

A concerned husband went to a doctor to talk about his wife. He said to the doctor, "Doctor, I think my wife is deaf because she never hears me the first time and always asks me to repeat things."

"Well," the doctor replied, "go home and tonight stand about 15 feet from her and say something to her. If she doesn't reply move about 5 feet closer and say it again. Keep doing this so that we'll get an idea about the severity of her deafness."

Sure enough, the husband goes home and does exactly as instructed. He starts off standing about 15 feet from his wife in the kitchen as she is chopping some vegetables and says, "Honey, what's for dinner?" He hears no response.

He moves about 5 feet closer and asks again. No reply. He moves 5 feet closer. Still no reply. He gets fed up and moves right behind her, about an inch away, and asks loudly, "Honey, what's for dinner?" She replies, "For the fourth time, vegetable stew!"

At the heart of today's Gospel (Mk 7, 31-37) there is a small but, very important word. A word that -- in its deepest meaning -- sums up the whole message and the whole work of Christ. The Evangelist, Mark, writes it in the same language that Jesus pronounced it in, so that it is even more alive to us. This word is "Ephphatha," which means, "be opened."

Let us look at the context in which it is located. Jesus was traveling through the region known as the "Decapolis."

They brought to him a deaf and mute man, so that he could heal him. Jesus took him aside, touched his ears and tongue, and then, looking up to the heavens, with a deep sigh said, "Ephphatha," which means, "Be opened." And immediately the man began to hear and speak fluently.

This then is the historical, literal, meaning of this word: this deaf mute, thanks to Jesus' intervention, "was opened."

Before, he had been closed, insulated; it was very difficult for him to communicate; his recovery was "openness" to others and the world, an openness that, starting from the organs of hearing and speech, involved all his person and his life.

Finally, he was able to communicate and thus relate in a new way.

When Jesus uses the word Ephphatha, he addresses the whole person. We all know that closure of man, his isolation, does not solely depend on the sense organs.

There is an inner closing, which covers the deepest core of the person, what the Bible calls the "heart." That is what Jesus came to "open," to liberate, to enable us to fully live our relationship with God and with others.

That is why I said that this little word, "Ephphatha – Be opened," sums up Christ's entire mission.

Ephphatha! – Be open. Jesus is telling us the same healing word right now. We might not be physically mute or deaf, but one can also experience deafness and muteness on different levels: Definitely we need an Ephphatha moment in our Church.

The Church has been deaf and mute when it comes to sexual abuse of minors for decades, the silence of the Church has been deafening.

There is deafness and muteness at so many levels - deaf from the call of forgiveness and reconciliation from those people who might have hurt and wronged us; deaf from the cries and agonies of those who are struggling to provide for themselves - the poor, the homeless; deaf or indifference to the teachings of the Gospel that might be challenging and hard to follow; or playing deaf when our teachers and parents ask us to do something

for our own good.

One can also be mute on telling the truth, mute in expressing our fears and concerns to those who care and love us, or mute in defending our faith in public or speaking against injustice in our world. The list can go on and on.

Jesus would say "You have eyes but do not see, ears but do not hear?"

Let us be inspired by the courage, sincerity and humility of the man with the speech impediment in the Gospel. That the Lord may touch us and speak that same word "Ephphatha!"

"Be opened." May Jesus open our hearts so that we can a great relationship with him.