

Our School of Religion begins this year on Sunday, September 8. I am very grateful to Doris Sandreth and her great team for their continued dedication to our Parish School of Religion. May God bless you all for teaching and promoting our Catholic faith. Our Diocese considers School of Religion attendance as very important to our children's development as Catholics. They learn about Jesus and his Catholic Church which prepares them to fully participate in the adult spiritual life of the Church by providing them with a solid foundation of our Catholic faith through the reception of the Sacraments. I find a message of hope and consolation in this 23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time's readings, especially in the first and the Gospel readings. Hope and consolation are restored through the healing of the physically challenged persons, as we read in the first and Gospel readings.

In the first reading, the prophet Isaiah addressed his people in Babylonian exile who needed hope and consolation from God. He urges them to have courage because God is coming to serve them. He tells them their time of salvation will be one of restoration and wholeness for human beings and of all God's creation. He uses various images namely restoring sight to the blind, hearing to deaf ears, speech to the mute, and wholeness to the lame to communicate this message of hope and consolation. It is truly a message of hope and consolation that his people needed to hear from God.

St. Mark addresses his early Christian community and future Christian communities who also need a message of hope and consolation to find the fulfillment of prophecy of Isaiah in Jesus. So, for Mark, he sees what Isaiah foretold his people in exile coming to pass in Jesus.

In today's Gospel reading, Mark tells us some people brought to Jesus a deaf man who had a speech impediment and begged him to heal him. Mark says, "Jesus took this man away from the crowd and put his finger into the man's ears and, spitting, touched his tongue; then he looked up to heaven groaned, said to him, 'Ephphatha!' that is, 'Be opened;' his speech impediment was removed and he spoke plainly." Yes, Jesus restored hope and consolation to this man through the healing of his impediment. St. Gregory the Great, a church father whose feast we celebrated on Tuesday, September 3, comments on this miracle: "The Spirit is called the finger of God. When the Lord puts his fingers into the ears of the deaf mute, he was opening the soul of the man to faith through the gifts of the Holy Spirit."

Just imagine the joy Jesus brought this man. It is said that "the greatest tragedy is not to be born deaf or dumb, but to have ears and yet fail to hear, and to have tongues and yet fail to speak." Could you imagine how many people today have ears but fail to hear and tongues but fail to speak? The gifts of hearing and speech are very important, but without a heart of compassion it is useless. We all need a heart of compassion to be able to hear well and speak well of even those we may dislike.

During the Rite of Baptism, the celebrant touches your ears and mouth and says, "The Lord Jesus made 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." Then, just before the Gospel is read, we sign our forehead, lip, and heart, asking the Lord to let his word open/enter our mind, our tongue to profess it, and his word to stay in our hearts. By doing this, we are also following the advice of St. James in the last week's second reading that we must be hearers and doers of the word of God. These rituals may appear simple but have a very important impact on our Catholic life.

My dear people of God, there is nothing that is impossible for Jesus. Just continue to have a faith in Jesus and he will one day answer your request also. Don't give up please. Remember 'PUSH' stands for "PRAY UNTIL SOMETHING HAPPENS." It will happen soon! Like the people who brought this deaf man with a speech impediment to Jesus for healing, let us also bring those who have left the Church or do not know Christ to him. Let us all remember that we can't give what we do not have. We must first know Jesus before we can bring others to him.

One of the best ways we can do this is what St. James talks about in the second reading. There must be no discrimination or favoritism based on status or wealth in our community. We are all God's children, hence we must treat one another equally, irrespective of one's gender, race, color, sex, economic, political ideology, etc. This is the teaching of Catholic Church commonly refers to as a preferential option or love for the poor. It is our responsibility as Catholics to challenge those in power to make policies/laws that respect and treat everyone as God's children.

Today, September 8, the Society of the Divine Word Missionaries of which Fr. John and I are members, launched our 150th anniversary. The SVD order was founded by St. Arnold Janssen, a German priest, on September 8, 1875. God willing, next year, we will be celebrating 150th anniversary. By the grace of God, we are working in over 80 countries. Please pray with us and for us that we continue to be faithful missionaries of the Divine Word of Jesus. We are blessed to have you all as part of our SVD family. Please know that you and your loved ones are remembered daily in our prayers. Thanks for your prayers and continued assistance.