

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

The deaf hear, the dumb speak

“Now that you’ve explained it, Holmes,” said Dr Watson, “it all seems absurdly simple.” The great detective was less than edified by this response. “That’s why I should never explain it,” was his bitter reply. We might say the same about the Gospel. Being all rigorously scientific makes us rather too literal about miracles. We’re required to take a 21st century position about them which is alien to the spirit of the Gospels, as if *the historic truth* of the stories were the first question first-century people would have asked. I think the world was much more mysterious to people before modern science came along, and I suspect that this made the world an easier place for non-specialist people to live in and apprehend. At least it made a world where wonder was more present than bald explanations; so often what is *explained* is in danger of being *explained away*.

The meaning of miracles

We aren’t being given, in today’s Gospel reading, an answer to the problem of deafness. If we were, the question would be about the mechanical changes which enable deaf men to become hearing ones. Instead, the Gospel is giving us an image of the encounter with Christ which we can apply to ourselves. At the heart of the story is that Aramaic word *ephphatha* – *be opened*. The meaning of the miracle is in the meaning of this word.

Opening a closed life

A closed door, a closed mind, a closed heart all say in different ways that the future is entombed. The hopefulness in the word “future” depends on the possibility of *change*. Change can be for the worse; but the worst of all worlds is one where there is no possibility of *any* change. Life in itself demands change; if we are at war with all notion of change, then we are at war with life itself. The deaf-mute man in the Gospel has a barrier across all his communicative powers: not only can no-one come in from the outside, but he cannot let the word out; although his life is not insulated from all encounter, his mind is marooned by itself in a terrible loneliness. This is perfectly symbolized by his incapacity to share the *word*, that great symbol of self-giving, of enlightenment, and of meaning. So we are meant to think of this mental isolation as absolute. Correspondingly, if we think of the concept of *word* in absolute terms, we shall be in harmony with the Fourth Gospel,

which says: *the Word was the one who enlightens everyone who comes into the world: nothing comes into being except through him*. For us, being impermeable to the Word is darkness of the deepest sort.

Don’t Be A Gradgrind

Try not to read this sort of story with a dull mind that only asks questions about *facts*. It isn’t that the facts are unimportant, or that the Gospel is a series of fables – quite the reverse. But get the meaning of the story into the centre of your attention, and the other questions pale in significance. How many of us can say that our antennae are sufficiently attuned to hear all that is spoken to us with accuracy and attention? Or that our mind is set to the task of communicating to others, fully and with justice, all that is in us? Very few, I guess. I have heard psychologists assure me that we only use a tiny fragment of our mental powers, and I know myself, because of the luminosity of those rare moments when I truly see the world I’m living in or the people who share it with me, that I spend much of my life insensitive, half-aware. I know that in moments of grace, when I am receptive and welcoming, the Word of God comes to my ears, and the Spirit of God is alive in me. There are times when life appears in its true colours, as a stream of blessing from the hand of God. It is to welcome that blessing that Jesus tells us: “Be opened.”

Fr Philip