

Kenneth J. Hughes, SJ

St. Mary of the Angels Sunday 23 B 9/9/18

Isaiah 35.4-7a; James 2.1-5; Mark 7.31-37

My Brothers and Sisters,

Maybe you and I are the person of today's Gospel, who is deaf and cannot speak properly. Are we fully able to hear God's word so that we can clearly proclaim God's word? Listening comes before speaking. The good news is that, just as caring people brought the deaf and speech impaired man to Jesus, so too, caring people – our parents, teachers, mentors, friends, and one another – have brought each of us to Jesus. And Jesus draws us aside right here in this church to open our ears and release our tongues.

Scripture scholar John Shea comments: "Although the ears detect sounds and the tongue produces sounds, it is not the ears that hear or the tongue that speaks. [It is]the heart, the spiritual center of the person, [that] is the source of hearing and speaking." Thus, when Jesus put his fingers into the man's ears, he opened the man's heart as well as his ears, and when Jesus touched the man's tongue with spit and breathed a sigh up from his own heart, the Spirit of Jesus passed into the man and so he could speak clearly. What the man said, we do not know. Perhaps, he did precisely what Jesus asked the people to do and failed to do: he kept silent in the wonder at what had happened.

Silence. In the past two weeks, both in our country and in our church, we have heard many, many words.

In our country, we heard words of praise and eulogy, words of love and admiration. But, we also heard words of spite and pettiness.

We heard noble words of what our country once was and what it might hope to be. But, those words were followed immediately by words of rancor and accusation, and mob-like shouting.

We heard words of courage and encouragement – by Nike, no less – "Just do it," followed by retaliatory words of hatred and prejudice, "Just burn it."

And there have been powerful written words in The New York Times and in a soon to be published book, entitled appropriately, "Fear."

So many words! So much noise!

Then, in our church, we have had to listen to words of condemnation concerning Cardinal McCarrick, the scathing Pennsylvania report, and more recently, accusations in Lincoln, Nebraska.

But, probably, the most hurtful and painful words were the accusations made by Cardinal Carlo Maria Vigano concerning the Cardinal McCarrick scandal and the Kim Davis conflict. And sadly, some American bishops have quickly joined the clamor for Pope Francis to resign. So many words! So much noise!

How has Pope Francis responded? With silence. With silence. And people wonder: does silence mean complicity or consent? Is silence a stalling tactic? Why doesn't he speak up? People want clear answers. But Pope Francis keeps silent.

Austen Iverleigh, probably, the best biographer of Pope Francis, claims that we should not be surprised at Pope Francis' silence.

When Pope Francis was Jorge Bergoglio, Archbishop of Buenos Aires, he was accused viciously, even by some of his fellow Jesuits, of collaborating with the military government in Argentina's "Dirty War." The accusations were strong and painful, but Archbishop Bergoglio remained silent. He did not blame anyone. He did not defend himself.

In time, he was not only exonerated, but "... stories emerged that prove[d] not just his innocence of the charges of complicity but highlighted his heroic assistance to victims of the dictatorship."

Years later, in 1990, in an article, "Silencio y Palabra" ("Silence and Word") concerning that era and its accusations, Archbishop, then Cardinal, Bergoglio wrote, "... sometimes it happens that silence is not a virtuous act but is the only option, one imposed by circumstances." And Iverleigh says that Pope Francis, right now by his silence, "... simply, in a very calm and dignified way, [has] stimulated an objective and dispassionate investigation from third parties and entrusted himself to whatever the outcome may be, for he doesn't fear truth, but rather is confident that truth will vindicate him."

I believe that Pope Francis, by his silence, invites us also to go deeper. In that same 1990 article, "Silencio y Palabra" he reminded us that at Jesus' condemnation, Jesus too remained silent, and, as St. Ignatius put it, "God went into hiding," concealing, as it were, his divinity with all its power. In that

silence, the evil spirit was exposed as the liar, the consummate liar it was (and is!), and God triumphed over evil in the resurrection of Jesus. Not death, but abundant life was and is the final word.

A terrible struggle between good and evil is taking place in our country and in our church. We need not be afraid. But, we do need to know when to speak and when to keep silent. We need to know what to say and what not to say. We have nothing to defend and nothing to hide. It is a time to hope and to trust that God's truth and God's love will prevail. May we enter into the silence of our own prayer in order to purify our hearts and our love. May whatever words we speak convey love. May we stand before Jesus and allow him to open even more fully the ears of our heart that we may hear his truth, and loosen our tongues, that we may speak his truth.

We do not need many words. We need just simple words, simple words to profess our belief and trust in God, simple words to express our love for God and for one another, and simple words of hope, such as those of Julian of Norwich, who promised centuries ago that, "all shall be well, all shall be well, all manner of things shall be well" because we are always in the hands of God. Amen.

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