

September 8, 2024

Homily for the 23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time on the Gospel of Mark 7:31-37

The Gospel of Mark 7:31-37 tells the story of Jesus healing a deaf man with a speech impediment by saying “*Ephphatha*” (Be opened). This miracle not only shows Jesus’ divine power but also reflects the deeper spiritual realities linked to **Baptism**. Below are seven parallels between this passage and Baptism, drawing on the Church Fathers’ insights.

1. The Opening of the Ears: Spiritual Hearing

Parallel: In Baptism, the grace of God "opens" our spiritual ears to hear the Word of God clearly. In the miracle, Jesus opens the man's ears so that he can hear. This symbolizes the opening of the soul to hear God’s voice, which happens in Baptism when we are cleansed from sin.

Commentary: St. Gregory of Nyssa reflects on this spiritual opening: “*As the ears of the body must be unstopped for hearing, so also the ears of the heart must be opened by the word of God.*”

Fathers' Insight: St. Augustine teaches that Baptism opens the heart to faith: “*In Baptism, the deafness of our hearts is healed, so that we may hear and understand the mysteries of the Kingdom of God.*”

2. The Healing of the Tongue: Speaking Truth in Faith

Parallel: In Baptism, our tongues are “loosened” so we can proclaim the faith. Just as the man’s tongue was freed to speak properly, Baptism gives us the ability to confess our faith and speak of God’s truth.

Commentary: St. Ambrose writes, "Our tongue is bound by the chain of sin, but Baptism releases it so that it may praise the Lord.”

Fathers' Insight: Cyril of Jerusalem notes, “Before Baptism, the soul’s tongue is tied by sin, but after Baptism, we are called to proclaim the Gospel with power and clarity.”

3. The Use of Touch: Sacramental Significance

Parallel: Jesus uses physical touch to heal, paralleling the sacramental nature of Baptism. In this healing, Jesus uses his fingers and spittle, symbolic of how the sacraments employ physical signs (water in Baptism) to impart divine grace.

Commentary: St. John Chrysostom points out that Christ’s touch in the Gospel signifies the importance of the sacraments: “He uses material elements to convey spiritual realities, showing the sacramental nature of God’s grace.”

Fathers' Insight: St. Irenaeus connects Christ’s physical touch to sacramental grace, saying, “Through visible elements, invisible grace is given.”

4. The Command "Be Opened": A Baptismal Invocation

Parallel: In Baptism, the words of the rite echo the command “Ephphatha,” a prayer for spiritual openness. During the Baptismal ceremony, especially in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA), the celebrant often touches the ears and mouth of the catechumen, praying for spiritual hearing and speaking.

Commentary: Pope Benedict XVI wrote in *Jesus of Nazareth*: “The word ‘Ephphatha’ sums up the entire mission of Christ—He came to open us to God and to each other.”

Fathers' Insight: St. Cyril of Alexandria explains, “Ephphatha, be opened, is not only a command to physical ears but a command to the soul that it may open to the grace of the Holy Spirit.”

5. Restoration of Wholeness: New Life in Baptism

Parallel: Baptism restores spiritual wholeness by forgiving sins and granting new life. The man in the Gospel is made whole physically, which mirrors the spiritual wholeness given in Baptism. The grace of Baptism restores our relationship with God.

Commentary: St. Basil the Great says, “Baptism is the restoration of the whole person, not only washing away sin but filling the soul with the grace of new life.”

Fathers' Insight: St. John Chrysostom elaborates, “The man’s healing foreshadows how we are restored by Baptism—made whole again after the disfigurement caused by sin.”

6. The Role of Jesus as Mediator: Baptism’s Connection to Christ’s Salvific Power

Parallel: Baptism connects us to the saving power of Christ, our Mediator. In the Gospel, Jesus mediates divine healing. Likewise, in Baptism, we are united to Christ, who mediates grace and salvation.

Commentary: Origen writes, “Christ’s mediation in healing points us to His ultimate mediation in the sacraments, especially Baptism, where He unites us to Himself.”

Fathers' Insight: St. Augustine notes, “In Baptism, we are made members of Christ’s body, and He continues to mediate grace to us through the sacramental signs.”

7. The Response of the Crowd: The Testimony of Baptismal Grace

Parallel: Just as the people are amazed and proclaim Jesus’ works, Baptism calls us to testify to the wonders of God’s grace. The crowd in the Gospel spreads the word of Jesus’ miracle, which reflects the baptismal calling to be witnesses of Christ’s grace in the world.

Commentary: St. Gregory the Great urges, “Just as the people could not keep silent about the miracle, so too should we, after receiving Baptism, proclaim the goodness of God to the ends of the earth.”

Fathers' Insight: St. John Damascene adds, “The wonder experienced by the crowd points to the wonder of grace given in Baptism, which transforms the soul and leads it to bear witness to Christ’s work in the world.”

Conclusion

The Gospel story of the healing of the deaf and mute man reveals deep connections to the sacrament of Baptism. It points to the restoration of our spiritual senses, the power of the sacraments, and our call to witness Christ’s transformative grace. The Fathers of the Church emphasize that through Baptism, Christ continues His healing mission, opening our hearts to faith and empowering us to speak the truth in love. Just as Jesus commanded “Be opened,” we too, through Baptism, are opened to the fullness of life in Christ.