

In last Sunday's readings, especially the Epistle lesson from Ephesians 2, we heard one of those great teachings of the Christian faith, that we are saved by the grace of God through faith in Christ, and that this is totally God's doing, God's work. There's nothing that we do to bring about our salvation, lest, as St. Paul writes, any man should boast. This is wonderful news, because it means that our salvation, our eternal security, is in the powerful, loving hands of Jesus.

But despite how wonderful this is, our sinful flesh, which hates God and rebels against Him, wants to throw this into doubt. In pride, we want to think that, there must be something we do, some way in which we contribute to our salvation. And the devil loves to encourage this, because if there's anywhere where we're trusting in ourselves and our efforts, like the Pharisee from last week, then that's somewhere that he can bring in doubt and attack faith.

Because this is such a prevalent attack, and because the truth is both so important and so comforting, the people who arranged our series of readings many centuries ago, people much wiser than I, chose another passage from Scripture to reinforce this truth. In the healing of the deaf mute man, we see what it looks like for Jesus to save apart from our efforts, and even in ways that seem ridiculous or impossible to our human nature.

So the first thing to note about this account is the location. We read, "Then [Jesus] returned from the region of Tyre and went through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis." Far from being filler, as if the evangelist has a word count to meet, even in these details the Holy Spirit is pointing out something important.

If we consider this region, who lives in these areas? Tyre and Sidon are to the north of Israel along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea, and when Jesus was there He healed the daughter of a Canaanite woman. Now He travels south and east, around the Sea of Galilee and over to the region of the Decapolis, a land east of the Jordan dominated by ten cities, hence, "Decapolis." These cities were mostly Gentile, some even bearing specifically Greek names, like Philadelphia.

So Jesus travels from one Gentile region, where it is a Gentile woman who shows great faith, to another Gentile region, where other people, presumably Gentiles, also show faith.

Why does this matter for us? Here, we have Jesus showing that His Gospel, His desire to save, are for all nations. This is nothing new, as in the prophets, such as Isaiah, and even in God's promise given to Abraham, God has repeatedly declared that He desires to bring all nations into His fold. This really takes off after Pentecost, but even here, in the ministry of Jesus, we see Him at work to save among people other than the physical descendants of Jacob.

Still today, God desires to bring in people from every place, every nation, into His kingdom. As the Scripture tells us, "God our Savior... desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." Every person you meet, every person who is on the face of the earth, Jesus desires that person to believe in Him and be saved.

So, when it comes to who we share the Gospel with, there's no one that would be "off limits," so to speak. We might think that someone already has a belief in something other than Christ, and so we should respect that. Of course, we should act in a respectful manner, but by the same token, since only Jesus saves and every other religion is a path to destruction, we should in love desire to share the truth with them.

Or we might think that there's no point in speaking to someone because that person "isn't religious." The thing is, though, by virtue of existing, certain questions come to everyone. "What is the nature of reality – is the universe just the physical, or is there something more, a metaphysical or spiritual realm?" "What is man? Why is he here? What purpose, if any, does he have in his life?" "What happens when you die?" "What is truth, or right and wrong, and from where do these things come?"

These are all finally religious questions, because they require believing in something that you cannot see or prove. Even the most hardened atheist has to take it on faith that there is no God, no spiritual existence, no afterlife, because he can't empirically disprove these things. Everyone is religious, and therefore everyone can and should hear the Gospel, that they might know the true answers to these questions and believe in the God who loves them.

After hearing about the setting of the coming miracle, we then hear, "And they brought to [Jesus] a man who was deaf and had a speech impediment, and they begged Him to lay his hand on Him." Here is the man who will be made whole by Jesus. But note, he's not there by his own effort.

He's deaf and also has a speech impediment. He's not going to be able to hear that Jesus has come to his area, if he's even heard who this "Jesus" is at all. And even if he knew, it would be very difficult for him to search him out. Because he can't speak clearly, he's not going to be able to tell people that he's looking for Jesus, or ask where Jesus is and be understood by others.

If it's just the man, it would be a hopeless situation. But the man isn't alone. He has others, perhaps friends or family, who apparently care for him. And in their care, what do they do? They bring him to Jesus. They have apparently heard word that Jesus is able to heal through the laying on of His hands, as St. Mark records at the end of chapter 6.

These people believe that Jesus is able to heal, and their belief leads them to bring their friend to Jesus, that he might be restored as well. Faith in Jesus is at work in them, at work to bring another to Jesus.

That's very often how people are brought to Jesus still today. As we heard last week in Ephesians, people are from the start dead in trespasses and sins. We cannot come to Jesus of our own free will, because our will is corrupted by sin from the beginning. That's why the Scriptures point out that, before conversion, we are enemies of God. Not neutral, enemies.

And Jesus Himself says, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him." It is God who draws sinners to Himself. And very often, God does so through the working of His people on earth, those who have the gift of faith in their hearts and are guided by that faith to bring others to Jesus.

One example is Holy Baptism. A child, even an infant, is brought to the font through the faith of the parents or grandparents. Such people believe the promise spoken through St. Peter during his Pentecost sermon, that the gift of Baptism and the Spirit is for “you and your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call.”

Another example of God working through a person’s faith is the act of evangelism. When one person shares the Gospel with another, why does he do it? Because he believes that Gospel! Christians share God’s Word because they truly believe that, though they are sinners, God’s own Son has died on the cross for them, to take away their sins, so that they might live forever in paradise, AND they want this not just for themselves but for others as well! The faith in the heart of a Christian causes them to want to share that faith with others, because, back to the first point, we believe that God desires all to be saved through faith in His Son.

And how does God work to bring about that faith, that salvation? In ways that often run contrary to human reason or feelings. Consider what happens next with the deaf mute man. “And taking him aside from the crowd privately, [Jesus] 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.”

Note how Jesus works both by the physical and also by his word. Jesus puts his fingers in the man’s ears and, after spitting, touches his tongue. And then he looks up to heaven and speaks the command “Ephphatha,” which is Aramaic for “Be opened.” So Jesus touches the man, not just by laying on His hands as the man’s friends had requested, but with very particular actions. And joined to those actions was His word. We have the physical and the spoken.

We might ask, “Why both?” or “Which one actually did the healing?” In the Gospels, there are times where Jesus heals through only His word, such as when He heals the centurion’s servant. And there are times where Jesus heals only through a touch or physical act, such as when the woman with the flow of blood is healed by touching his garment. But here, He does both.

Could He have done just one or the other? By His almighty power, yes. But, according to His perfect knowledge and wisdom, He knew that this was the best way to heal this man.

This is a helpful example for us when it comes to how our Lord has told us He works in His Church to bring forgiveness and faith. Does Jesus sometimes work just through the Word to create faith? Yes! Many are brought to faith through the preaching of the Gospel, the power of God at work unto salvation, as we hear in Romans 1.

What about all those who are baptized? Is the water just a mere symbol, and the proclamation of the Triune Name the thing that really works? No! Jesus has given His Church to baptize with water and in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and where those two things are present, He promises to work. To try to pick those elements apart is to both question the wisdom of God Himself and to introduce doubt.

Likewise, if someone has been brought to faith through the preaching of the Word, why does he still need to be baptized? Because God has both commanded it in His Word (“He that believes and is baptized shall be saved”) and has given all sort of wonderful promises connected to Baptism (“We were

buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.”)

Holy Communion is another example of this. Why did our Lord Jesus, in His last hours before His arrest and passion, give His disciples a meal and command them to do it in remembrance of Him? There are many reasons, tied especially to things in the Old Testament such as sacrifices, unity, life in the blood, but at the end of the day it's because Jesus knows how best to give us forgiveness, life, and salvation, and He has chosen to do so through His Supper.

The Supper leads into another thing that must be noted in the healing of this man, namely, the fact that it should've been impossible. This comes out especially in the word of Jesus to the man. Jesus tells the man's ears to be opened.

What's the problem with that? His ears don't work! He's deaf! This would be like Jesus holding up a book to a blind man and saying, "Read this." It should be impossible! And yet, as Jesus Himself declares, "with God all things are possible."

Jesus speaks, and what happens? "And his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly." Whatever had closed this man's ears and bound his tongue was banished at the word of God. In an instant, despite not having heard what clear speech sounds like, the man speaks clearly.

This is the power contained in the Word of God. In the beginning, God said, "Let there be light," and at that very moment light came into existence. Jesus tells deaf ears to be opened, and at the very moment, they are opened. Still Jesus works through His almighty power to bring blessing to His people. He says of the bread and wine in His Supper, "This is my body. This is my blood." How can this be? The power of God, which defies human limitations or reason. He says, "Baptism now saves you." How can water have eternal consequences? By being joined to His Word.

How does hearing the Gospel bring about saving faith? Because it's the word of Christ, the same word that makes deaf ears speak, that commands lame legs to walk, that tells the dead to come out of their tombs. He tells us, "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ."

Again, as we hear in Romans 1, the Gospel contains the very power of God unto salvation. That's true whether it comes out of the mouth of Jesus Christ, or of one of His apostles or prophets, or even out of your mouth. When you share the Good News, that Jesus has died to take away sins and grant eternal life, your words carry the power of God. And when you hear the Word of God, that power is at work to strengthen your faith and sustain you to life everlasting.

The account ends with a bit of a warning or admonition for us. "And Jesus charged them to tell no one. But the more He charged them, the more zealously they proclaimed it." Why is it that, when Jesus commands deaf ears to open, they open, even if it seems impossible, but when He charges people not speak, they go on speaking? Is His power somehow diminished? No, He is still almighty. What we see here is how God allows people, even people who believe, to defy Him.

A mute man cannot speak until Jesus heals him and enables him to speak, but should those who choose to defy Jesus' words and speak contrary to His will, He allows it, for a time. An unbeliever cannot believe until Jesus comes and by His power creates faith in the heart and newness of life. But

one who has been granted faith can choose to rebel against Him, to break His Commandments, to walk contrary to His ways.

Why does God allow this? Part of it is the mystery of faith, known only to Him. But part of it is tied to love. God desires us to love Him, and love cannot be forced. He puts love in our hearts, but He does not force us to keep it there, because such force would not be love.

Therefore, looking at the example of the crowds, we must be mindful of how we use the new life that God has given to us. As we heard last week in Ephesians, we are God's workmanship, created to do good works in faith. We must not think that once we're saved, we can just do whatever we want, speak however we want, live however we want, and we'll be fine.

Rather, we must abide in our Lord's word, as He says, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." As we remain in His Word, He continues to work through His mighty power to give us comfort and strengthen our faith.

By taking in His Word, we are then able to speak rightly, as pictured in the healed man, for our speech is filled with His Word. By being filled with His Word, we are able to call upon Him and to find comfort in His Word, including the promise that "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

In the name of Jesus, amen.