

Last year, at the start of the fall semester at the Sunday 5:15 Mass I had my good friend Fr Paul G. concelebrating with me. Fr. Paul is 87 years old and uses a walker to get around. I introduced him as the new campus minister – there were some gasps. However, Fr. Paul smiled like nothing had been said and that is because he can barely hear even with a hearing aid. It is always fun going to confession with him as he makes me repeat louder what I had done wrong.

In all seriousness, though, people who have trouble hearing can annoy us and many just refrain from even speaking to them after awhile. For the deaf person, it is embarrassing as they cannot understand the simplest of questions. I think back to my childhood and my younger brother. He often had ear infections, which affected his hearing – after awhile he would just fake like he understood. It is not so unlike being in a foreign country and you just grow frustrated at not understanding, that you start to shake your head with a yes, over and over again.

By virtue of his condition, the deaf man lives in virtual isolation, which can be the most painful dimension of life when one is isolated or excluded; alone and part from life. It is a horrible feeling when you realize you don't fit in and are ostracized because of it. We've all experienced it in one way or another. It might be you are struggling to find your way in the world or perhaps painful childhood memories of being mocked and laughed at. Perhaps you still carry that insecurity of not being accepted as "normal". A parishioner handed me a quote from, I believe John Paul II, in which he said that greatest poverty one can suffer is that of isolation.

This can lead to such an individual to become mute, because no one hears him/her, so they no longer speak – confidence and esteem are gone; they have no voice.

And so Jesus comes to the deaf man and is fully present to him and frees him from isolation. He leads him away from the crowd because sometimes it is difficult to hear the voice of God in the crowd of the world.

This is particularly true in our society today. God has been banished from our schools and anything that involves the government. Just the other week, I heard that the ACLU was going after someone because they simply offered grace. Their goal is to rid any sign of God in the public sphere and in so doing they are destroying the very foundation of our country. In its place there is nothing but emptiness and sometimes violence. The violence comes always from those who feel alone and rejected and thus made mute - when we no longer hear the voice of God, we become empty and without purpose.

The world we live in is also cluttered with artificial noise, an environment that overwhelms all of our senses to being aware of God's presence. Is there any wonder why so many doubt God because they have been deaf to God? We are in constant communication, be it cell phones, ipods or the internet that we have been lost to the crowd of the world.

Doctors warn that issue of deafness may afflict more people than every before, because of the damage being done to the eardrums. I would also say there is real damage in being done to the eardrums for and to the divine. Are you having doubts of God's existence? Walk away from the noise and crowds of the world and be alone with him.

The story of the deaf-mute may have been aimed at those members of Mark's community who could not bear witness to Jesus because they had become deaf to his word, which led to a speech impediment in speaking about him. When is the last time you ever spoke of Jesus to those around you? Perhaps it might be time to check your hearing.

It is clearly symbolic that Jesus goes out of his way to travel via Sidon into the district of the Decapolis. The deaf man symbolizes all of this, a people in isolation. Yes, this was a Gentile area, which was scorned by the Jewish people and was to be avoided at all cost. The isolated, those could not be heard, who had no voice, to them, he came. He comes also for you, but we have to be willing to be away with him.

“Ephphatha!” The first voice the deaf man hears is the voice of God. In our baptism, Jesus speaks the same word: *“Ephphatha. May he soon touch your ears that you may hear his word. May he soon touch your mouth that you may speak his word.”*

Do you remember the first time you heard his word and spoke his word? How long has it been since the last time you have heard his word or spoken his word? Be alone with him. The gospel shows us even though it seems we have no voice and that no one listens to us, there is one who does and that is Jesus. Yes, Jesus wants you to know that you are never alone in this world. He understands when it seems no one else in the world can; he does, as he always listens.

St. Augustine once lived a slothful life, deaf to God's voice, until he was alone with God. Of this experience, Augustine wrote (in his Confessions), “you called to me; you cried aloud to me; you broke through my barrier of deafness. You shone upon me; your radiance enveloped me; you put my blindness to flight. You shed your fragrance about me; I drew breath and now I gasp for you. I tasted you, and now I hunger and thirst for you. You touched me and I burned for your peace.”

In being with him, we discover, like Augustine, that all the senses aspire to God, everything in us reaches upwards; our whole being is a longing for God. Be alone with God and will discover that we are never alone in the world.

After he heals him the deaf man, Jesus says to tell no one. This is really Mark's cryptic way of saying this is not the total picture, as that will come when you he dies and rises from the dead. However, when you spend real time in the presence of Christ, you have to talk! I mentioned in one of our weekday Mass this week that I experienced this. I was feeling down for one reason or another (yes, melancholy afflicts priests as well) so I sat down and began to pray. Afterward, I could feel Christ's presence and I felt joy. I had regained my voice!

Take time and be away with Jesus. In so doing, you will regain your hearing God and will want to speak about God. In so doing, your words become God's words. And for someone out there, that may be the first time they hear the voice of God in their ears through your voice.