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PAPUA NEW GUINEA – Port Moresby – 08.09.2024 – 08.45

**Holy Mass**

*Sir John Guise Stadium*

**Homily of the Holy Father**

**Official translation**

The first words the Lord addresses to us today are, “Be strong, do not fear!” (*Is* 35:4). In this way, the prophet Isaiah addresses all those who have lost heart. He likewise encourages his people and, even amid difficulties and suffering, invites them to raise their eyes to a horizon of hope and to a future where God is coming to save us. For the Lord will indeed come, and on that day, “the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped” (*Is* 35:5).

This prophecy is fulfilled in Jesus. He is the Messiah whom the Father sent so that the downhearted might find courage, sinners be forgiven, the blind gain sight, and the deaf finally hear. In this regard, today’s Gospel presents us with the healing of a deaf man with a speech impediment (cf. *Mk* 7:31-37). In Saint Mark’s account, two things in particular are emphasized: the *distance of the deaf man* and the *nearness of Jesus*. Let us reflect on these two essential features.

The *distance of the deaf man*. We see him in a geographical area that we would call, in today’s language, the “periphery”. The territory of the Decapolis lies beyond the Jordan, far from the religious centre of Jerusalem. It was inhabited by pagans and, because of their customs, considered an impure territory, far from God. What is more, this deaf man also experiences another kind of distance: he is far from God and from others because he cannot communicate, he is deaf and thus unable to hear, and he is also mute and so cannot speak. He is cut off from the world, isolated, a prisoner of his deaf and mute condition, so he cannot reach others or communicate with them.

We can also interpret the man’s situation in another sense, for we too can become cut off from communion and friendship with God and with our brothers and sisters when, instead of our ears and tongue, our hearts become blocked. Indeed, there is a kind of inner deafness and muteness of heart that occurs whenever we close in on ourselves, or shut ourselves off from God and others through selfishness, indifference, fear of taking risks or putting ourselves on the line, resentment, hatred, and the list could go on. All of this distances us from God, from our brothers and sisters, from ourselves and from the joy of living.

Brothers and sisters, God responds to such distance with the *nearness of Jesus*. Through his Son, God wishes to show us first of all that he is near and compassionate, that he cares for us and overcomes any distance. In fact, in the Gospel passage we see Jesus going to territories on the peripheries, leaving Judea, his own religious environment, in order to meet pagans (cf. *Mk* 7:31). In this way, Jesus shortens distances, brings those who are considered distant closer, and makes himself familiar to those considered strangers. What is more, when they bring him the deaf man, the text says that the Lord “put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue” (v. 33). Thus, the Lord touches the one who is impure, and in doing so establishes a connection, bridging the distance to bring himself close. This is the nearness of Jesus, who comes to touch our lives and remove every distance. As Saint Paul states, by his coming Jesus announced peace to those who were far away (cf. *Eph* 2:17).

Through his nearness, Jesus heals human muteness and deafness. Indeed, whenever we feel distant, or we choose to keep ourselves at a distance from God, from our brothers and sisters or from those who are different from us, we close ourselves off, barricading ourselves from the outside. We end up, then, revolving only around our own ego, deaf to the word of God and to the cry of our neighbour, and therefore unable to speak to God or our neighbour. However, Jesus draws near and, as with the deaf man, says to us, “Ephphatha”, that is, “be opened” (*Mk 7:34*). Yes, because Jesus conquers our hardness of heart, helping us to overcome our fears, to open our ears and loosen our tongues; in this way, we rediscover ourselves as children loved by God and as brothers and sisters of one another.

Brothers and sisters, you who live on this large island in the Pacific Ocean may sometimes have thought of yourselves as a far away and distant land, situated at the edge of the world. Perhaps, for other reasons, you may also at times have felt distant from God and the Gospel, unable to communicate with him or with each other. Yet, as he did with the deaf man, today the Lord wants to draw near to you, to break down distances, to let you know that you are at the centre of his heart and that each one of you is important to him. He wants to heal your deafness and muteness. He says to each one of you today, “be opened”! The most important thing is to *open ourselves to God and our brothers and sisters, and to open ourselves to the Gospel*, making it the compass of our lives. We are not in the hands of blind fate, and evil and witchcraft do not change our lives in a positive way! Let us say “no” to all that, because it locks us up in lies and fear! Instead, let us open ourselves to God and his word, to the Gospel, and to the Church’s faith. In this way, we will also be able to communicate with one another and build a different society, also here in Papua New Guinea.

Today, the Lord also says to you, “Courage, people of Papua New Guinea, do not be afraid! Open yourselves! Open yourselves to the joy of the Gospel; open yourselves to encounter God; open yourselves to the love of your brothers and sisters”. May none of us remain deaf or mute before this invitation. Moreover, may Blessed John Mazzucconi accompany you on this journey, for amid much difficulty and hostility he brought Christ into your midst, so that no one would remain deaf before the joyful message of salvation, and that all might loosen their tongues to sing of God’s love. May this indeed be so for you today!

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