Homily Proper 18B

S. Stephen’s, Providence

4 September 2021

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

As those of you who have been in the church for many decades know,

going back four or five decades or more,

there has been a great shift – a great change –

maybe even a great rupture, we might call it –

a seismic shift in the life of the Church in North America,

and for that matter, Europe.

Even before the current pandemic, attendance had dropped significantly.

We all hear about the latest Pew Research Polls that tell us

that Christianity in this country is shrinking,

and that those who identify as “nothing” are a growing percentage.

I won’t deny the hard facts and the numbers,

but I will say that there also many signs that point to the contrary:

while it’s true that there are areas of significant death and decay,

there are just as many hopeful signs of growth and new life as well.

All is not lost.

In fact, God will always have the Church that God needs,

which I say not to diminish our role in it,

but to remind us that it is not all about us.

Ultimately, it is about God.

It should be obvious:

But I dare say that there are times we surely think it is all about us,

and about what we can do.

God is the interesting thing about religion, though,

as Evelyn Underhill once reminded Archbp. of Canterbury Cosmo Lang.

God is the interesting thing about religion, indeed.

The authors of the four Gospels knew that,

and as we consider our Gospel reading today,

I wonder if we shouldn’t keep that at the forefront of our minds.

There are without question many healing stories in the Gospel,

and the fact that Jesus healed people was without doubt

a very large part of his ministry:

otherwise, these healing stories

would not be recorded with such importance in all four Gospels.

But the Gospel writers have first and foremost in their minds

the nature of God, especially God as revealed in Jesus Christ:

their primary aim is to communicate the nature of who God is

to all those who would hear their Gospel message.

They are not writers of “biographies” in our modern sense of the word.

They have as their primary focus a message of Good News

to proclaim and illustrate;

they are poets who have known the Living God,

and they want us to know him too.

So, what should we notice about today’s reading?

First of all, I’d like us to focus on the 2nd half of our reading this morning –

the healing of the deaf man.

Here, there are two things I think we would do well to take note of:

Firstly, we should notice that Jesus has traveled to a region

that is not the usual setting of his earthly ministry.

He has traveled outside Israel to the other side of the River Jordan,

to an area which is today the country of Jordan.

He has traveled outside the Holy Land of Israel

into what we might call a secular region –

a group of ten cities known as the Decapolis –

an outpost of Greco-Roman culture at the far reaches of the R. Empire

which stand in stark contrast to the Jewish world of Galilee and Judea.

Second of all,

we should notice that this is one of only three instances in all four Gospels

in which the authors record Jesus in his native Aramaic tongue.

And yet his healing action, done even as he speaks a language

that those around him would not have understood

transcends language, as well as all cultural and ethnic and religious barriers.

Every human by virtue of the human condition

understands the impact and significance of being severely impaired

as well as the overwhelming relief and gratitude at being healed –

healed and restored to fullness of life and functioning.

Like music, being healed transcends any spoken language.

As odd as it might seem,

I see in the healing of the deaf and mute man in the Decapolis

a perfect illustration of the Church in the world today:

or rather, its situation – as well as its mission and its challenges.

What do I mean?

Well, let’s go back to the issue of location.

Jesus has gone to the Decapolis – as I said before, an area outside of Israel

that is very decidedly not Jewish.

So, in essence we have Jesus going about proclaiming the Gospel

in a secular context,

among people who do not share his faith or its language.

Christianity in North America is now in the same position.

Though a majority may claim Christianity as their religion,

the truth is that the values and the language of Christianity

are far from the center of our national and common life.

That isn’t to say that there aren’t good values shared by many,

nor do I mean to say that Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, or any other faith

should be excluded from our common discourse.

Rather, the hierarchy of values and the vocabulary of faith and compassion

are sorely lacking from the national discourse and have been for some time.

While I am sure that there are many studies that can point out

all the various intersections of colliding factors

that have resulted in the increased polarization of politics and faith,

as well as the fierce partisanship that seems to dominate every issue

from Britney Spears to the COVID vaccine,

I do have a gut feeling that the removal of the common narrative

or shared common experience of the Judeo-Christian worldview

and its emphasis on peace and reconciliation

and virtues like temperance, humility, charity, and even patience,

are missing from the dominant narrative that we hear right now.

Take for one example the so-called cancel culture,

which “cancels” celebrities or other folks in the media

when some become outraged by something they’ve said or written,

whether recently or even ten years ago.

I ask you, Where’s the room for grace and redemption in that?

Aren’t we all worthy of second chances? Capable of changing?

Very few saints in the church’s calendar would meet the high bar

set for them today by some.

Rather, I find, what most people hear

is something that espouses an entirely different system of values,

and a different ordering of priorities.

And when that’s all they hear, that’s all they will know how to articulate.

How can they possibly begin to speak an authentically Christian voice

into the common narrative

if they are never given or exposed to the words or concepts to begin with?

As St. Paul said,

“How are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard?”

This brings me back to my second point,

which is that the deaf man in our Gospel reading today

symbolizes far more beyond the immediate healing story.

His physical deafness represents on a theological or spiritual level

the deafness of all those who hear not the Word of God

nor the language of faith.

Some close themselves off from it, while others have never heard it at all.

In the Gospels, the healing of the deaf often alludes to the deafness

of those like the Pharisees or those who reject Jesus’s authority or teaching.

How many today are likewise deaf to the voice of the Gospel?

Like Jesus speaking a strange and unknown tongue

as he goes about his work in a secular land that does not share his faith,

so we the Church find ourselves today;

a people with a strange language that some do not understand,

yet going about the work of the Gospel,

even as we find ourselves as islands of faith

in an increasingly secular culture.

But into that deafness God speaks, “Eph’phatha!” “Be opened!”

Jesus uses his most intimate and personal language in that moment

to perform something which transcends all language.

Be healed! Be opened! Hear me!

In this healing story there is strangely enough a model for evangelism

that the Church would do well to embrace in these times:

to find ways to be about the work of the Gospel,

and doing things which transcend barriers of language or faith,

even though they may have at their core the values of Christian faith.

We too have a strange and intimate language,

and I’m not just talking about our Prayer Book or Elizabethan English.

Rather, words that have charged meaning for us –

sin, redemption, salvation, justification, grace –

those words for us automatically open up worlds of meaning;

but for one who has never heard that language before,

those words signify nothing.

So into the deaf culture at large the Church is called to use her voice,

even as she engages in actions which transcend language,

and model these deeply Christian concepts

in ways that are plainly understood.

This is a model for evangelization and mission.

Eventually, those who hear God’s call will come to know and understand

our funny words and our seemingly odd ways and speak our language also.

But the challenge for that evangelization is there before us – all of us.

I don’t mean we should all run around spitting on people’s tongues

and putting our fingers in people’s ears saying “Eph’phatha!”

or “Be opened!” – as hilarious as that would be to watch:

but we and the church at large are called to speak the voice

of Christian witness and faith to those we meet.

“How shall they believe in one whom they have not heard?”

I was touched yesterday by the number of students and parents

wandering in and out of our open church doors.

Some come from active faith traditions, some from none.

Some come in and take in the physical beauty of the space,

others come in, find a spot,

and immediately drop to their knees for a time of quiet prayer.

This parish has been and remains uniquely positioned,

literally by its physical placement,

to be a vehicle for the kind of evangelization modeled in our Gospel today.

Speaking the voice of faith amidst a sea of secularity,

ministering to all those who come through our doors,

as well as all those outside these walls;

helping those deaf to God’s voice to hear his longing for them,

and for their hearts and minds to be opened to his call,

his life-giving and restoring voice, and discover a beautiful new language,

speaking Good News into a world that needs to hear it.

Will we respond to that invitation and that challenge? Amen.