

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 6, 2015

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There is something curious about the Lord's healing of the man who was deaf mute. On the one hand it reveals Jesus as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. When the Messiah came the deaf would hear and the mute would break forth into song. On the other hand, the miracle is almost *completely secular* in tone. There is no note of faith in either the motivation for healing or the result.

This incident has common aspects with ancient miracles done by ordinary healers. In most of Our Lord's miracles the miracle itself *and any technique used* is played down. But here notice is taken about the use of saliva, and the groan made by the healer, and the special word of healing used. **Ephphatha** means "be opened." The ancient near-east abounded with healers and shamans and medicine men. There is even a well-known story told by both Tacitus and Suetonius that the Emperor Vespasian once healed a blind man with the use of saliva. Our Lord used saliva in one other cure, when He anointed a blind man's eyes with clay. (*John 9*)

So what's with all this? Some people want to believe the Son of God needed extra effort to effect this healing! That is nonsense. As in most every other miracle recounted in the New Testament, it would be *one word of command*, or even *one thought* from the Lord, that would accomplish the cure. So the putting of His fingers into the ears of the deaf man, the groaning, the use of saliva, and the special word *ephphatha* have a different explanation. They resemble in their own way some of the treatment used in modern psychotherapy, where the treatment sometimes includes persuasive gestures to accompany and promote the desired effect. To say *ephphatha* while touching the man's ears and tongue was simply to give verbal encouragement to what was happening anyway.

The remarkable thing about miracles in the New Testament is that Our Lord Jesus had not the slightest interest in demonstrating His Messiah ship with wonders and signs. God Incarnate was not entertaining the crowd at the sideshow in the circus! In the New Testament the miracles do not validate Christ. Rather, it is the other way around. The Bible begins with the fact that Jesus is Lord, that His Godhead is preexistent, that there is nothing on earth which could make Him, or prove Him, to be Son of God. Christ's working of miracles makes *them* important. That God's Own Son does this particular miracle attached significance to it, not to Him. This is

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the reverse of what many people think. But never mind that. In the Bible the miracles derive their meaning from the fact that *Christ does them*, and therefore, in this case, shows God's particular care for this individual.

It says "Jesus took him off by himself away from the crowd." Compassion is a character trait of Almighty God. Here the sole focus is on this one individual, who is taken aside. Jesus is helping one isolated and suffering human being. There is no teaching here for the crowd, and no object lesson for the rest of the world. There is no photo-op, no cameraman trailing along recording the scene, no one passing out "vote for Jesus" pamphlets! Here is the Son of God helping one individual person who in his own right needed divine help. The Lord took this man aside because this healing really was no one else's business.

If the Lord groaned it was not because this healing was difficult for Him to perform! Again, that is nonsense. Rather, it showed the Lord's sympathy with human suffering. And because Jesus is God's Own Son, He well knew in advance all the difficulties and temptations this man would soon face with his hearing and speech restored. Our ability to hear and speak can get us into trouble, as we all know, and *Our Creator certainly knows*. "He knew what was in man; He needed no one to tell Him." Remember in the Lord's perspective, which is the only one that counts, it is better to enter Life halt and maimed.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who gave his life in a Nazi death camp, once said, "We must learn to regard people less in the light of what they do or omit to do, and more in the light of what they suffer." Bonhoeffer may have been thinking of today's gospel. In any event, we rejoice to know this story of Our Lord's compassion. And we ask Him in all things to help us to follow where He has led the way.