

EPHPHATHA – BE OPENED

Dear sisters and brothers, as we celebrate the Eucharist today, we also thank God for the gift of our Mother Mary as we celebrate the feast of Mount Mary at Bandra. We celebrate Mary's birthday and all that she means to us as our mother and our model for our Christian living. We are also reminded that God can act powerfully in our lives just as Jesus healed powerfully those who came to him for healing. Let us, at the beginning of this Eucharist, bring our own ailments, our sicknesses, psychological, spiritual, bodily, and let us pray that the Lord may heal and touch our lives.

My dear sisters and brothers, I would like to begin with a little bit of the geographical setting in which the miracle of the healing of the deaf and mute man is worked. This is the first of the miracles worked in a strange and different location. Jesus had been teaching and working by the west bank of the Sea of Galilee. That was his home ground, his familiar territory. He had just done the multiplication of loaves, and we've been hearing the last few Sundays Jesus' teaching on the bread of life. He offers the people his flesh and blood, and the people are scandalised and reject his teaching. They have received bread that satisfies them, but they don't receive the teaching of Jesus.

So, Jesus decides to leave the chosen people in Palestine and moves to the west, to two cities, Tyre and Sidon, in foreign lands. After he goes to those places, he does not return to Galilee, but skirts the Sea of Galilee and moves towards the east to the region of the Decapolis, the land of the ten cities. After Alexander the Great conquered these places in 332 B.C., the Greeks occupied these cities and established a Greek and Roman culture, which was alien and very different from the Semitic culture of Jesus and the Holy Land, as we know it today. And so, Jesus, who is rejected by his own people, has left the Holy Land and moved away towards the west, then to the north, travelling a hundred kilometres with just his band of disciples. They travel on foot, cooking their meals and spending the nights in the desert. Jesus told his missionaries, 'If you go to a town and they reject you, shake the dust off your feet and walk away'. Don't impose or force your message, but walk away. And he himself does it and goes to these foreign territories, where there are non-believers, non-Jews.



When Jesus reaches the Decapolis, he is encountered by a man who is deaf and has an impediment in his speech – probably stammering or stuttering. And Jesus works a miracle there. Let us pay attention to this: he is working a miracle of healing, not among the people of faith, the Jews, but among people who were supposed to be non-believers. In Palestine, he was rejected and given a deaf ear, and here, he is going to encounter people whose ears are open to his message.

It is interesting to see the miracle that Jesus works there. He goes through seven steps in working the miracle. He took the man aside, away from the crowd. In other words, Jesus is saying that he is not like the popular miracle workers. People who like to be in the limelight say, 'Look at me: I am working miracles; I am the healer'. This is what happens sometimes even in the Church today. We advertise: 'So-and-so is coming to this parish; he's a miracle healer'. And there are crowds. But Jesus is the hidden God. He works his miracle in silence. The gospel says he took the man aside from the crowd to save the man from embarrassment. It was Jesus' desire to keep his actions hidden and not be spectacular. Jesus does not impose his message.

Then he uses three very physical steps in the healing process. The gospel says he puts his fingers into the ears of the deaf man. Then he takes his saliva, his spittle, and puts it on the man's tongue. It seems almost repulsive. Jesus touches the man's tongue and, a very important step comes now: he looked up at the heavens. In other words, he was using a similar technique that was used by Greek magicians to work some sort of miracles. For the Greeks, these physical gestures were very important. While Jesus does these physical gestures, according to the culture of the place, he does not give them importance. The gospel says he looked at the heavens, and then, with a sigh, he said to that man, 'Be opened'. 'Ephphatha'.

These are the same words used in every baptism service. When a child is brought for baptism, the priest touches the ears of the child and says, 'Be opened'. Ephphatha. Open your ears to God's word. Open your ears to what heaven has to do for us. Open your ears to God's intervention. Jesus brings this message very clearly, that it is the heavens and the power of God that is working the miracle. It's not a spectacular miracle worker, it's not the magician, but it is the power from above.

We have certain things to take away from today's gospel. The first thing is that if we reject the action of God in our lives, he does not impose himself on us. He will walk away because he respects our freedom. So the way we exercise our freedom can be dangerous. We can even reject God. Do I welcome God and his power in my life? If I reject him, he will distance himself from my life. Most of us live our daily lives without consulting God, without connecting with God, without prayer. If we continue this for a long period of time, we are saying to God, 'I don't need you'. If we say that, God will leave us and walk away.

The second thing that we can take from this is that Jesus' intervention takes place in a place where there are non-believers, which means that God can work even among people of other faiths. He will work miracles if they believe.

The third thing is that we need to believe that God can intervene in our life. Including myself – I sometimes used to be very sceptical when people would say, 'I feel a miracle has been worked in my life'. Many of us would dismiss it as something merely psychological or subjective. But this text teaches us that Jesus looked up at heaven to tell the world that the heavens are open for those who are open to the divine intervention of God. God can intervene in each one of our lives, working miracles. We need to be open – ephphatha. Let our ears and our lives be open to God's word.

So dear sisters and brothers, let us take from this passage this important message, never to reject God in our lives. He may walk away and distance himself from us. Let us also realise that God has intervened in the past in a divine and powerful way, and he can intervene even today, working miracles for each one of us, amen.

As we say the Lord's Prayer, let us pray that we may always welcome God in our lives, welcome his action, his intervention, and never in any way reject him. And so we pray with child-like trust and confidence, Our Father...

Our parish team wishes you a very happy feast. May our Mother Mary bless each one of you, our homes, our communities and our parish, and the world. We would like you to also take our greetings and our special loving concern for the housebound in your homes and in your neighbourhoods.



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