

Homily for September 6, 2009 (23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time, B)
Mary Queen of Heaven Parish, Detroit
Is 35:4-7a; Ps 146:1b, 7-10; Jas 2:1-5; Mk 7:31-37

Earlier this year, in an effort to educate and discourage young people from sending and receiving text messages while driving, the police in Gwent, Wales (part of the United Kingdom) produced a video in which a young driver is reading and sending text messages and talking with her friends. Distracted by her cell phone, she crosses the center line and slams head-on into another car, causing a horrible accident that kills her friends and kills and injures several others.

The video is notable for its graphic depictions of the accident, including a girl's head slamming against a windshield. In that respect, it's not much different than the 1950's movies like *Blood on the Highway* that scared, excited and tried to educate an earlier generation of young drivers. However, we live in the age of the internet; and within weeks of being released this video created by a small town police department in Wales "went viral." Once intended for a group of high school students, it's now on YouTube and has been seen millions of viewers around the world.

Hopefully, people won't be so caught up by the drama and graphic violence of the video that they fail to get its message: texting and driving don't mix! In fact, a 2003 Harvard study found that using a cell phone in your car—talking or texting—increased the likelihood of having an accident four-fold, to the same level of a driver with a blood alcohol level of .08, the legal limit. In other words, if we choose to use our cell phones in the car, its statistically as risky as driving drunk!

I must confess that I once texted someone once while driving in Montana; but then I almost hit a deer and was "scared straight." Since then, I've even tried to reduce or eliminate using the phone at all when I'm driving. I should probably just turn the phone off when I get behind the wheel; but as in other areas of my life, I haven't quite met my goal.

I mention these stories about texting because they remind me of a common human experience, especially in our 24/7, perpetually plugged-in world of today. We can see and yet be blind. We can hear yet fail to listen. We can become so connected to our virtual and electronic worlds that we fail to pay attention to the world and people right in front of us.

Fortunately, God gives us a very hopeful and helpful word today. In our Scripture readings we are reminded that it is God's will that we be healed of our blindness, deafness, muteness, lameness in whatever forms that they take! God is attentive to us even when we're distracted or lost.

In our first reading from Isaiah 35, for example, God promises through the prophet to heal the people of Israel suffering from the load of oppression from the Assyrians (and later the Babylonians) brought on by their disobedience and neglect of the Covenant.

In our gospel passage from Mark 7, Jesus healed a man who was deaf and suffered from a speech impediment. In doing so, he was also releasing him from the power of the community's moral and social blindness that marginalized him because they assumed that his malady was somehow associated with sin.

In this particular periscope, it's not only important for us to reflect on what Jesus healed but also *how* he healed. He didn't just stand at a distance and wave his hands or snap his fingers. Instead Jesus reached out to the man in a very personal, even intimate, way: putting his finger into the man's ear, touching the man's tongue with his own spit, and emitting an audible groan. He made the man's suffering his own.

True compassion has a cost. Helping others to healing and wholeness demands something of us. At the same time it can also be a very sacramental experience: one in which God's grace and power are manifested in seemingly ordinary people and things—even something as seemingly profane as spit! Sometimes God also uses the stinging medicine of rebuke. That's what we witnessed in our second reading, where James admonished the early church to resist the temptation to discriminate against people based on class and appearance; and he reminded them that God's ways are different than those of the world.

Though God can and does heal people of all kinds of physical maladies, God's primary mode of healing is from the inside out. We are called to be instruments of God's healing; but we cannot be fully effective unless we also recognize that we are also called to be open to the power of God's healing grace in our own lives and especially in our hearts and souls. That means conversion.

Conversion and compassion are essential parts of the life of any disciple of Jesus; but there times when they are especially needed. As we celebrate Labor Day Weekend 2009, may we be particularly mindful of the tens of millions of our brothers and sisters who want to work but can't find a job or who want a full-time job that provides decent wages and benefits for them and their families but can only find a part-time job that provides none of those things. As we remember them in prayer and reach out to them in whatever ways we can, may we also pray and work for a society and economy that more fully respect human life and dignity. May we send and receive the most important message of all: God's love. +