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Quality Communication

Biblical Reflection for 23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time B

By Father Thomas Rosica, CSB

TORONTO, SEPT. 2, 2009 ([Zenit.org](http://zenit.org)).- In the magnificent piece of biblical poetry in Isaiah 35:4-7 (today's first reading) the prophet Isaiah announces the end of the Babylonian captivity.

The Exodus of God's people from bondage in Egypt became a model for thinking about salvation and a symbol of the great pilgrimage of the human family towards God. The prophet Isaiah encountered a dispirited community of exiles. Isaiah responded by recalling the joyous memories of the Exodus from Egypt.

A second Exodus is in store, symbolized by the healing granted to the blind, the lame, and the mute, and new life to the dead. Delivered and saved by God, all peoples shall return to their own land by way of the desert, in a new exodus. Isaiah prophesies that there shall be one, pure road, and it will be called the way of holiness upon which the redeemed shall walk.

In the midst of the desert, streams will break forth. God's saving power also embraces afflicted humans, healing every ill that comes upon people. Isaiah addressed specific afflictions that God would heal: "then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy."

Isaiah's prediction of this abundant, new life underlies Mark's understanding of Jesus' cure of "a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech" (Mark 7:31-37). Mark's story of the healing of this hearing and speech impaired man invites us to consider some important points about sickness and suffering in the New Testament.

Sick people in the Bible are those who have fallen from an appropriate human state or condition of human integrity or wholeness. Jesus heals people by restoring them to a proper state: Those who are leprous are made clean, blind people see, mute persons speak, etc.

We have little information about how Jesus' healings episodes were accomplished. Jesus did not perform miracles as someone waving a magic wand or clicking his fingers. The man cured by Jesus was deaf and dumb; he could not communicate with others, hear his voice and express his feelings and needs. The sigh uttered by Jesus at the moment of touching the ears of the deaf man tells us that he identified with people's suffering; he participated deeply in their misfortune and made it his own burden.

"Ephphatha, Be opened!"

The early Church was so impressed by the healing miracle of the deaf man that it attached deep significance to it, incorporating the Lord's action into the Baptismal Rite of new Christians. To this day, the minister of baptism puts his fingers into our ears and touches the tip of our tongue, repeating Jesus' word: "Ephphatha, Be

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opened!" He has made both the deaf hear and the dumb speak.

We learn by hearing and listening

Sight deals with things, while hearing deals with human beings. Sight has to do with science, with observation, with objectivity. Hearing has to do with personal relationships, with subjectivity. When I use my eyes to look at people or things, I am in complete control of the information that comes to me, for I can shut my eyes when I wish. When I am reading the words of scripture by myself, I can close my eyes and stop reading. But the ear is unlike the eye. I cannot shut my ear. The only way I can stop the sound is to leave the room!

We learn about other people by hearing and listening to what they have to say. Language reveals the inside of another person, something sight can never do. If we want to learn about God, we must listen to His Word with all our heart, all our soul and all our mind.

Looking at Him, if it were possible, would not tell us anything. After all, Satan appeared as an angel of light, while God appeared as the broken, mangled body of a young man dying on a cross. Who would have believed this without eyes and ears of faith?

When we read the Bible, do we "hear" what it says? The Bible does not tell us to read the Word of God but to hear it, to listen to it. That is the great Jewish prayer: "Shema, Israel," "Hear, O Israel." Someone else must read the Word so that I may hear it and truly understand it.

Biblical faith cannot be individualistic but must be communal. Speaking and hearing involve mutual submission. Mutual respect and submission is the essence of community, and the only way I can get away from hearing is to leave the room, to leave the community and go off by myself. Sadly this is the case for many who have left the Church community and claim to have found freedom, autonomy, and truth in solitude, away from the community of faith!

What they have found is not solitude, but loneliness, selfishness and rugged individualism. Authentic hearing and listening involve submission to authority and membership in community.

Physical and spiritual deafness

The healing stories reflect Jesus' intimate, powerful relationship with God and his great compassion. He healed with words, touch and physical means. Physical deafness and spiritual deafness are alike; Jesus confronted one type in the man born deaf, the other type in the Pharisees and others who were unreceptive of his message. Jesus was concerned not only with physical infirmity but also spiritual impairment and moral deafness.

Our contemporary world has grown deaf to the words of Jesus, but it is not a physical deafness, it is a spiritual deafness caused by sin. We have become so used to sin that we take it as normal and we have become deafened and blinded to Jesus and his daily call to us.

If deafness and dumbness consist in the inability to communicate plainly with one's neighbor or to have good relationships, then we must acknowledge that each of us is in some way impaired in our hearing and speech. What decides the quality of our communication, hearing and speech is not simply to speak or not to speak or hear, but to do so or not to do so out of love.

We are blind and deaf when we show favoritism or discrimination because of the status and wealth of other people (see James 2:1-5). We fail to recall that divine favor consists in God's election and promises (James

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2:5).

We are deaf when we do not hear the cry for help raised to us and we prefer to put indifference between our neighbor and ourselves. In doing so we oppress the poor and blaspheme the name of Christ (James 2:6-7).

Parents are deaf when they do not understand that certain dysfunctional behaviors of their children betray deep-seated cries for attention and love.

We are deaf when turn inward and close ourselves to the world because of selfishness, pride, resentment, anger, jealousy and our inability to forgive others.

We are deaf when we refuse to recognize those who suffer in the world around us, and do not acknowledge glaring situations of inequality, injustice, poverty and the devastation of war.

We are deaf when we refuse to hear the cry of the unborn, of those whose lives are in danger because they are elderly, handicapped, and chronically ill, while others wish to end their lives out of misguided mercy.

Beethoven's deafness

The German composer and virtuoso pianist Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) was one of the most loved composers of all time. What I never knew until recently was that Beethoven started losing his hearing at the age of 28. The deafness gave Beethoven insights into that which existed beyond that which could be seen and heard.

Beethoven was aware of the oneness of music with God from a very early age. And he was conscious of this while composing his music. "Ever since my childhood my heart and soul have been imbued with the tender feeling of goodwill. And I have always been inclined to accomplish great things." In many of his letters Beethoven expresses his desire to serve God and humanity with his music. "Almighty God, you see into my heart ... and you know it's filled with loved for humanity and a desire to do good."

Beethoven's life is a paradox. On one hand, his solitary life was burdened by his deafness and on the other his spiritual insights flashed through his music. Many a times his deafness drove him to the edge and he cursed it. Yet, he also accepted it. It may have been out of frustration, but there was an acceptance of the divine will.

Today may the words Jesus spoke over the deaf man be addressed once again to each of us: "Ephphatha, be opened!" May our ears, eyes and hearts be opened to the Gospel!

[The readings for the 23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time B are Isaiah 35:4-7a; James 2:1-5; and Mark 7:31-37]

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