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Church of St. Thomas More, NYC
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23rd Sunday of Year B Mark 7: 31-37

I remember reading a news story several years ago about a problem that had developed in some of our local airports. It seems that the airports had begun to experience some difficulties with large numbers of rabbits that lived between the runways. The rabbits lived a few feet below the deafening roar of the jets taking off and landing every few minutes, but they were oblivious to the noise. They went scurrying across the runway as if they owned the place, causing problems with planes landing and taking off. It seems that over time the rabbits had become deaf to the sounds of the planes. They simply could not react to the reality of that noise that was all about them. They lived in their own silent world.

In today's Gospel we read of Jesus opening the ears of the man who is deaf. He restores the man's hearing so that the man might be able to listen to the message of the gospel. Modern science has provided us with many of the tools to restore some measure of sound to those who are hard of hearing. We may be able to hear, but are we able to listen—listen to the news that reaches our ears of all the natural disasters that are occurring with increasing frequency? This past July was the second wettest in New York State history; this August was the fifth wettest. Two records for the heaviest rainfall were broken within days. And, while the eastern part of our nation is under water, the West is plagued with fire and drought. The situation reminds me of the response Ernest Hemingway gave when a friend asked him how he came to be bankrupt. Hemingway replied that it happened "first slowly, then suddenly." In the same way we have been hearing for decades about impending ecological disasters, perhaps imagining that it's still a long way down the line. Then, days ago we heard of people drowning in their basements in Queens and Brooklyn, and in their cars on the roads of New Jersey.

This Saturday, with the approaching 20th anniversary of 9/11, we recall the shock we experienced to our collective sense of security, when a terrorist attack that only happened in other parts of the world, now was happening in our backyard. Likewise, the flooding from typhoons and monsoons occurring in developing nations, disasters that we may have seen on TV news reports, are now reported on the local evening news. How did it happen? First slowly, then suddenly.

We may be beset by a deafness of the spirit, by a moral obtuseness, whereby we try to insulate ourselves from the sounds of the unpleasant reality of today's world. Too often we hear what we want to hear, and screen out what might disturb our

comfortable ways of thinking. We take from religion its consolation, its comfort, its promise of peace, while we neglect its challenge. Pope Francis has spoken on many occasions about the challenge of confronting climate change, most specifically in his encyclical, Laudato, Si: On Care for Our Common Home. He is insistent on framing the issue of global warming as a moral, not just a political or governmental question.

The Book of Genesis remind us that we are to be stewards, not exploiters of the "garden" God has given us. We are invited to be "co-creators" with the Divine Creator, bringing the world to fulfillment. We are called to live in harmony with our natural environment, sharing the bounty of the earth with all God's children, equitably and justly. The notion of the "common good" should regulate our priorities in how we develop and use the material goods God has given us. The "common good" requires a concern not only for the people of today but for future generations as well. Global climate change poses one of the greatest threats to the most vulnerable among us. Because of poverty, age, health and location, the poor are especially vulnerable to the potential negative impacts of global climate change. The poor and vulnerable do not have the economic and technological resources either to adapt or ward off the expected impacts of climate change. Every individual and institution must accept responsibility in caring for God's creation, remembering we are all interdependent in the universal order established by our Creator.

Pope Francis' encyclical is rather long, some 43,000 words. Still, it is worth reading. But if you are not ready to read the whole document, summaries are readily available online. I want to highlight one section. The Pope emphasizes that environmental harm is caused by sin understood as broken relationships "with God, with our neighbor and with the earth itself." These relationships are broken in part because humans "presume to take the place of God and refuse to acknowledge our creaturely limitations." He goes on to criticize what he calls the "technocratic paradigm," a view which "accepts every advance in technology with a view to profit, without concern for its potentially negative impact on human beings," a view where "finance overwhelms the real economy." Pope Francis calls for a "personal and communal" conversion away from consumerism and "collective selfishness" and the development of a lifestyle animated by sound ecological virtues, i.e., "good habits."

In a few moments we will take part in the Eucharist. We are reminded that the one bread is composed of many grains of wheat. So, the Body of the risen Christ whom we receive in the Eucharist is united to many members. The Eucharist reminds us of our interconnectedness in, with and through the risen Christ. Again, it is this them of interconnectivity that runs through the Pope's encyclical. Let us pray that what we profess and celebrate in mystery, we may live out in fact, that we are merely "stewards" of God's creation, and that we are always our brother's keeper."