

SERMON FOR EVENING PRAYER¹
THE TWELFTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

The Rev Warren E. Shaw, Priest Associate

Lessons:²

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the eighteenth Verse of the twenty-ninth Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.³

“And in that day shall the deaf hear the words of the book, and the eyes of the blind shall see out of obscurity, and out of darkness. The meek also shall increase their joy in the LORD, and the poor among men shall rejoice in the Holy One of Israel. For the terrible one is brought to nought, and the scorner is consumed, and all that watch for iniquity are cut off: That make a man an offender for a word, and lay a snare for him that reproveth in the gate, and turn aside the just for a thing of nought. Therefore thus saith [SETH] the LORD, who redeemed Abraham, concerning the house of Jacob, Jacob shall not now be ashamed, neither shall his face now wax pale. But when he seeth his children, the work of mine hands, in the midst of him, they shall sanctify my name, and sanctify the Holy One of Jacob, and shall fear the God of Israel. They also that erred [URD] in spirit shall come to understanding, and they that murmured shall learn doctrine.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the thirty-first Verse of the seventh Chapter of the Gospel According to St. Mark.⁴

“And again, departing from the coasts of Tyre [TIRE] and Sidon [SIGH-dunn], he came unto the sea of Galilee, through the midst of the coasts of Decapolis [deh-KAH-po-liss]. And they bring unto him one that was deaf, and had an impediment in his speech; and they beseech him to put his hand upon him. And he took him aside from the multitude, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spit, and touched his tongue; And looking up to heaven, he

sighed, and saith [SETH] unto him, Ephphatha [EFF-uh-thuh], that is, Be opened. And straightway his ears were opened, and the string of his tongue was loosed, and he spake plain. And he charged them that they should tell no man: but the more he charged them, so much the more a great deal they published it; And were beyond measure astonished, saying, He hath done all things well: he maketh both the deaf to hear, and the dumb to speak.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Homily:

“O Lord, open thou our lips”, “And our mouth shall show forth thy praise.”

We say that every time we read Morning Prayer, and well we should, because unless the Lord opens our mouths we cannot speak his praise.

It has always been expected that Christians would share their experience of Jesus with others, especially people who had no such experience. That is how the Church has always grown. But let me ask you a question: How many times in the past month have you actually done that?

If you walk into a room where people are talking, and you are carrying a tape recorder, and you hold the microphone in front of somebody, there is a good chance that person will stop talking. The same thing often happens when you ask a Christian, especially an Anglican, to tell you about Jesus. Suddenly a speech impediment develops. You get some stammering, a few disjointed phrase, but nothing like the fluent and animated speech that comes out when you ask about someone’s vacation, or their grandchildren, or their new car, or something else of much less importance.

We meet a man in today's gospel who had a general speech impediment. He was unable to speak clearly about anything. And Jesus healed him.

I don't want to get into the specific methods that Jesus used except to say that were in keeping with the methods generally employed by healers in His day. I do, however, want to point out that before he enabled the man to speak, he enabled him to hear.

One of the reasons I believe people have so much trouble talking about the Gospel is that they have never really heard it.

There are reasons for that. One of them is that we are easily distracted. There are a lot of things going on in our lives and lot of things going on all around us, and it is easy to lose our focus. Jesus knew that, and so the first thing He did was take the deaf man aside, away from the crowd and all the distractions that a crowd represents to a man who has trouble hearing.

Everybody is talking and gesturing and moving around and it's hard for a deaf man to know where to look or what to look for. By taking the man aside, away from the crowd, Jesus is saying to the man, "Look at me."

That's the most important thing if you want to really hear the Gospel. Focus your attention on Jesus.

The Bible itself is full of things that can distract us. There are all those genealogies and all those obscure laws and all those different types of literature. There is poetry and history and little contradictions and discrepancies and a strange literary *genre* [ZHAWN-urr] called "apocalypse" full of weird images and predictions. But if you really want to hear the Gospel, you have to look past all those distractions and keep Jesus as your focal point.

The whole Bible is about Jesus. Whenever you read the Bible, Old Testament or New, look for Jesus. Whenever you hear the Bible read aloud in church, listen for the voice of Jesus. Jesus

is the living Word Who speaks through the written word. Look for His image and listen for His voice in every passage of Scripture. Put the distractions aside. Keep Jesus as your focal point.

Sometimes when I want to clean out my ears, I use my fingers. That was the second thing that Jesus did. He put His fingers into the man's ears, as if to clean them out.

Among the obstructions that block our hearing of the Gospel in its fullness is fear. Fear that if we actually heard the Gospel, we might have to change the way we live and the way we think about life and the way we understand the world. We throw up our prejudices and our carefully crafted notions of right and wrong, and our comfortable images of ourselves and others as barriers that obstruct the hearing of the Gospel in its fullness. We need Jesus to remove those impediments to our hearing because we cannot remove them ourselves. We may hear the words. But we cannot really hear God speaking to us until Jesus cleans out our ears and breathes His spirit into us, as He did with the man in the Gospel. "Faith cometh by hearing," says the Apostle, "and hearing by the word of God."

The third thing Jesus did with the man in the story was to spit on the ground as though expelling the obstructions that were keeping the man from speaking clearly.

Once again, there are obstacles that work to inhibit us from speaking clearly to others about our faith. We need to spit them out. There are feelings of embarrassment because our culture says it is not polite to talk about religion in public. Spit out that social taboo. There are fears of being labeled a nut or a religious fanatic. Spit out those fears as well. There are feelings of inadequacy. We don't have the vocabulary. We don't have the conceptual structure. We don't have the confidence. But nobody is asking you to preach a sermon or write a theology book. Just start talking. The words will come.

And the reason the words will come is the final thing that Jesus did for the man in the story. He touched the man's tongue, just as He had touched his ears, and then He breathed on him. He breathed His own Breath⁵ into him, just as God breathed His own Spirit⁵ into the nostrils of Adam at the creation. And He said, "Be opened."

Be opened. Let the ears that I have touched be opened. Let the tongue that I have touched be loosed. And so it was. And so it will be with you when Jesus takes you away from all the distractions of the world, and touches your ears so that you may hear, and touches your tongue so that you may speak and breathes His own Breath into you so that you may live. He will do that if you ask Him. He will do it if you let Him.

Oh Lord, open thou our ears, that we may hear thy voice.

"O Lord, open thou our lips. And our mouth shall show forth thy praise."

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St. David's Anglican Catholic Church
Charlottesville, Virginia

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¹ "Any set of Psalms and Lessons appointed for the evening of any day may be read at the morning service, and any set of morning Psalms and Lessons may be read in the evening." *Concerning the Service of the Church*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER viii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

² *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxxiii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

³ Isaiah 29:18-end (KJV).

⁴ St. Mark 7:31-end (KJV).

⁵ In the Biblical languages, "wind", "breath", and "spirit" are the same word, which is *ruach* in Hebrew and *pneuma* in Greek.