

23rd Sunday (B)

8th September 2024

'Ephphatha!'

Is 35: Look, your God is coming ... Ps 145: the Lord is just to those
oppressed James 2: do not try to combine faith in Jesus Christ with the
making of distinctions between classes of people
Mk 7: 31–37: cure of the deaf and dumb man

3 years ago, these were the Sunday readings that greeted me on my 1st Sunday as Chaplain here at Newman House. And, that word of Jesus — “*Ephphatha!* Be Opened!” — was most relevant, because Newman House had been quasi-closed by then for 18 months. No non-residents had been in this Chapel for a year and a half, owing to the Covid restrictions. With the arrival of September 2021, that could change, and within a few days of my coming we could happily throw open the doors of Newman House, and our chapel, again, to welcome students from far and wide. “*Ephphatha!* Be Opened!” should maybe be written over our front door, as it’s the very purpose of our chaplaincy, and our chapel, that it be a place of Christian welcome and an oasis of peace and prayer for all. It was indeed very sad, for those latter 1.5yrs of my predecessor’s time, that the Chaplaincy had to be semi-closed; it went against the whole ethos of Newman

House. They’d had other events in other locations, other churches, but it wasn’t the same as everything being here under one roof, one place of welcome and a ‘home from home’ that it should be. I am glad that this has now been the case for 3 yrs again — and it works well. Thank God that you have all gradually found your way here, whether over some years, or just in recent weeks. Or maybe you’re brand new, and have found your way here for the very first time. The doors of this Chaplaincy, and this Chapel, are opened wide for you, in Jesus’s name!

This singular word, *Ephphatha*, is in fact a Greek transliteration of an Aramaic word. This happens a few times in the Gospel: the word written in the text isn’t an original Greek word at all — the language the New Testament is written in — but an Aramaic one, i.e. a *verbatim* saying of Jesus in His native tongue. It points to the historicity of its being an actual word-for-word quotation of the Saviour Himself in His ministry; in this case, the encounter with the deaf-and-dumb man. Sudden words like this in Aramaic are little anchor-points which

add to the real-life sense of Our Lord's dialogue. Another one would be His distressed cry from the Cross, quoting the psalms, "*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani!*" They are significant moments of His historical speech — *ipsissima verba*, the theologians sometimes say, 'His very words.' Why so important a word at this particular occasion with the deaf-and-dumb man in Mk 7? Isn't it just another of so many healing miracles wrought by the Son of God according to His divine powers that we hear of in the Gospel? Well, on one level, yes it is; but on another level it is an invitation not only to this poor unfortunate man, about to be healed; it's also an invitation to the whole of deaf-and-dumb humanity: *Be opened, all of you, to the Word of Christ!* That's why, I think, the immediate follow-up to this healing miracle for one man is the inability to keep contained the message of Jesus: it 'goes viral,' as one would say today: "*the more widely they published it ... their admiration was unbounded ... He has done all things well.*"

As we are gearing-up to begin this new academic

year, making once again a new start, it's good to have those words ringing once more in our ears: *Ephphatha, Be Opened!* They are, in fact, words that we first heard on the day of another new start we once made — the most important 'new start' that we ever made: the very day that we became a Christian, *our Baptism Day*, which may have been 20 or more years ago. The *Ephphatha* rite is a small but beautiful part of the Baptism ceremony, when the celebrant gently touches the ears and the mouth of the one just baptized and says: "*The Lord Jesus made the deaf hear and the dumb speak. May He soon touch your ears to receive His Word, and your mouth to proclaim His Faith, to the praise and glory of God the Father.*" These words, making clear the connection to today's Gospel healing encounter, show the significance to our ongoing life of faith, the very point of our being baptized is: our *hearing* the Word, and our *proclaiming* the Word.

Please God, in this year ahead, in this place, your University Chaplaincy, you might have Christ "*touch your ears to receive His Word, and your mouth to proclaim His*

faith.” It is a good and holy prayer for the start of the year, just as it was a great and holy blessing at the very start of your life in Christ at Baptism. If we do not have Christ touch our lives, and if we do not imbibe the teachings of Christ ourselves, then we have nothing of faith to share with others, do we? But if we listen to the Lord, take time to understand His Word, pray with it, spend time with Him, then He can gradually equip us with the heartfelt knowledge and conviction that He wants us to share with others: the faith that is in fact “the Way, the Truth, and the Life.” We want others to have, as we have, that “unbounded admiration” for Jesus, don’t we? We would want others to know, as we do, that “He has done all things well” for He is the immortal and infinitely merciful Son of God, the only Saviour.

“*Be Opened*” says Jesus! Yes, this chapel is open — opened for you! — it’s open 9am to 8pm weekdays, and almost as much on Sundays. And to those who happen also to live here, it’s open 24/7! Our Lord is calling you to come into His presence, inviting you to prayer with Him, to

have your eyes and ears and heart and mouth opened by Him in understanding, praise and proclamation. He *can make this happen* if you spend time with Him. So, don’t neglect His loving call to you, “*Be Opened!*” Be generous with Him in response; open your hearts to Him; open your diaries to Him; allow Him space in your day; visit Him, do not neglect Him; for He dwells here in the Blessed Sacrament with that persistent but gentle invitation that you come and be here with Him. I invite you to do just that: if you live here, do not let a day go past without your visiting Him for prayer; if you don’t live here, but are passing, then be sure to come on in!

When term begins, we will provide more opportunities for scheduled prayer, Adoration, Benediction & Mass. But for now, as well as this Sunday Mass, there’s weekday Mass (5.30pm Tues–Fri) and, as I said, the chapel open daily for many hours for quiet prayer. Our days, our lives, can be complicated, and it can sometimes seem that we feel overwhelmed and unable to clearly hear or express or explore our relationship with the Lord. The very thing

that we need is to stop with Christ, have some time for peace in His presence which will allow Him to ‘lay His hand gently upon us,’ to open our ears to Him, and having heard His saving words, to be more ready and able to share that with others, bringing your friends and acquaintances here, to Jesus too. I would want this chapel to be that place of new encounter for you. Indeed, there could be other places of prayer that are important to you to meet the Lord — all sorts of other chapels and churches (London has no lack!) — but here *is special* for you, it’s your own university chapel ... where others, like you, are also seeking the Lord’s Word and encouragement.

The Lord said, “*Ephphatha*” to you — maybe years ago — when you were baptized ... but He wants, now, in a new way, now you’re adults seeking a life with meaning and purpose, to say to you again, “*Ephphatha! Be Opened!*” Hear that singular word today as a *personal invitation* from His sacred heart to yours — *heart speaks to heart*, as Cardinal Newman would say — that in Newman House, this year ahead, you can find a new, a deeper, and a

long-lasting openness to Him. Make Newman House your spiritual home, and so make your heart an open house for Jesus to dwell in as His home so that He can speak to you, from within, and guide you every day into great peace.