

HOMILY 23rd SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME 2021
FATHERS' DAY AND REACHING OUT
Mk 7.31-37 Is 35.4-7 James 2.1-5

Welcome yet again to another virtual Mass on-line, now in springtime, after a few lovely warm sunny days and some refreshing rain. Where to from here? Well, an obvious response is to get vaccinated, as it's the only realistic way forward, given the increasing number of COVID cases here in Victoria, and the frightening numbers in NSW, stretching community health resources to the limit and beyond. It is beyond me how anyone can see vaccination as not an essential responsibility for all, for the good of the community as well as protection for oneself! Pope Francis reminds us of this too.

Another Fathers' Day to be celebrated in lockdown, but let's remember our fathers with gratitude, present and past, and make sure we acknowledge their love and sacrifices made for us as their children, even if we can't get together as family to celebrate with them. I always say it's good to have a particular day where we do stop and reflect on their presence in our lives and the positive influence they have been and continue to be.

And so we gather in spirit to pray and reflect.

Initially, I was sceptical that the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, held successfully in 2021, would get off the ground, or if it did, there could well be problems with the spread of COVID, but despite increasing numbers in the broader Japanese community, the *bubble* precautions taken seem to have been successful in the athletes and support staff avoiding the plague. And now, the Paralympics are about to conclude with the same sort of success.

The first Paralympics were held in Rome in 1960, with 400 athletes from 23 countries competing. Finally, it was recognized that those who were disabled in some way, or rather, *differently abled* as many would describe themselves, should be given the opportunity to compete at top level as well. The word *Paralympic* derives from the Greek word '*para*' which connotes *beside* or *alongside*. Now, in 2021 in Tokyo, there are 4,432 athletes from 160 countries, including one Afghani female competitor, 179 Australians, with 22 sports and well over 500 events. Australia has won 72 medals, 18 gold, not, of course that it's primarily about winning, but rather competing and inspiring by the way in which adversity has been overcome with determination and perseverance.

One can only admire the determination and adaptability of the participants, competing in all sorts of sports, and pushing themselves to the limit. Did you know that 15% of the world's population, roughly 1 billion people live with disability? For Australia, the figures are even higher, with 18% or 4.4 million classified as having some form of disability. Depression is number one for under 60's, followed by hearing and visual problems, although the listings are arbitrary, given the diversity of physical and psychological limitations or afflictions.

So often in the past, disability was largely hidden from our consciousness, unless it was close to home, if we thought we were alright or normal, as it might be put, but, then again, what's normal? The awareness of disability has become so much more heightened as provision for disability has been legislated and implemented, as, for example, with lifts, ramps, adapted bathrooms, as standard requirements in public buildings and homes, and the more recent NDIS (*National Disability Insurance Scheme*).

There wasn't too much consideration given to such issues in Jesus' day, although there weren't too many multi-storey buildings back then. Attitude was more of a problem, however, with the disabled pushed into the background and largely blamed for any personal limitations being their own fault, and God's punishment, or genetically transmitted fault of their parents or parents' parents, and so on it went. It was a convenient cop-out for those who could have helped in some way, but preferred to blame and ignore.

Here is where Jesus' approach was so counter-cultural, in many ways, to women, children, the physically, emotionally or psychologically afflicted, and, in particular, sinners, especially the bad ones, like tax collectors and adulterers. Today, he reaches out to a person deprived of normal communication (something I have

become more aware of as my hearing has deteriorated with age!). In word and action, he shows the way to compassion, understanding, encouragement and healing.

The opposition to his approach by the religious authorities of the time is highlighted in the Gospels, as we heard in John's account of Jesus' discourse on the Bread of Life, and in his many encounters with the fringe dwellers, or those generally pushed into the background. Today, in Mark's Gospel, we hear of his encounter with the man who cannot hear or speak, following on from his feeding of the hungry crowd, walking on the water, confronting the Pharisees about their obsession with ritual details and purification laws. Mark has Jesus now moving into foreign or mainly Gentile territory, where he is first approached by the Syrophenician woman (surely a sign of multiculturalism!) who is desperate to seek healing for her daughter, and demonstrates and perseveres in her faith in Jesus as one who can help her, despite his initial apparent reluctance, no doubt testing her faith.

Now we have supportive family or friends bringing the deaf and dumb man to Jesus, his faith, identity, ethnicity unknown. It seems to be their faith that initiates the encounter, as Jesus first takes the man aside and then physically reaches out to him, as his ears are opened and he begins to speak freely. There is a message here for all of us, in that we are to open our ears to his words of hope and faith, and to speak his word in faith to others.

The fact that the Aramaic word *ephthatha*, which means '**be opened**' is not translated, but retained in the words of Gospel, and used in our Baptism prayer: "*May the Lord Jesus soon touch your ears to receive his word, and your mouth to proclaim his faith, to the praise and glory of God the Father*". We move from a story of physical healing, where a person is disadvantaged being cut off from others, in that "*he can neither receive verbal communication nor freely communicate his own thoughts, feelings and reflections to others. His condition is lonely and isolated*", as Brendan Byrne SJ puts it.

But now he is re-engaged with the community and can participate in spreading the Good News too, despite Mark's emphasis on Jesus not wanting word to spread, which becomes an impossible requirement!

It could be interpreted as Jesus wanting to engender faith in his message, proclaiming God's Kingdom of love, justice and peace, rather than a crowd just following along to see signs and wonders. Again, as Brendan suggests: "*Having heard that Word in the context of our own life experience, we then can turn to praise God and share what we have heard with our fellow believers (and beyond!). Our ears are opened and our tongues are loosened for full participation in the community of faith.*"

So, here we are in spirit, called to demonstrate empathy, compassion and support, to those who are differently abled, and, at the same time, seeking strength to persevere and accept the limitations of our present situation, hoping that our compliance will help bring about looking up from lockdown, enjoying springtime and appreciating the flowers and the fresh air, at a more leisurely pace, meanwhile.

And, finally, a word of acknowledgement and appreciation to all of our fathers and to those who have been father figures in our lives, on this Fathers' Day of 2021.

john hannon

5th September 2021