

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Open Wide

I don't believe Mr Fenton was a cruel man by nature. He was a dentist of his time; it wasn't his fault that the technology of his day turned him into the kind of man the Spanish Inquisition would have admitted as guide, friend, and instructor to young torturers. Time is a great healer, but I am proud to say that I once bit Mr Fenton, when taken young to his chambers, and he can take me as a *child* of his times. Going to the dentist today is, of course, a pastime for aesthetes and pleasure-seekers.

They Brought Him

We used to hope poor Mr Fenton would have been stricken with incurable illness that morning, or that the bus would break down that took us to him, or that anything might happen which would prevent him saying: *Open Wide*. Even then the response inside was: *Why should I? I know you....* and I remember that my dutiful parents were as guilty about handing us over as we were unwilling to go. I wonder if the people who brought the deaf and dumb man to Jesus had the same sense of fear? Imagine the act of letting the clanging and roaring of the modern world into the muffled mind of one profoundly deaf: an awesome decision! I know young people who have doubts about whether they dare to bring children into this world at all, so penetrative is our self-doubt.

Speech Impediments

Letting the man in the Gospel *hear* is accompanied by the corollary – letting him *speak*. This should alert us to the depth of our responsibility as speakers. Every time I stand up in Church to preach I feel the responsibility I have to say what will convey the truth of the Gospel into the minds of those who listen. It isn't enough to say true things: we must say things in the way that helps people to see, and feel, their truth. To speak means respecting the way people hear. We can't do that unless we have the habit of listening too. But what is the point of listening, if those we want to hear have *an impediment in their speech*? Many a parent has irritably remarked that getting their children to communicate is *like drawing teeth* (hello again, Mr Fenton). Part of this is their inability to define what they feel; but part is also their sureness that we won't want to hear it when they do. How do we *loosen the ligament of their tongues*?

The Gift of the Word

The Gospel mentions his deafness first, and the opening of his ears first. I believe that the speaking of the Word of God comes first too: if we can find the right way to speak the Gospel, the correct hearing of the word may inspire the correct speaking of the mind. It was after God spoke, that we came into being; whatever we learn to *say* will always be a *response* to that. I suppose we have to face up to the fact that, if people hear the word of God as a word of oppression, then we have obviously bent it beyond recognition, kidnapped it and turned it into something else. Even the Spanish Inquisition believed they were forwarding the Gospel!

Go, and do in like manner

Perhaps from here we can see our way to the challenge of this week's Gospel. To be like Jesus we need that miraculous way he had of embodying the Word: in a way that let it shine in the sight of people. When he spoke, even to ask people to leave everything, they obeyed freely. They felt no oppression, and surrendered gladly what they had in their hands. The distance there is between Jesus and me is measured in the difference in my speaking, in my capacity to listen, to welcome, and to enable communication from others to find the light of day. *Ephphatha*, Jesus said, *be opened*.

He heard then; and not only heard, but *spoke clearly*. Lord, make us a listening Church!
Fr Philip