

Commentary to the 23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time - Cycle B



The story is told of a four year old saying her night prayers. She asked God to take care of mommy, daddy, and her cat. Then she asked, "And now, God, what can I do for you?"

A question still hotly debated is how do we take care of the poor. Three billion people exist on \$3 a day. Over one half billion on \$1 daily. A quarter billion children work sometimes in dreadful conditions. Five people will die from malaria in the time it takes you to read this homily. Do we help the poor and ill just by paying our taxes? Or do we give at the office? Or do we get our own hands dirty? The answer to these questions is found in today's Gospel?

Mark is the only Evangelist who tells us this sensitive story. The Teacher had little over one year to live. The police were after Him. He and His people slipped north across the border into today's Lebanon and yesterday's Phoenicia. He spent some time hiding out in the still existing cities of Tyre and Sidon.

He may have spent as many as eight months on the run.

Then it was time to break camp and return to Palestine. There was serious work to be done there. But His route would be a tortured one. He would slip into Palestine's back door located east of the country. This was the area of the Ten Cities or the Decapolis. The Ten Cities had been founded by veteran Greek soldiers after the death of their legendary young leader, Alexander the Great. The Teacher was well known among these people for at least one miracle and very possibly many others. The fellow,

brought to the Nazarene presumably by his family, was deaf but not mute. He could make incomprehensible sounds. He must have suffered greatly throughout his life from people ridiculing him.

The Teacher at this point was surrounded by a huge mob of groupies and paparazzis. He was yesterday's version of today's rock star. Everybody wanted a piece of Him. Unhappily for them, there was only so much of Him to go around.

Mark tells us Jesus "took the man aside." And, at the risk of being redundant, the usually terse writer adds "away from the crowd." Why did Mark make such a point of all this?

The explanation that is most reasonable is that the Lord was anxious to spare this afflicted man any more embarrassment than necessary. The poor man had suffered from people taunting him far too long. The man was not a client for the Christ but a person in deep trouble. And, luckily for him, the Master had no need to grandstand for the crowds. Besides, the Christ wanted to make this man feel special at least once in his life by making a fuss over him. And there we have the answer to the questions posed at the beginning of this homily. Paying taxes is not enough. Nor is giving at the office. Rather, like Christ, we ourselves must get involved with the people who need us. We must dirty our hands. Work at a soup kitchen will hurt none of us.

Pope Gregory the Great wrote, "Feed the hungry man. If you don't, you have killed him." St Peter Claver said, "We must speak to the needy with our hands before we speak with our lips."

Also we must perform our kindness with the gentleness and consideration Jesus brought to this deaf gentleman.

The wonderful word here to the deaf man was of course the Aramaic "Ephphatha" or "Be opened." This was the only word Jesus spoke in this Gospel. I like the treatment the Benedictine Daniel Durken gives to this term. He feels we should make it part of our own vocabulary whenever we run into situations where people are uptight. Specifically he says we should say "Ephphatha" to "the old who are closed to creativity and change, to all who have lost their sense of humor and turned sour and cynical, to co-workers so that they stay open to challenges and surprises, to ourselves so that we live with eyes open to God's wonders, ears open to God's wisdom, arms and hands open to hug and help and heal. What a wonder-word it is - EPHPHATHA!"

"And now, God, what can I do for you?" The answer to that question is easy. Take care of His poor. After all, He leaves us no choice on the question. But remember the monk who told us that while Christ could perform His miracles in a flash, we must work at them more slowly.

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