

# EPHPHATHA

*A Sermon for the Twenty-third Sunday of the Year (B)*

*St Paul's Parish, Gävle, Sweden.*

*Texts: Is. 35: 4-7; Ps. 145; James 2:1-5; Mark 7: 31-37.*

**“Ephphatha.”** My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, this Aramaic word, which means “Be opened” is what the Lord tells us today and through us the entire world. It is noteworthy that although the rite of baptism has been translated to the vernacular, this Aramaic word is retained, following the tradition of Mark the Evangelist. During the celebration of the Sacrament of Baptism, the minister traces the sign of the Cross on the ear and the mouth of the candidate and uses the same words that the Lord spoke, **“Ephphatha”** – be opened. Most of us – if not all – in the Church here present have been baptised. This means that most of us – if not all - have heard the same words that the Lord spoke to the man who was deaf and dumb. We received from the Lord through the minister who baptised us the healing for our spiritual deafness and dumbness. The Lord opened our ears so that we could hear his words and our mouths so that we could proclaim the Good news of salvation.

**“Ephphatha”** – be opened. We know from the Scriptures that we all have been commissioned to be witnesses of Christ. We are told during our confirmation that we have been made soldiers of Christ, commissioned to go out to preach the Gospel of salvation. Countless Church documents re-iterate the same command. Pope Paul VI (*in Evangelii Nuntiandi*) reminds us that **“The Church is an evangelizer, but she begins by being evangelized herself”** - we who are sent to evangelise must first be evangelised. A person who is deaf and dumb cannot carry out the Lord’s command to be the bearer of the Gospel.

**Ephphatha!** You may wonder why this command should be repeated since it was spoken to us at baptism. Here is why: we renew our baptismal promises

every time we recite the Creed. In the same way, we need to be reminded of that dignity that is ours through baptism. We need to remind ourselves that we who were cured of deafness and dumbness cannot afford to close our ears and tie our tongues. Before we were given the regeneration through water and the Holy Spirit, we were deaf so we could not hear the Gospel of salvation and dumb so we could not proclaim it.

We live in the world among people who do not believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and the message of salvation in him. We are infected by the twin spiritual disabilities: the deafness of their unbelief and dumbness of their silence in offering praise to God our Saviour. Therefore the words of the Lord are addressed anew to us even as we listen: *Ephphatha!*

In this country, it has become fashionable for atheists and secular humanists to challenge Christians to debates on whether God exists or not. There are many good and knowledgeable Christians who willingly agree to hold the debates with them. But by asking for these debates the atheists intend to reduce our faith in the true God to an ideology. Further, they want to prove that an ideology is a perspective on life and that a perspective is relative: that there is no objective truth.

St Paul was confronted by people like these. He certainly held debates with both the philosophers of his time and the Jewish believers who did not believe in Christ as the long-awaited Saviour. In his First Letter to the Corinthians, he gives us what we can call his stand: *“For the Jews demand signs and the Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to the Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ is the power of God and wisdom of God”* (1 Cor. 1: 22-24). So, my message to the atheists in Sweden and all over the world is *Ephphatha!*

When people who pride themselves as notable philosophers experience the salvation that is only in Jesus Christ, they make the words of St Paul their own: ***“Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord...that I may know him and the power of his resurrection”*** (Phil. 3: 8-10). Augustine of Hippo was a great philosopher indeed. We read in his *Confessions* that when he surrendered to Jesus Christ whom he confessed to be true God and true man, he cried out, ***“Late have I loved you, O Beauty ever ancient, ever new, late have I loved you! You were within me, but I was outside, and it was there that I searched for you”***. He understood that all the while he prided himself as some one enlightened; he was really deaf, dumb and blind. This explains why he praised God for healing him: ***“You called, you shouted, and you broke through my deafness. You flashed, you shone, and you dispelled my blindness. You breathed your fragrance on me; I drew in breath and now I pant for you. I have tasted you, now I hunger and thirst for more. You touched me, and I burned for your peace”***

*(St Augustine: Confessions X: 27, 28).*

We can live as the Lord commands only if we have been cured of our deafness. We can proclaim the message without fear only if we have been cured of our dumbness. And we can see Jesus in everyone without discrimination only if the light of Christ shines in our hearts. For only those whose hearts are the dwelling places of the Son of God can see him present in those whom society rejects.

Only those who have been cured of the deafness of pride and foolishness, the blindness of unbelief and the dumbness of not praising God can get rid of fear. Only they can hear the words of the prophet, ***“Courage! Do not be afraid.”***

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