

**Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle B**  
**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception – September 9, 2018**  
**Reverend Robert W. Marshall, Jr., Pastor**

It used to be said that last Monday – Labor Day – marked the beginning of the fall campaign season. Since at least the 1990s, however, it has been difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish the fall campaign season from the winter, spring and summer campaign seasons. Everyone, it seems, is constantly running for election or re-election. We've been bombarded by political commercials for months. On one 24-hour cable station or another so-called experts and pundits continually criticize and analyze the candidates or would-be candidates. The November elections are not yet here and many of these folks are already talking about 2020 or 2022. They don't call them "talking heads" for nothing. These experts have an opinion about everything – opinions they are happy to share. What is missing, of course, is dialogue. Each pundit is dying to get his or her own opinion out there, but not at all interested in hearing the views of anyone else. There is, indeed, a lot of talking these days, but precious little listening. In the words of the famous football coach Lou Holtz, "When all is said and done, more is said than done."

In the gospel today, Jesus opens the ears and cures the speech of a man who begged for his help. It was an important action, because – as we heard in the first reading – the prophet Isaiah had foretold that the people of Israel would recognize God's presence among them when the eyes of the blind were opened and the ears of the deaf were cleared. So Jesus not only cured the deaf man, at the same time he revealed himself as God. And he did so in an interesting, an unexpected way. Jesus is God, but he is human as well. He is the Word Incarnate. So Jesus did not heal this man with a great display of power – with lightening bolts or trumpet blasts – as one might expect that God would do. No, Jesus cured him in a very earthy way, a very human way. He put his fingers in the man's ears, and spitting, he touched his tongue. Now the gospels were written in Greek, but obviously Mark felt that the word that Jesus actually spoke was so important that he preserved it in the original Aramaic – "Ephphatha!" "Be opened!"

If this sounds at all familiar, it is because most of us have heard it before. The same words were probably spoken to us, though we may have been too young to remember it. If we were baptized as infants, the priest or deacon touched our ears and our mouth. In Jesus' name, he commanded that they be opened. It is a nice gesture, but the danger is that its meaning will be lost on us. We certainly pray for those who are deaf or hard of hearing. For some reason, we tend to accept people with eyeglasses more readily than we accept people with hearing aids. That

is unfortunate, because there really is no difference. I know that the older I get, the more my own hearing fades. Still, most of us can hear perfectly well. Our hearing doesn't need to be cured. Ah, but our listening!

When Jesus speaks the word, "Ephphatha! Be opened!" to us, he is talking about more than the physical mechanics of our ear drums. He asks us to open our minds and our hearts to listen and receive him. He asks us not only to hear the Word of God – in the same casual way we hear popular music on the radio – but more importantly to listen and to respond to God's word. He asks us not only to hear the cries of the poor and the afflicted, but to listen to them. For our God knows that if we truly listen to those in need, we will get out of our chairs and do something about it. Perhaps our help will be financial, perhaps we will give of our time, or perhaps we can only listen and offer our compassion and our prayers. Once our ears are opened, once we have truly listened, our response will always be tangible, human.

Here, we follow Jesus as well. Jesus heard the deaf man begging for his help and cured him by using his hands and his voice. He performed a mighty deed, a miracle – and the people of his time could not help but talk about it. Though Jesus tried to quiet them down, they could only proclaim all the more: "He makes the deaf hear and the mute speak." We too are called to cure the ills of our society with our hands and with our voices. Jesus invites us to open our ears, to listen to the Word of God and to make that Word incarnate in our lives. There is a great temptation to let the many cries of those in need wash over us like so many of the urban noises or robo-calls or the endless chatter of cable news pundits. Today he invites us, in a special way, to listen to voices of the hungry and the poor, the cries of the needy and the oppressed, the stories of victims and the heartache of witnesses. Only when we move beyond merely hearing these voices to truly listening to them will we be moved to action. Unlike Jesus, we may not be able to work miracles, to effect physical cures – but then we have to be careful about how we define miracles. You see, as miraculous as it might be to heal the sick, to comfort the afflicted, to feed the hungry – the real miracle might be that every once in a while, our ears and our hearts might be opened to the voice of God.