

Homily of Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B, 2024

Isaiah 35:4-7; Psalm 146: 6-10; James 2:1-5; Mark 7:31-37

At the time of the prophecy of Isaiah in the first reading, worship of false gods and evil practices by kings and the people were rampant. Many worshippers of the true God were becoming fainthearted and beginning to wonder whether God had abandoned and forgotten them. The reading was a section of Isaiah's messianic prophecies, assuring the people that God had neither abandoned nor forgotten them. Isaiah prophesied to the people, "Thus says the Lord: Say to those whose hearts are frightened: be strong, fear not! Here is your God, ... he comes to save you. Then will the eyes of the blind be opened; the ear of the deaf be cleared; then will the lame leap like a stag, then the tongue of the mute will sing." Jesus and his mission were the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. As we see in the gospel, the healing of the deaf man who had a speech impediment was as Isaiah prophesied.

May God come to save the people in many countries and places where the leadership is blind, deaf, dumb, and lame, thereby inflicting sufferings on the people. May God come with vindication and recompense for his people according to his word, "Here is your God, he comes with vindication; with divine recompense he comes to save you" (Isaiah 35:4).

May God come to save those who are going through various kinds of afflictions. As in today's gospel, may there be exceeding astonishment at God's saving grace. As prophesied by Isaiah, let streams burst in the desert, and rivers in the steppe. Let the burning sands become pools, and the thirsty ground becomes springs of water. May God's children leap like stags in joyful dance, and may there be loud testimonies of, "He has done all things well," by those liberated and those healed.

St. James in the second reading brings to our attention some of the diseases that cause blindness, lameness, deafness, and dumbness on many people and on our society. St. James mentions showing partiality, making distinctions, and becoming judges with evil designs. Therefore, all forms of racism, ethnicism, discrimination, segregation, gang-ups, cliques, and the like are evil designs.

St. James writes, "For if a man with gold rings on his fingers and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and a poor person in shabby clothes also comes in, and you pay attention to the one wearing the fine clothes and say, 'Sit here, please,' while you say to the poor one, 'Stand there,' or 'Sit at my feet'" (James 2:2-3). Are our governments and their apparatuses not guilty of this? Are some religious leaders not guilty of this? Are many people, homes, communities, and institutions not guilty of this?

St. James challenges the evil designs of giving awards, honors, titles, positions, allocations, admissions, placements, appointments, and opportunities that are not according to merit and fairness but according to privilege and favoritism.

It is spiritual blindness when we do not see the sufferings of the needy. It is spiritual deafness when we do not hear the cry of the needy. It is spiritual lameness when we refuse to step forward or step out of our comfort zones to help the needy. It is spiritual dumbness when we are silent to the truth and silent in the face of evil.

We read in today's gospel, "And people brought to him a deaf man who had a speech impediment and begged him to lay his hand on him. He took him off by himself away from the crowd. He put his finger into the man's ears and, spitting, touched his tongue; then he looked up to heaven and groaned (in prayer), and said to him, 'Ephphatha!' (that is, 'Be opened!'). And immediately the man's ears were opened, his speech impediment was removed, and he spoke plainly" (Mark 7:32-35).

According to a Bible translation, Jesus spat on his finger and touched the man's tongue. This is curious! What is the meaning? Among the Jews, during the time of Jesus, as it was among some African tribes, the medicine man/woman saliva was an important ingredient of medicinal concoctions. Also, elders used to gently spit specks of saliva on someone's palms while pronouncing blessings, or spew out saliva on or towards someone while swearing at the person

or cursing the person. It was believed that saliva has healing power, blessing power, and cursing power. Universally, spitting saliva someone or on an object is a sign of disgust, disrespect, anger, or contempt. However, Jesus put his own saliva on the dumb man's tongue to loosen the man's tongue and installed the power of speech in the man.

Let us approach Jesus with faith that he may, also, take us away from the crowd and give us similar personal attention. Let us present to Jesus our life, our family, our businesses, our plans, and our afflictions so that he may touch us, heal us, and restore us. May he do exceedingly astonishing deeds for us. May he pronounce *ephphatha* on us and break open everything the Evil One and his agents closed up, covered up, sealed up, or tied up. For it is written in Revelation 3:7-8, "When you open, nobody can shut, and when you shut, nobody can open." Thank you, Jesus, for you have opened our door of blessings which nobody can close. Alleluia!

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