

Although the words of Scriptures we read today were written long ago, God always speak to us in the present. When it was proclaimed by the prophets or by Jesus himself, it had an immediate application but also a long-term application. It is important to read the words of Isaiah, James and Mark with the confidence that God is speaking to me now.

Jesus' healing miracles were more than an act of compassion for a suffering person; they were for him a teaching tool as well. At this point in Mark's Gospel, Jesus was in open conflict with the Scribes and the Pharisees who were haunting him and attempting to lay traps for him. He has fled his native Israel, first for the Lebanese territories of Tyre and Sidon, where he healed the daughter of the Phoenician woman. After the doubts expressed by his contemporaries it was the faith of this pagan woman who led him to cure her. In today's gospel, Jesus has made a sixty miles detour not to return to Galilee but visit instead another pagan territory, the District of the Ten Cities or Decapolis.

It is significant that once there Jesus heals a pagan man who could neither hear nor speak. Contrary to the Scribes and the Pharisees, this man's faith makes him able to hear Jesus and to proclaim his praises. The Scribes and the Pharisees considered the pagans a lower class of people, shunned by God and destined to hell. Jesus on the contrary praised the faith of the Phoenician woman and opened this man's ears to his message. By these two miracles he is saying that salvation is opened to all who believe and not the reserve of a chosen few.

The attitude of the Scribes and the Pharisees is the temptation of all believers. It is the temptation to believe that we are the favorites of God and pity those who are not as enlighten. It is the temptation of the rich nations toward the poor, whom we consider backward, corrupt and ignorant. Why won't they just listen to us? Wouldn't that solve all their problems?

No doubt this statement is an over simplification, but isn't there a grain of truth somewhere in there? The fear of the rich, and we are all one way or another in that category, is to lose what we have. It fosters an atmosphere of fear. And there is plenty of fear to go around in our society: as we prepare to celebrate the anniversary of 9/11, we fear the terrorists who can disturb our nation at any time, we fear the immigrants who are invading our shores, we fear criminals who may break into our homes and wreck our lives. Our fears are fed by a 24 hour the mass media that thrive on disaster and bad news, leaving us the impression that there is only bad news. On a daily basis we are fed images of war, of devastating natural phenomenon and violent crime. Who would not want to protect themselves from such a reality? Correct, all those events are real, but they

are not all of reality. Even better, they are not most of reality; there are more good things than bad happening every day but they are not as interesting as disasters. "Happy people have no history" goes the saying.

Even with the bad news, is fear the right response? Fear is a strong emotion that can distort or paralyze our judgment. Fear causes one to act impulsively and take short term defense positions without always realizing the consequences. Historians tell us that this country has never been so polarize. They mean that the majority of the population is not in the middle anymore on important issues, but more and more people are being pulled toward the extremes. I heard the editor of local newspaper speak to an ecumenical clergy meeting. He said he has never seen anything like it. If he mentions a key word, like "**immigration**" in his editorial to suggest a dialogue on the issue, he immediately receives nasty letters and calls from both sides of the issues. Clergy of every faith complain they cannot speak rationally on any of these key issues that divide the nation without antagonizing half their parishioners. Any of us here present probably have to tread lightly when talking to long time friends and fellow parishioners.

Since God speaks to us through his word, what is He telling us today through the readings we read? First, he tells us through Isaiah: "**Say to those whose hearts are frightened: Be strong, fear not!**" (Is 35:4). He tells us in the letter of James to "**show no partiality**" (Jas 2:1) between the poor and the rich, between those who are like us and those who are not. Above all in the Gospel he invites us to come to him and be healed of our deafness and our muteness.

If we let ourselves heal, how will this healing be manifested? One way to tell would be if we can admit that the version of the truth we hold so fast to is not a complete version. We look at a distance to the conflict between the Israeli and their neighbors and say: "**Don't they see that it's senseless? Why can't they compromise?**" We look at the Shiites and the Sunnis and say: "**Why do they have to kill each other? Why can they work it out?**" For the same reason we don't agree here on armed interventions, on abortion, on stem cell research, on the death penalty and on immigration. Because, like the Scribes and the Pharisees, we are right and the others are wrong. If we accept to be healed, however, we have to first give up that dogma. We have to let our ears be open to the point of view of others. We have to be able to speak charitably to opponents, not to attack but to ask questions, to listen, and give positive responses. That would be the miracle of the healing of the mute and deaf.

I know what we are all thinking: "**I wish my neighbor was here to this. He might understand why I am right.**" That is why we all need to pray again: "**Lord, heal me for I am still deaf.**"