

Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament – Altoona
Blue and White Mass – Sunday, September 9, 2012
Homily

Ever since the fateful day of September 11, 2001, there has been a renewed appreciation for those men and women who wear blue or white; those who work to keep the peace and keep us safe; and those who respond when the peace is broken and the lives and well-being of people in our communities have been threatened.

At this Mass we gather together to pray for and with those men and women in our area whose vocation is to protect and serve in law enforcement, firefighters, and all those engaged in emergency services. Will all those men and women present here among us please stand so we can acknowledge your important roles in our communities.

I invite all of you here today to pray for these men and women not only today, but pray for them often. When I was in Catholic grade school I was taught by the Sisters of St. Joseph that whenever you hear a siren or see an ambulance or fire truck or police car pass by, say a prayer for those who are in need of those services and for those that provide your services.

I know personally that those prayers are appreciated. In my first assignments as a priest, I was also a hospital chaplain and unofficial chaplain to the local police and fire departments as well as the state police in those areas. I can recall many times having to go from the scene of some event to the hospital to minister to those who died or who were injured. Like them, I was on call 24 hours a day for those situations.

After attending to them and their families, I often ended up spending some time with the hospital staff in the emergency room, the EMT's that provided care at the scene, and the police officers and firefighters who often asked questions about why some of these things happened.

Most of the time I just listened and then I would offer a few words; but always I ended it with a prayer for them.

Listening and saying a few words, especially the right words; the best model for that in such situations is our Lord Jesus Christ. Today's Gospel reading is a good example.

Jesus encountered a man who was deaf and mute. Most of us take for granted these senses which are so important for us in how we experience the world in which we live. It was a matter of great distress for this person and it would be a matter of great distress for a person in danger, or those responding to that person if he or she could not hear or could not speak.

I heard a story about a fire that happened late one evening in a crowded residential neighborhood in a big city. As often happens, the fire was first spotted by a neighbor who called 911. In the confusion of evacuating the house, a 7 year old boy did not exit with his mother and father who had to gather up three other younger children in the family.

The boy was scared and stayed in the apartment. He went to his favorite safe place; his bedroom which overlooked the street. When the boy appeared in the window, the firefighters called to the boy to jump.

Finally, the boys father who had been standing across the street with his wife and other children ran toward the house. He started yelling to the boy to jump. Finally, the boy jumped out the window and was safely caught by two firefighters.

When the boy was reunited with his family, his father asked him, “Didn’t you hear the firefighters who called to you? Why didn’t you answer them?” The boy said to his father, “I was so afraid that I didn’t hear anything and I couldn’t say anything. But when I heard your voice, all of a sudden I forgot that I was afraid.”

The man in the story was in distress. He could hear and he could not speak. Then, along comes Jesus. This is the important part for all of us to pay attention to; it’s very important.

Jesus recognized that man’s distress and his fear. There is an old saying that sometimes when someone is in distress, the Lord calms the storm. And sometimes the Lord let’s the storm continue, but he calms the person.

All of us have experienced moments in our lives which were made worse by our awareness of our distress or fear. It’s not unusual in those situations not to be able to speak or to listen.

But we are reminded in the Gospel today that the Lord Jesus recognizes our fear and our distress. He understands those moments when it seems impossible to hear anything or to say anything. With the gift of faith that we have, what is impossible becomes possible as we take notice that in the middle of all of that, Christ is aware of our need and he comes to us.

The simple words that Jesus said to the man who was deaf and mute were: "Be opened." Jesus says the same thing to everyone of us here and we need to hold onto those words at all times throughout our lives.

In this celebration of the Holy Eucharist and in every Eucharistic celebration, the Lord opens not just our mouths through which we call out to him in praise and thanksgiving. He opens our minds and our hearts to recognize his constant love for us.

His love is a heroic love, because it was most perfectly expressed in his passion, death and resurrection; the great mystery of faith that we celebrate here.

Each time that you and I celebrate that mystery, we should offer up our distress, or fear, or sin, or whatever keeps us from being able to hear or to speak. By uniting ourselves to Jesus in this way, we allow ourselves to experience the effects of his saving death and life-giving resurrection.

It says that the man in the Gospel story was able to speak plainly after Jesus touched his mouth and his ears. In this Eucharist, in our receiving the Body and Blood of Christ, our Savior not only touches our ears through the Word of God that we hear in the Sacred Scriptures, but he touches our minds and our hearts. Over and over again throughout our lives, they are opened.

As a result of this encounter with Jesus in the Holy Eucharist, we become like the man in the Gospel story who was able to speak plainly. It means that everything was OK.

There is an old saying that sometimes when someone is in distress, the Lord calms the storm. And sometimes the Lord let's the storm continue, but he calms the person.

In either case, another lesson to be learned here is that as we have received such grace from our Lord Jesus Christ for ourselves, then we must become

that kind of grace for others in their time of fear and distress. We must help to open their ears, their mouths, their minds, and their hearts.

That's part of the vocation of being a Christian. It's certainly part of the vocation of the men in uniforms of blue and white.

At the end of the Gospel story, Jesus tried to keep the crowd from saying anything about the miracle of healing that just occurred. But the more he told them to be quiet, the more they proclaimed that awesome news.

They went from being afraid to being astonished.

We are not silent today about this gift from God. In the circumstances of the world in which we live today, it is even more important that should share with others what Isaiah the prophet tells us to do in the first reading: "Thus says the Lord: Say to those whose hearts are frightened: Be strong! Fear not! Here is your God. He comes with vindication. With divine recompense he comes to save you!"

We give thanks to God for the gift of our Savior Jesus Christ. And we give thanks to God for all those among us whose vocation is to rescue and assist people in time of distress.