

My friends in Christ, as we know, Jesus is God. (In any event, I sincerely *hope* that we know that by now! We are *Catholic*, after all!)

Now, I mention this rather obvious fact because whenever Jesus (our Lord and our God) is about His business healing people, curing the sick, and so forth...because He is *God*, He can just *do* it. No need for an elaborate show; no need for “magic words.” If God wills it, it will be done.

We see this, for example, in the very first chapter of the Gospel narrative of Saint Mark, in a scene when Jesus miraculously cleanses a leper. The leper kneels before Him, begs Him, and says to Him, “If You wish, You can make me clean,” and Jesus responds, “I *do* will it. Be made clean.” We see that He only needs to *will* it...and it *will* get done.

In fact, not only can Jesus merely *will* it and it gets done...He actually does not even need to be anywhere near the physical proximity of whomever needs healing. We see in the Gospel account of Saint Matthew, the centurion goes to Jesus begging Him to heal his paralyzed servant. And Jesus tells him that He will come and heal the servant. But in his remarkable faith and profound humility, the centurion says to Jesus in reply: “Lord, I am not worthy to have You enter under my roof; only say the word and my servant will be healed.” And thus, it happens.

And so, we see that Jesus, being God, only needs to *will* it and it *will* get done...and He does not even need to *be* there to *get* it done.

Why, therefore, in today’s Gospel passage from Saint Mark, does Jesus go through such an elaborate ritual and speak weird words in strange tongues in order to bring healing to the deaf man who had a speech impediment? He clearly is *not* one generally given to putting on a show; after all, He is “meek and humble of heart.” So why? What purpose could such an elaborate show and this strange “magic word” of *ephphatha* possibly serve?

I would propose that one possible answer to this question has to do with the importance of ritual. We notice that He deliberately, intentionally, and utterly without any explanation whatsoever

went about this ritualized performance of going about this man's healing. And we can imagine that entire scene through the eyes of those who were there: Jesus takes the man aside, and so we are all of us watching this whole scene unfold from a short distance (perhaps He took the man aside so as to give Himself some room for what He was about to do); then Jesus sticks His finger in the man's ears (evidently, Jesus is amused by giving people wet-willies while He heals them!); then Jesus spits, which is strange, and it remains unclear if He actually spat on the man's tongue or if He turned His head to one side, spat on the ground like a baseball coach, and then touched the man's tongue with His finger – the *same* finger that had just been stuck in the man's ear!). Just plain weird, either way; and then Jesus looks up to Heaven, groans, and speaks what is possibly the strangest word He *ever* says in the Gospel: *Ephphatha*.

And in all of this, what are *we* doing, as members of the crowd? Why, we are totally drawn into this whole thing! We are fascinated! Some of us are so moved by His compassion for such a poor, helpless man; others of us keep remarking how weird it all is, these things that He is doing.

But regardless of our individual reactions to all of this, the point is that this odd ritual, this elaborate performance of going about that man's healing...it has totally captured our attention, so that we cannot help but stand there utterly enchanted by every little detail of what Jesus is doing.

The importance of ritual – why ritual matters – is because, on one level, it draws us in.

And then after we have been drawn in, the importance of *repeating* ritual – why the ongoing repetition of ritualistic words and gestures – has much to do with our memory. If we consider, for example, the ritual of the Mass: why the Mass matters, as ritual, has much to do with how *crucial* it really is for us to *remember* all that God has done for us, to immerse ourselves in our *memories* of the many gifts and blessings that God has given to us – has *entrusted* to us as faithful stewards – and in the end has summoned us to put to use and to share with others for the salvation of souls and for the glorious majesty of God. To remember God's great goodness, to immerse ourselves totally in

the beautiful memories that we have of God's many gifts and blessings – all of that should inspire within us that profound praise of God's glory, as was proclaimed in today's Gospel text: "He has done all things well."

And it should *also* inspire within us our most profound gratitude...our thanksgiving. We partake of the Eucharist after all because the Eucharist is our highest expression of thanksgiving.

When we read the Old Testament, we find that the Lord actually laments – quite frequently, in fact – when we do not remember (when we forget) what He has done for us; indeed, God seems most concerned *not* that we sometimes forget various details of the divine law (though that is, truly, very important for our salvation)...but that we so easily forget the wonderful things that have been done for us. The Israelites were rescued from slavery in Egypt, they passed through the Red Sea in total safety when it was parted for them, they were given manna to eat in the desert, and water that poured forth from the rock, and then at last, they were brought to the Promised Land.... Yet how often they *forgot* all of that!

And as for *us*: *we* have been given *Jesus*. Jesus, Who shows us how to live. Jesus, Who was born of a humble Hebrew girl...and Who emptied Himself of heavenly glory so as to be immersed in earthly poverty...and ultimately, Who suffered and died on the Cross for love of us...Who died, that we might live...Who died on the Cross so that, *through* the Cross, He might lead us to the halls of heavenly realms where life eternal awaits us.

But how *easily* and *quickly* we tend to *forget* all of that! Which is why we *constantly* need to be reminded! Which is why ritual *really* is so important, why ritual matters. Because ritual draws us in, and it keeps us in, keeps us engaged, helps us to remember...so that we can then be sent forth into the world, with new strength and new vigor and renewed faith, to share with others all of the good things of God that, once again, through ritual, we remember.

The Mass is repetitive, people say. Yes it is. And we pray the same old prayers week in and week out. Yes we do.... Just like football – same old thing, different day. Just like the news – same old bad news, different day. But still, we watch football; and still, we read the news (God help us, I have no idea *why*); but *unlike* football, *unlike* the news, the repetitious ritual and the same old prayers week after week of the *Mass* has *eternal* import...because, once again, why ritual matters is because it is a remedy for the sad fact of mortal life that we tend to forget...because the ritual of the Mass has to do with God, and redemption, and salvation, and life eternal in halls of heavenly realms. It *draws* us in, as it did the crowds when Jesus healed the deaf-mute; and it *keeps* us in, keeps us close to *God*, through Whom and with Whom and in Whom we live and move and have our being...and then, at the last, the ritual of the Mass gives us the Eucharist, gives us *Jesus* – Who heals *us* as He healed the deaf-mute, and the leper, and the centurion's servant.

May it be, then, that as the heavenly ritual of the Mass continues and we soon come forward to receive the Lord in the Eucharist worthily and well, we would remember all of the good things in life that God has done for us and *continues* to do for us, that we give praise and thanksgiving to God at all times in our pilgrim's journey of faith here on Earth toward halls of heavenly realms.