
Faith and Confidence

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 10 August 2025

Acts 3:1-10 • Mark 7:31-37



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

Our readings today speak of two healings. The first, from the Book of Acts, is done by Peter, who is in the first flush of his new-found confidence as a Christian and a leader of his people. He heals a man who has been lame from birth. The second healing is done by Jesus himself, healing a man who was deaf and could hardly talk. The common thread here, besides the fact that it was God who actually did the healings, is that both men were open to being healed. They had faith that Peter and Jesus could heal them, and that made all the difference.

Jesus uses that lovely word, ephphatha, which we are told means, “Be opened.” I first heard this Gospel story back in California when we belonged to the Episcopal Church, well before we moved to New Zealand. We had an associate priest who preached once a month or so and was also our choir director. Her name was Jane, and this was one of her favourite stories. I can still hear her speaking that word — ephphatha — like a breath. That’s how I think of it. It is the breath of Jesus, the healing breath of God. It’s a satisfying word; it feels good on the lips. Let’s say it together: ephphatha.

To be opened, to be open to God, should be our primary goal in life. If we are open to God, we can know what God is telling us. If we are open to Jesus, we can follow him, and learn to be like him. If we are open, we can be fully in Communion and truly know God's love for us.

In the same way, in our Acts reading, the man Peter healed was open to God, or you could say he was open to the possibility that he could be healed. Peter encouraged him to be open when he and John looked straight at the man, and told him, "Look at us!" They wanted his full attention, and the man complied. We are told he was "expecting to get something from them" (Acts 3:4-5).

In this attitude of expectation, of openness, he could receive healing. God directs his power, his love and his healing to those who are open to it. Ephphatha!

So must we be open to God's love and God's grace. We must be convinced that God wants what is best for us, and wants to give it to us. In this spirit, our Vestry has stepped forward in faith, convinced that God wants this parish to grow. And so, although it will mean a little bit of a stretch financially for a year or two, we hired Marco to help build our Dominos program, to reach out to more of our youth. We hired Andrew so that we could start a second service at Prebbleton, reaching out to children and families in that community. There would be no point to doing all this if we thought that God wanted us to stay as we are, with the people we already have, doing the same things we have been doing. But we have opened ourselves to God, who is always doing a new thing, and we have faith that God will send us his people. Like the man in the Acts reading, we are expecting God to act.

This is not pride or arrogance; it is not "chutzpah", the Yiddish word which means arrogant presumptuousness. It is a confidence borne out of prayer. We pray to God to bring him our concerns and our cares, and to listen, to find out what God wants us to do. It isn't always clear what God wants us to do, but if we continue in prayer, usually, over time, God will make his will clear. In this manner, through prayer, we believe God wants us to take steps to grow our church, to make new opportunities for people to turn to God, and to use our resources, both human and financial, to achieve these goals. And so we move forward with confidence that God will indeed grow our parish.

We have confidence also because, after all, growing the church is what Jesus commanded us to do. We were told to go forth and make disciples, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. A disciple is someone who has given his life to Jesus, and to make a disciple means to work with God on a person to encourage him or her to make that commitment. God works in the hearts of those he wants to come to him. In turn, we offer what we can, through personal testimony, Bible study, church services, and the example of a Christian life to

educate and encourage such people. As in so many things, God plants the seed, and we water and cultivate it.

Example and teaching are very important. Why do I remember, all these years later, that sermon from my friend Jane about ephphatha? Clearly, this was something I needed to hear, and that God wanted me to think about. Being open to God is something we all can model for other people. It is a way of living in the present, with thanksgiving for what we have received in the past, and a grounded hope for the blessings we will receive in the future. There is so much hopelessness in the world today. Most of it is caused by the actions of other people, which are beyond our control. Even leaving aside the big things, like war, violent crime and the like, there are many things in our daily lives which we cannot really control. Take this church service. I can't say who will walk in the door this morning, or any Sunday morning. But we prepare the lessons, the sermon, the Communion, so that we are ready to welcome the people who do come in, with generous and hopeful hearts. And our hope is not misplaced, because we know our God wants us to help bring others into a knowledge of his love. We sing about it. We pray about it. And we are ready with a smile and a word of welcome for those who arrive. We are open to what God will bring us. Ephphatha.

So, keep praying, and keep hope in your hearts. I have been very encouraged by the first three Sundays of the new Prebbleton service. We have had a dozen or so new people come, people whom we have not seen before, in addition to a few from our existing congregation, who have been very supportive of the new service. Half of those new people are children. God is doing a new thing in Prebbleton, and we have faith and confidence that it will continue. When the man Peter and John met at the temple saw that he was healed of his lameness, he jumped about praising God. So should we praise God for all his blessings, and so:

Thanks be to God our Father, our brother Christ, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.