

Sunday: Ordinary 23, Cycle B, 9.6.15  
 Scripture: Is 35:4-7/James 2:1-5/Mk 7:31-37

**EPHPHATHA! –**

**BE OPENED! BE THE GOOD!**

It was a difficult thing to see on the news this week – that picture of a three year-old Syrian boy in a red T-shirt, blue pants and tiny shoes with Velcro straps, lying face-down, waves lapping over his delicate body -- one of twelve people who drowned off Turkey and washed up on a beach on Wednesday. His name, they soon discovered, was Aylan Kurdi. Before broadcasting the photo, most television news reporters gave a warning: *Some viewers may want not want to see the following picture and may find it offensive.* There was debate among news editors whether or not to include the jarring photo. One editor from the LA Times said: *"The image is not offensive, it is not gory, it is not tasteless – it is merely heartbreaking, and stark testimony of an unfolding human tragedy that is playing out in Syria, Turkey and Europe, often unwitnessed. We have written stories about hundreds of migrants dead in capsized boats, sweltering trucks, lonely rail lines, but it took a tiny boy on a beach to really bring it home to those readers who may not yet have grasped the magnitude of the migrant crisis."*

Do any of us grasp the magnitude of any of the crises that assault our world -- daily? In our comfortable homes and communities, we may be the ones who hide our eyes and close our ears to the disturbing sights and sounds that millions witness first hand everyday. Yet, you and I know that we're so far from the promise of Paradise which the prophet Isaiah described in our first reading, where *"the eyes of the blind be opened, the ears of the deaf be cleared... where the lame leap like a stag, and the tongue of the mute sing... where streams burst forth in the desert..."* We'd all love to see this happen for everyone in the world,

and we feel so helpless to make God's vision for the world come about.

On a commercial street in Baghdad, a car bomb exploded earlier this summer, killing ten people and injuring many more. Sadly, such destruction isn't unusual in the Iraqi capital. But in the wake of this blast, something unusual did happen. As police and military secured the area, a man appeared wearing a black suit jacket, his long hair combed back. He unfolded a small chair and sat down. And then, amid the rubble and ash, he began to play his cello. The musician was Karim Wasfi, a renowned conductor of the Iraqi National Symphony Orchestra. Wasfi has been appearing at such sites around the city of Baghdad, playing an original composition titled *"Baghdad Mourning Melancholy."* A deadly attack on his own Baghdad neighborhood prompted him to take his cello to the streets.



*"The other side chose to turn every element, every aspect of life in Iraq into a war zone. I chose to turn every corner of Iraq into a spot for civility, beauty and compassion."* Karim Wasfi's playing at the sites of such devastation attracts a wide-ranging and appreciative audience of soldiers, shop owners and residents of the destroyed neighborhoods. Many listen in tears; Wasfi's music inspires hope and perseverance and assures his fellow Iraqis that life, not death, is reality. *"Unlike what*

*people think, we have a choice of fighting back," the maestro explains. "We can't just surrender to the impending doom of uncertainty by not functioning. But I think it's an awakening for everybody to make a choice and to choose how they want to live, not how they want to die. My message as an artist, as a conductor, also as a cellist: that when things are abnormal, we make things normal. We make things worth living for."* With his one-man vigil of music Karim brings good into his world of destruction and disaster. The ears of the deaf began to hear.

Mauro Mujica is a young man who also tried to "normalize" the abnormal situation in which he found himself. Mauro served as a Marine in Kuwait and Iraq. A product of Catholic high school and college, he wanted to be a Marine since he was a little boy. Excited and full of bravado when he left boot camp, Mauro was stationed in Ramadi, in the heart of what was called the "Sunni Triangle." There, his bravado confronted the reality of war. His commitment never faltered, but having seen his best friend and other members of his platoon killed and many more injured, he came to believe that we were going about the goal of liberation in the wrong way. Mauro said, "It's a war that can't be won solely with weapons."

When he returned to Iraq in 2007 he convinced his superiors to divide his platoon into units of ten, each of which would be imbedded in an Iraqi detachment rather than operating from a U.S. base. By living and working closely with the Iraqis, he believed, the Marines would be able to foster a healthier relationship with the people. From then on the young lieutenant began encouraging his men to build relationships with the Iraqis -- to understand their customs by sitting on the floor with them when they ate, scooping up food with their hands from a common dish as the Iraqis did. He fasted with the Iraqis on their feast of Ramadan and circulated through their marketplaces, buying their platoon's food from the local vendors and supporting their tailors and merchants. The Marines were no longer seen

as the enemy but as a friendly and supportive presence.



Mauro tells the story of a barber who refused to deal with the Americans. Mauro kept going back to the barbershop to ask for a shave and a haircut, but the man always refused. One day Mauro just plopped himself down in the chair. He wrote his mother about it saying, "Now, you have to realize that the Iraqi barbers use a straight razor, so I was taking a calculated risk." But it paid off. The man gave the marine a shave and haircut. After that, the attitude of the barber softened and he started cutting the hair of many of the marines. These small actions produced important changes and signs of bonding and friendship began to grow. By working with Iraqi civilians and forging relationships with them this young Marine was able to appreciate the humanity of people he had previously seen as enemies. He developed as a person for others by being able to see others as persons. He put his faith in God and his belief in the teachings of Christ into action. Even in the midst of war and desolation, it was the process of building relationships that made his corner of the world a better place – for himself and for many others. He opened the eyes of the blind to see and understand that we are all brothers and sisters and that God shows no partiality... and neither should we.

At the beginning of this school year, our parish elementary school chose for their theme a wonderful motto: ***Believe there is Good in the world.*** In a simple but lovely message it brings together both sides of our Christian conviction – not only to have faith (*Believe there is Good in the world*), but to put that faith into action (*Be the Good!*) The gospel of Mark preserves the strange and ancient Aramaic word used by Jesus -- *Ephphatha! Be opened!* Perhaps to remind us very poignantly that we all need to have our ears unsealed, our hearing restored.



We still judge one another by appearances, by the standards of the world. We are still not as open to one another as God has been to us. We still miss the presence of God in the poor and the dispossessed, in those who suffer from disease or war or loneliness. We still shun the person of another race, or those who have been shaped by a different culture, or who worship God in a different way. We have yet to put aside all our biases of the past and to be transformed by God's compassion and love. So the command of Christ still needs to be heard by all of us: "*Ephphatha!*" - "*Be opened!*" Be open to the example of people who are like living parables and teach us something of the kingdom of God. Be open to the miracles of life that surround you each day. Be open to the possibilities of showing compassion and allowing your heart to grow. *Be the Good* that reflects God's hopes and dreams for our world.

*Fr. John Kasper, OSFS*