

23rd Sunday of Ordinary Time “Jesus Our Healer”
Fr. Frank Schuster

My friends, this Gospel reading comes at a good time for me. It gets us back to why we follow Jesus. One of the basic things we know about Jesus from the Gospels is that he was a healer. He performed miracles throughout his ministry and miracles still happen today in the life of the Church. I know, I have seen them. It is a simple thing we can do along our spiritual journey, when it gets right down to it, to simply lift up whatever is hurting in our soul to Jesus and ask for his healing. And so, it gives me joy to take a break from the news and talk about miracles in the life of the Church this weekend and explore the question with you: why does Jesus perform healings anyway? What is his motivation? I think this question comes at a good time because we all seek healing from the Lord at times.

Like I said, I have seen miracles happen. The people who are healed by Jesus are real people. Trust me on that one. I have seen enough in my priesthood to be able to say the miracles recorded by the Gospels happened and they continue to happen today. What is really important however is to understand that Jesus doesn't perform supernatural healing for healing's sake alone, never has. Jesus' miracles always have a deeper symbolic relevance that points to the Kingdom of God. For example, was there really a man who was deaf with a speech impediment who was cured by Jesus like we have in our Gospel reading this weekend? Yes. It really happened. But now let us look at the deeper significance of this miracle.

I like Bishop Robert Barron's take on this Gospel reading from Mark. The Gospel story begins with Jesus coming back to his home country. For St Mark, Jesus is the Christ who will gather the tribes of Israel. Jesus is the good shepherd gathering the lost sheep. The miracle then demonstrates Jesus as the gatherer of Israel by taking this deaf-mute man who symbolizes Israel and addresses the problem.

You see, in the bible, the people of Israel are the people privileged to hear the word of God. Think of all the great figures in the bible who were hearers of the word: Abraham, Noah, Moses, and all the patriarchs and prophets. And look how difficult it is at times to hear the word of God. Elijah has to strain his ears to hear the tiny little voice in the silence of a mountainside. Remember how Samuel hears the word of God while he is asleep but isn't quite sure at first who it was who was calling him. He needed Eli to help him discern the voice of God. Just like John the Baptist who must go into the quiet of the desert to hear the word of God. Or like Saul on the way to Damascus who has to be knocked to the ground before he can hear the word of God.

And now we have the basic problem. Are there great figures in the bible who hear the word of God? Yes! But here is the rub. Is Israel often deaf to the word of God? Yes! Israel in the bible is often listening to other gods, the false gods of their neighbors or the voice of popular culture. Sometimes Israel simply closes their ears because the word of God is too challenging. God speaks but they don't listen. My friends, what happens if we can't hear, what follows? Well, speech becomes compromised. Israel, by closing their

ears to the word of God, is no longer able to speak effectively or convincingly the word of God. Israel needs healing.

Now watch carefully the details of this miracle of the healing of the deaf-mute. There are three moments we must not overlook. First, the Gospel says Jesus began by taking the deaf-mute away from the crowd. This is important. What makes Israel deaf? Israel is lost in the loudness of worldly concerns. Israel must get away from the crowd so that they may hear the word of God again, and so do we at times, right?

What happens next? Jesus touches the man's ears. Jesus spits and touches his tongue (OK, sounds kind of gross), and says "ephphatha...Be opened!" For St. Augustine, the spittle of Jesus is evocative of his inner nature, Jesus' divinity. Israel needs to be linked to word of God so Israel can hear the word of God and proclaim it once more. Bishop Barron says that this awesome moment of Jesus touching the deaf mute is evocative of the beautiful painting by Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel. God reaches out from heaven to touch Adam. There is an electricity of touch. Jesus touches the deaf mute to reestablish a link to the divine.

Finally, who is the new Israel, commissioned to hear and speak the word of God? For St. Mark, the new Israel is the Church, the Body of Christ. We are the healed deaf-mute. We are the new Israel. That is our vocation. We are the special people who are called to hear and speak clearly the Word of God. Like I said, this Gospel reading comes at a good time for me.

My friends, what do we need to do to hear and proclaim God's word? The invitation Jesus seems to be offering is to begin by getting away from the crowd. Spend some time each day alone with Jesus. And, allow Jesus to touch our mouth and ears so that we may hear and speak effectively the word of God.

Do we dare? Do we dare to take time this week, do we dare to take time each day to be away from the noise and be reconnected to Jesus? If we do, we may be surprised by a miracle in our own lives when we hear Jesus whisper into our ears, "Ephphatha! Be open!" I say this because we all come before the Lord for healing at times. And sometimes the best healing Jesus can give us isn't a supernatural display but rather what happens naturally when we welcome Jesus really and truly into our hearts. Whatever healing we seek from Jesus this week, turn to him. Turn to him. We have faith that Jesus will offer us healing in the way he knows we need it most.