

23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, B – September 9, 2018 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.  
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Ala. – 5pm Vigil, 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 950 words

In our gospel this Sunday we encounter an Aramaic word that St. Mark chose to retain, even though he otherwise wrote in Greek. That word is “ephphatha”, which he immediately translates as, “be opened”. It is not clear why the biblical writers sometimes kept foreign words; other examples are the Hebrew “alleluia”, “hosanna”, and “amen” – words we use today even in English.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps it was to lend special importance to the scene being recounted. And indeed, what Christ did for the deaf man, in “opening” his ears – that is, healing his deafness – was a great sign, because it partially fulfilled the Old Testament prophecy of Isaiah from the first reading, and the prophecy of the responsorial psalm.

Just as the Church has taken up some foreign words like “alleluia” and “hosanna” into her liturgy – we say them at most every Mass – so she has done with the word “ephphatha”. In the Rite of Baptism for Infants, there is the ephphatha rite towards the end, which is accompanied by a beautiful prayer. The minister says, “The Lord Jesus made the deaf hear and the dumb speak. May he soon touch your ears to receive his word, and your mouth to proclaim his faith, to the praise and glory of God the Father.” In the older or extraordinary form of baptism, the minister may even moisten his thumb with saliva while touching the ears and mouth, like our Lord did in the gospel – although that part is optional.

(And I’d like to acknowledge the fact also that more and more families are asking me to baptize their children in the extraordinary form. Most of the prayers are done in English – only a few are in Latin – and the prayers are both beautiful and powerful. I’m happy to accommodate those requests, just as I’m equally glad to celebrate in the newer rite with which we are all familiar; indeed, the rite in which I was baptized as an infant! We are blessed with many baptisms each year here at St. Paul’s – a good indicator of the health of our parish!)

For the man in the gospel, the healing that he received from our Lord was physical: he truly had been unable to hear and speak correctly before Jesus met him. For the babies whom we baptize, however, this gospel scene is spiritualized. They may already hear just fine – but we desire that they might hear the word of God. They may well end up learning to speak just fine – but we wish for them to learn to praise God and share the faith with others. Thus enter in the responsibilities of the parents and godparents to help ensure these holy desires are fulfilled.

But the sequence of ceremonies during the Rite of Baptism give us another clue as to the spiritual meaning of the Church’s wish: the ministers does not say this prayer until after the child has been baptized. This is because the word of God cannot take root in the child’s heart until after he or she has been given God’s grace through the sacrament. And it is also because the praise of God and the effective sharing of the faith cannot take place in a fruitful way without the grace of God, which is bestowed in baptism.

Maybe all of this seems like details and so much trivia, but it has implications for each of us who have been baptized. The Church’s wish remains for us as well. We are called to both hear and proclaim the word of God fruitfully – and anything we do cannot bear fruit apart from God’s grace. In our time, so many have forgotten about the reality of God’s grace. The older generation memorized its definition in the old catechism: “Grace is the life of God in us”. Without God’s grace we cannot be saved. No amount of Mass attendance or good deeds will save us if we are

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<sup>1</sup> St. Isidore has a beautiful reflection on the special status that Latin, Greek, and Hebrew enjoy: “And there are three sacred languages: Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, which excel above all others in the world. For these three tongues were written above the cross of the Lord by the will of Pontius Pilate.” St. Isidore of Seville, *Etymologies*, Book IX. But we note that the sacred writers included words from other languages as well, in other parts of the Scriptures.

not living in his grace. A life lived in the grace of God is what will get us to heaven. A life ended apart from his grace will only result in hell – and forever.

Our life of grace started at baptism and is strengthened or even restored (when lost through mortal sin) in confession. It is further fortified through our faithful prayer and our charity. The goal for each of us is to be filled with grace – the life of God – by the time we meet him in death: to be “full of grace”, like our Blessed Mother was and is. But we start out poor. St. James spoke of this in the second reading: God chose the poor for salvation. We were born in total spiritual poverty, without the grace of God – with no capacity to save ourselves. The Lord Jesus reached in, saying “ephphatha” also to us through baptism, setting our lives on a new path and giving us the supernatural means – the grace – to attain our destiny.

As we thank him for this great gift this Sunday – a gift that we in no way merited – let us ask him again to open our ears, our mouths; indeed, to open our hearts. “He has done all things well”; whatever path our life has taken to this point, not a moment of it has escaped our good God’s notice. And for whatever wandering off the path we may have done, he always offers us the means to get back on it. He did not make us to be thrown out; he does not desire that a single one of us be lost. May he give us a greater understanding and appreciation of the gift of his grace, and help us to live in it always.