

September 9, 2018 23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Bishop Bradley's Reflections on the Sunday Readings

My youngest sister told me that she was recently babysitting her young grandson, Braydon. It was a rainy, stormy evening, and the little guy was getting frightened. So my sister, his grandmother, tried playing some games to distract him, but that wasn't working; she then said: "Let's say an Our Father and a Hail Mary; that will help." Braydon answered that he couldn't do that, to which his grandmother asked the reason. "I know Hail Mary", he said, "but I don't know YOUR Father."

Well, even for those of us who do know the Our Father, Who is our Loving Father Whose Presence abides with us in good times and in bad, we're living in some pretty scary times right now given all the confusion and anger caused by the current number of scandals in the Church. And on top of that, a lack of transparency and confidence in many of our Bishops has contributed to a crisis of faith. These scandals have resulted in strong emotional reactions among many of our Catholic faithful, from anger, to shock, disbelief and rage. But when we put all those emotions together, they might all have a root in fear; a fear of what's next, a fear for the future of the Church, a fear of to what this all will lead.

Because of that, today's Readings from God's Holy Word for this 23rd Sunday of the Year are a welcome gift from our Loving God for us to hear at this time.

In today's First Reading, Isaiah the great Old Testament Prophet was calling the People of Israel back from wandering away from God in the practice of their faith and from their fears that God's punishments could be realized. So we heard Isaiah saying: "*Say to those whose hearts are frightened: 'Be strong! Fear not! Here is your God...Who comes to save you.'*" Isaiah is actually announcing the dawn of the Kingdom of God, and in that Kingdom, amazing and wondrous transformations will take place, as we heard: "*the eyes of the blind will be opened, the ears of the deaf will be cleared...the lame will leap like a stag...the tongues of the mute will sing....and streams will burst forth in the desert.*" God is always about doing something new; He is about renewing the human heart. But that's not easy!

In today's Gospel, we see Jesus leaving Jerusalem and heading for the Sea of Galilee by way of Tyre and Sidon. The crowd of people brought to Jesus along the way a man who was deaf and who had a speech impediment, and they begged Jesus to lay His hands on him. St. Mark records for us, in dramatic fashion, the step-by-step process that Jesus used to bring about this miraculous healing. First, He took the man away from the crowd to avoid all the distractions and rubber-necking. Then He took His finger and inserted it in the man's ears. Then He took some of His own spittle and touched the man's tongue. Then He looked up to Heaven and "groaned", and then said: "*Ephphatha! Be opened!*" And the man was instantly able to hear and speak clearly. As St. Mark said, the crowds were *exceedingly astonished*". Why? Well, of course, because they just witnessed a miracle. But also because it did not go unnoticed by them that Jesus had done exactly what Isaiah had foretold, as we heard in today's First Reading, would happen when the Kingdom of God came: "*the ears of the deaf will be cleared....the tongues of the mute will sing.*" They knew that they were in the Presence of God. Jesus healed that man, but it wasn't easy.

These days are painful for all who are even slightly aware of the awful news that seems to keep unfolding regarding the Archbishop McCarrick situation, the Pennsylvania Grand Jury Report, and allegations of cover-ups and denials at the highest levels of the Church leadership. There's pain in our hearts; there's anger in our hearts; and I'm sure there's a lot of fear in our hearts as well---what does this all mean?, and where will this all lead? I'm sure we'd all love to have an instantaneous "healing" of this whole mess, to have Jesus emit a "groan" to the highest Heaven, pronounce that word "*Ephphatha, Be opened*", and have it all be made right again. But, of course, it's not that easy!

So what do we do? Let's go back to the Gospel passage once again, and pick up on a very important detail. As Jesus was making His way along the road, we read that "*the people from the Decapolis brought to Him (Jesus) a deaf man who had a speech impediment, and they begged Him to lay His hand on him.*" The people brought him to Jesus. They could have brought that man to anyone. They could have ignored that man all together. But they cared about him, and they heard amazing things about Jesus, and so they brought him to Jesus. That's a very important point for us to keep in mind. We, and anyone committed to working for change and healing in the Church---we are "the people"; and "we" need to bring this "problem", this "crisis", to Jesus, and beg Him to lay His hand on us, on this awful situation, and bring us healing. It may take many "groans"; it will take a

lot of painful admissions; it will take frank, honest, bold initiatives; it will take being willing to really “speak truth to power”. We can’t just deal with this awful situation through anger, revenge, bitterness, or out of any sense of retribution. We must bring it all to Jesus, and beg Him to guide us. We must ask the Gift of the Holy Spirit for His seven-fold Gifts, including courage and wisdom to do whatever it takes, and to know what that is.

We need to ask our Loving Father, our Saving Lord, and our Holy Spirit to demand of the Church: “*Ephphatha, Be opened*”---

We need to insist that those among the hierarchy, at any level, who have done wrong, who have not done what was right, who have failed in leadership as true shepherds: “*Ephphatha, Be open*” to change, conversion of heart and mind.

We need for all of us, who love our Mother the Church, to pray: “*Ephphatha, Be open*” to the guidance of the Holy Spirit to remain faithful, and to not look anywhere other than the Church which is the way to salvation and to eternal life.

For each and every one of us, individually, we need to pray: “*Ephphatha, Be open*” to change what we need to change; do not just point fingers at others, but ask for God’s grace, thru the Gifts of the Sacraments, especially the Holy Eucharist, to keep growing as faithful and joyful disciples of Jesus, to stay strong in our Faith, and to continue to spread the good news of the Kingdom of God.

Just like those people from the Decapolis, let us be “*exceedingly astonished*” at what Jesus has done for us in winning the ultimate Victory over sin, evil and death. Even though we are dealing with an awful evil in the Church at present, evil will not prevail; the Gates of Hell will not prevail. Jesus and His Church will prevail. But it won’t be easy!

And so, to those whose hearts are frightened: ‘*Be strong! Fear not.*’ The Lord our God is here to save us.

God bless you, now and always!