**The Spoken Word and Ceremony**

Based on [Mark 7:31-37](https://biblia.com/books/esv/Mk7.31-37)

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I was reading an online article recently which addressed the topic of the senses, and particularly the question of whether it was better to be deaf or blind. The conclusion was that, for an adult, the issue isn’t settled and it might depend on the person’s character and circumstances. But for a child there is no question...it is better to be blind than deaf. Quoting a neuropsychologist, the article says “Hearing is the primary channel through which we receive language, and all of those incoming words downloaded into our brains carry a wealth of emotional and cognitive apparatus that structures and empowers our imagination. Language is the mind’s opposable thumb.”

Language is also the means that God uses to create all things and to save us. In the beginning, God said “Let their be light”, and the creation heard and obeyed. The gospel of John says, ‘In the beginning was the word, and the word was God.” St. Paul writes, “Faith comes by hearing” and “how are they to hear without a preacher.” Not only did God arrange salvation through the hearing of his word, but He also tells us that we are not to privilege sight. The resurrected Lord says to Thomas, “Blessed are those who have not seen, and have yet believed.” St. Paul writes, “We walk by faith, not by sight.” And Scripture also says that faith is the conviction of things not seen.

The new testament includes several instances of Jesus healing blind men, but only in todays gospel do we hear of him healing one who is deaf. Jesus was traveling through the Decapolis and people there brought him a man who was deaf and had a speech impediment, and they begged him to lay his hand on him. And taking him aside from the crowd privately, he put his fingers into his ears, and after spitting touched his tongue. And looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, “Ephphatha,” that is, “Be opened.” And his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly.”

I was reading the bible to one of my children last night, and in the middle of the passage she asked me a question about cartoon characters. I said, “We’re hearing the bible right now, why weren’t you listening?” She said, she was. I asked, okay, what was the passage about. She admitted she didn’t know. Other times, when this happens, the child will be able to repeat word for word the last sentence, because it did enter their hearing, but it didn’t enter their thinking.

There are certainly two aspects to hearing. There is the ability to physically hear the sounds and words...an ability which the man in the gospel lacked. There is also the ability to take in what is heard and consider what it means. Neither of these aspects of hearing is enough to save. Salvation comes when what is heard takes root in the heart by faith, and that is entirely the work of the Holy Spirit. And even people who cannot hear because they are deaf, or cannot understand, such as infants and some who are mentally handicapped, we believe the word works upon them, even without this preliminary hearing. But what we know from today’s gospel is that, when salvation happens, it is always because God is working miraculously to make a way for your faith.

Consider this. Once when Jesus was in a boat with his disciples, he was sleeping in the midst of a storm. His disciples woke him and he calmly got up and rebuked the storm and there was great calm. And the disciples marveled that even the winds and sea obey him. The english says “obey” but it’s from a greek word that literally means to “hear under”. To hear is to obey. Jesus gives the sea the ability to hear him at the very moment he commands it.

This should give us great confidence in our own hearing and speaking the word of God. It has its own power and authority, because it is God’s word, not ours. It is apparent that many people today think that preparing people to hear the word of God is more important than preaching it. This is not true. The word is its own preparation. In one of my education courses this year, I studied the use of games in teaching and learning. The idea was that the use of games motivates students to learn what you are teaching. While this is true, there is a sort of hidden message that can come with it. The message is an admission that the learning is not itself worth your attention, so the teacher hides the learning in the game...kind of like mixing your peas in with your mashed potatoes to hide the taste.

Do we need to hide God’s word in worldly dress before we can expect people to hear it? No, Christ says his sheep hear his voice and follow him. And his voice should not be hidden in the values and structures of the world. Someone once justified a christmas pageant to replace sunday worship because it might attract people who would otherwise not come, and then they would hear the word. That sounds like a good thing, but if you have to hide the gospel in order to communicate it, you have hid it’s light under a bushel.

At the same time, when we come together to worship, we do observe certain ceremonies that are, strictly speaking, unnecessary. We have the liturgy, which is our orderly way of delivering the word and sacraments. Some say we should get rid of all of that ceremony, and many churches have in the name of the pure preaching of the word. But in today’s gospel, notice that Jesus doesn’t only say to the man’s ears and tongue “Be opened”. He puts his fingers into his ears and after spitting touched his tongue. Now, that would obviously violate today’s COVID protocols, but what I want you to consider is that Jesus heals through a ceremony involving touch. He didn’t have to heal this way, but he chose to heal this way through touching the place of the man’s ailments.

In the same way, Jesus chose to take bread and wine and through them offer to us the forgiveness, life and salvation we need. Through this sacrament, he promises to keep our ears open and our hearts assured that we have everything because we have been reconciled to God through his death and life. Peter cut off a soldiers ear, and Jesus healed it immediately. Let us thank God for our ears that by them we keep our minds and our hearts turned to his gospel, trusting in his mercy and thankful for his grace.

And there are two remarkable aspects to the healing. First is what he heals, the man’s hearing and speech. And second, how he heals him