

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time 2021 B

“Do you have any questions for me?” I asked the young man during his Confirmation interview. His reply surprised me a bit: “What do you like most about being a priest?” I had to stop and think ... it really isn’t the meetings, or signing the checks, or struggling sometimes to remember a name. What I like most, I think, are the sacraments; and especially the Anointing of the Sick. In those moments when people are seriously ill and they and their loved ones most experience their need for hope, strength, and a peace that no human power can give them, the gift of faith and the presence of Christ reveal their depth and beauty. I have been privileged so many hundreds of times to stand by bedsides and wheelchairs to anoint, to speak Christ’s own words of hope – Come to Me, and I will give you rest – and *to hold the hand of someone so close to being with God. Even for those who can no longer hear, Christ speaks to their souls; even for those who can no longer speak, the Church prays in their name; even for those who can no longer remember, Christ never forgets them.* He continues to say “Ephphatha! Be opened!” to the life of heaven for each of us.

For many people with dementia ... like my father had ... they are reduced to silence – no longer able to recognize us, no longer able to speak, afflicted like this man in the Gospel. But *very important truths are communicated in that silence* – truths about human dignity and worth, about faith and trust, about compassion and love – truths that human words can barely stumble to express. *In such silence, God can speak to hearts that are made attentive by mysteries beyond their grasp.* Presence, caring, love – holding a hand in silence – these things speak far more meaningfully than any words.

Perhaps in our day, James would write that second reading not only about the poor in shabby clothes, who are in fact still with us; but also about our brothers and sisters in the human family who suffer other forms of poverty: those who are new to our communities; or those who are very young, even still microscopic; or those who are very old and suffering from memory loss and the other diminishment of age; or those

who are difficult to understand, difficult to love. Instead of seeing a fellow child of God, we too easily see someone in the way. But being healed by Jesus to see as He sees and hear as He hears, we are opened to what God would teach us through weakness and the mystery of suffering, decline, and death, which we will all share one day.

Like many today, this deaf and mute man in the Gospel was drawn apart from the crowd. But Jesus takes Him aside, not to isolate him further, but to heal him and return him to a place among the others. Jesus still wants to take us apart from the crowd – the crowd of voices and opinions and problems and our to-do list, so that He can speak that same word to us: Be opened! People today are often impatient with silence; it seems like a waste of time, a void where nothing is accomplished. But at a deeper level, perhaps we are afraid of silence – *for who knows what God might say if we really let Him be heard? Without silence, we cannot pray well, and we cannot hear the Lord. And without listening to the voice of our Good Shepherd, we can so easily lose the way. He may not always say things we LIKE to hear, but they will always be the words of Spirit and Life, and time listening to God is never wasted.*

Still today, it is Jesus Who opens ears to hear, opens eyes to see, opens mouths to speak ... and even opens the tombs of our spirits and brings what was dead to life again. Consider today where you might have closed off the voice of hope, of compassion, of understanding, of God. This week, take some cherished moments of silence. Let Jesus take you apart from the crowd, whatever that means in your life, and say to your spirit: *“Ephphatha! Be opened.”*