HEARERS AND PREACHERS OF THE WORD

By PETER SHARP

IN THIS consideration of the experience and place of deaf and hard of hearing people in the Church are indicated the ways in which christian life and worship might be made more meaningful and enriched, not for hearing-impaired people alone, but for the whole Church community. Deafness challenges the Church in every parish and assembly to communicate more simply and more clearly, which benefits everyone. However, the real and valuable contribution of people who are deaf or hard of hearing is in the gifts of the Holy Spirit which through their particular experience and view of life are developed in a unique way. Challenged daily to overcome the difficulties of impaired or lost hearing, many such people become skilled in alternative forms of communication and develop a high degree of discernment. Others demonstrate a directness and simplicity concerning profound truths and insights which can confound the articulate for whom words and language can so easily become a substitute for rather than an expression of reality. The challenge for the Church today, having long been concerned with enabling deaf people to 'hear' the Good News, is to open the way for them to 'speak' and to witness to the whole christian community. While pastors specializing in the ministry to profoundly deaf people have a special responsibility in this regard, it should be the concern of all to enable people who are hard of hearing to have a fuller share as receivers and preachers of the word in the life and worship of their parish church and community.

Legally deaf people now enjoy the same civil rights as any other citizen, but such was not always the case. Developing the jewish Talmud, the Justinian Code formed the basis for much european law which in former times prevented many deaf people, regarded legally as children, from making wills, inheriting, owning property or entering into contracts, including marriage. Even today there

remain vestiges of these laws in some european nations together with some deep-rooted prejudice. However, in spite of ignorance and bias, that deaf people today should be denied their inheritance is unthinkable. Yet, it can be nonetheless extremely difficult for many such disabled members of the Church to claim that which is promised at baptism. Along with other people loosely described as disabled, people who are deaf and those who are hard of hearing are already full members of the Church by virtue of their baptism and confirmation. They too are endowed with the gifts of the Holy Spirit and are individuals with abilities and positive qualities of personality and character. Such attributes, in spite of handicap, enable deaf and hard of hearing people to grow to full maturity, to form close and intimate human relationships, to enjoy independence as working people and to live within the society as contributors to its welfare as well as supported by its structures. Like people classified in any other terms, however, there is a wide variation in the degree to which these measures of 'success' in life are attained by those handicapped by hearing loss.

Disablement is not always an impediment to success: sometimes it is the challenge which fires a person with enthusiasm and determination; the misplaced sympathy, even the patronizing attitudes or taunts of others can goad a disabled person on to extraordinary achievements. Some such individual successes receive a blaze of publicity in which even the severest disability can assume a positive value, raising a particular achievement to a higher order of merit.

In stark contrast however most deaf people suffer from what might be termed 'negative identification'. Instead of being known as 'the lady who lives in the house with the beautiful garden', or 'the boy who is great at football' or 'the man who repairs cars', they are referred to as 'that deaf woman', 'the little deaf boy', and 'the deaf man down the road', being noted, as it were, not by some ability or positive attribute but for what they cannot do and have not got. It is this manner of identifying people in negative terms as 'disabled' which seems to establish the context for attitudes which can set them apart in the community and place them in notional groups such as 'the hearing-impaired', 'the blind', 'the mobility-handicapped'. Such groups of course do not exist in reality. There are however some groups created by disabled people themselves, who, denied the opportunities and facilities available to others, even thrust together by other well-meaning people, do

find a common purpose, a shared need, a mutual sympathy, which draws them together. Of course such groups and associations are very important and of great significance in the lives of many disabled people. They are often responsible for opportunities and provisions otherwise unattainable. But it is to some extent a reflection on society that some groups can in reality exist as an alternative rather than as a complement to the wider community in which their members live.

Being a disability of communication, deafness tends to isolate people, inhibiting their ability to speak or take a full part in family and social life. It may also severely restrict their participation in christian ministry and worship. Those who suffer hearing loss or associated conditions range from people of all ages who have been born deaf—and may consequently lack the ability to speak, whose normal communication may be the sign language of deaf people—to people who are hard of hearing, the majority of whom are elderly and whose hearing loss though less severe may be just as debilitating. Both the invisibility of this handicap and the understandable reluctance of many hearing-impaired people to engage in communication hide the true extent of the disability. Apart from deaf and hard of hearing people themselves, many others suffer from the results of their deafness. Families suffer greatly, but the whole community is ultimately affected by the lost contribution of those who do not participate. In the case of deaf and hard of hearing people, those who work among them recognize this as a potentially rich contribution. This valuable resource is most evident in the communities of profoundly deaf people, drawn together through the development and communication of their sign languages, which, incidentally, differ as do spoken languages from country to country and have even regional variations. There exists in such communities what has been described as 'deaf culture', communicated and developed largely by sign language. Sadly, the lines of communication between the deaf and the wider communities are not sufficiently developed for people in general to become fully aware of the positive aspects of deaf people's life, experience and culture. It should be noted, however, that though these 'deaf communities' form the largest identifiable groups, they represent a minority—albeit an important minority—of those suffering from the disability of deafness. There are others born deaf, with or without speech, who choose not to belong or identify with them; there are deafened people, those who lose their hearing slowly in

adult life, those with associated difficulties of hearing or speech, and deaf and partially hearing children attending special schools or units for hearing-impaired pupils integrated into ordinary schools.

The Church includes people from all these categories in its membership. As baptized Christians they are called to witness and to minister, and also to enjoy the mutual love and care which is the mark of the christian community. In this regard the work of the Church particularly among deaf people and hard of hearing people is a continuation of the work of Christ who spoke the word, 'Ephphatha!' to the deaf man (Mk 7, 34), curing him of his deafness, and enabling him to speak also. The *final* outcome of Christ's intervention was not that a deaf man without speech could hear and speak, but that others around him praised God and spread word of his goodness. Christ tried to silence them 'but the more he insisted the more widely they published it'. In similar manner the work of 'Ephphatha' today does not end with enabling deaf people to hear or even to speak, but involves the whole community to which they belong. It is consequently impossible to write about deaf or hard of hearing people except in the context of and through the community whose life they touch. Because of the handicap of deafness, and for some the consequent lack of speech, the influence of hearing-impaired people is felt more by the effects of their actions than what they say, with implications not only valid for the deaf and hard of hearing, and other disabled people, but for the whole christian community. As pastors working with and for people who are deaf, engaged in Christ's ministry of 'Ephphatha', we often more readily identify with the friends of the deaf man in the gospel and the onlookers who, seeing what Christ had done, praised God and whose 'admiration knew no bounds' (Mk 7, 37). It is as an onlooker then that I want to reflect on the place and contribution of people who are deaf or hard of hearing in the community, the life and the worship of the Church.

The christian community is made up not of similar people, but of young and old, of rich and poor, blind and sighted, intelligent and feeble-minded, hearing, deaf and hard of hearing. Taken as a whole, all we have in common is our baptism. However, though we begin as one people, a community of love and praise of God, we have built our churches with steps up to the doors; we have composed our liturgy to be celebrated in words and language; we are inclined even to form a community of saints rather than sinners, putting obstacles in the way of physically disabled, those

who lack hearing or the ability to speak and still others who are mentally, emotionally, socially, or even morally disabled. We have, in short, restricted the enjoyment of full membership to able-bodied, hearing, sighted, mentally and emotionally and morally fit individuals, who are now engaged in providing access for disabled people.

The question of access for people with hearing difficulties often starts, as for physically disabled people, outside the church building. It so often involves in the first place the creation of a welcoming community in which fears of communication difficulties, of frustration and isolation are dispelled. A person unable to hear and perhaps also unable to speak, is likely to feel more isolated in a crowd than at home alone, unless there is some sort of real communication. Physically, there is of course the need for adequate amplification, for inductive loop systems, for clear speech and for visual signs whenever possible, but perhaps the greater need is for an approach to the composition and presentation of liturgy which takes account of the communication of deaf people, both as hearers and preachers of the Word, and of their particular experience in christian living. Is there not room for people who are deaf to celebrate the liturgy *as deaf people*? This plea was made most graphically in sign language by a man who is a regular Mass-goer and an active member of both a club and church centre for deaf people and of the parish where he lives: 'Look, I am deaf. Deaf. I cannot hear; I am not a hearing person; I am a deaf man. That's me: deaf! But everyone wants to make me hear. I don't want to hear! I am *happy* to be deaf. Why can't I belong *as a deaf person*?'

Liturgy is the church community worshipping together in praise and thanksgiving. It should be an orchestration of contributions representing everyone in a parish into a single unified act of worship, not a set piece to be performed in a predetermined way in which only a few are cast in active roles.

The selection of readings, the issue of approved eucharistic prayers and the rubrics ordained for the universal Church assure its unity in worship, but should not inhibit the manner and style of our celebration. One cannot have failed to notice the rich variety of culture reflected in national celebrations during recent papal visits around the world. But perhaps more telling than these are the liturgies celebrated by small close-knit communities in which the Sunday Mass is a local festival, a concerted act of worship, a

social event in which everyone takes part.

Each presentation of liturgy should thus reflect the uniqueness of the celebrating congregation in a way with which everyone present can identify, and which expresses the concerns and speaks the language of the wider community.

Access for people who are deaf should involve active participation too. Sign language in the celebration of Mass should not be a mere interpretation so that people who cannot hear may follow the prayers and readings but a contribution from deaf people, their life, their community and their culture, which can add a new dimension to the liturgy for everyone. In a similar way the contributions of minority ethnic and social groups can not only enhance the liturgy but make it a more authentic community expression of praise, petition and thanksgiving to God, reflecting especially in a multi-cultural society the catholic nature of the Church, perhaps in a more immediate and effective manner than the use of the latin language can. The use and development of vernacular languages in the liturgy of the Church should take account of all forms of human communication and not speech alone. Good visual communication even in Masses not celebrated in sign language is exemplified in the following account of a visit to a church while on holiday by a lady with a severe hearing loss: 'It was a small church, a temporary building I think, and really quite poor, but it shone with polish and flowers. There were no microphones or loop system so I couldn't hear a word from beginning to end. But, oh, the way that priest celebrated Mass with everyone joining in, I was so glad I had my best clothes on!' For this lady, the fact of not being able to hear on that occasion did not isolate her even in a strange church; she was inspired, lifted by the experience and two weeks later still talking about it.

Many profoundly deaf people, whose normal communication is sign language, and who may also lack speech or fluency of language, will rarely feel so at home in an ordinary parish Mass. They also need the opportunity to receive the Word of God, spiritual talks, and to celebrate the sacraments in their own language. Whenever possible churches should aim to provide these services and facilities as a part of and not apart from the local christian community.

It seems a tragic consequence of pastoral services exclusively organized for deaf people that those who benefit from these missions for the deaf rarely know what it is like to belong to the parish

community with their neighbours in the place where they live.

While it is acknowledged that specialist ministries of trained priests and others skilled in communicating with deaf people are necessary for the provision of adequate pastoral care, these should be offered clearly as a normal part of every diocese, an integral part of the Church's pastoral strategy and structure, and not as a charitable or fringe activity. Authentic and effective mediation between deaf and hearing people is only possible if interpreters and other specialist workers in the field of hearing impairment are themselves fully integrated in the wider community. Teachers, for example, who specialize in the education of hearing-impaired children need to keep in touch not only with developments in education but also with the environment in which these developments are taking place. Where units for hearing-impaired children exist in normal schools, the interaction of staff ensures this process. But teachers in special schools for hearing-impaired children need to develop contacts with those in ordinary schools and to be aware of changing social behaviour and structures which are forming the society in which their deaf pupils are growing up.

The same is true of special ministers working with profoundly deaf people. If they become isolated from the wider Church and out of touch with other christian people, they can easily become ineffective as mediators and, since God chooses to reveal himself through his people, perhaps to some extent also between deaf people and God! The integration of specialist ministers and pastoral workers into the mainstream of pastoral strategy and structures facilitates valuable interaction between specialists and generic workers in different fields of pastoral concern. Thus up-to-date developments and services become available to deaf people directly or through their specialist pastors. As for other members of the Church, the days of the priest or minister assuming the roles of preacher, teacher, social worker, marriage guidance counsellor, therapist, interpreter etc., should be past.

This movement towards more integrated services should be two-way. It is as important for the Church at large as it is for deaf and hard of hearing people who themselves should be growing in awareness that they too are called to be ministers, not simply within their own deaf communities but among hearing people as well.

For all we have said about the contribution and place of people who are deaf or hard of hearing in the Church, like all of us they

need to be fed with the gospel both in word and in practice. In order that this can be achieved it is essential that there be a sufficient number of priests and others in the community who have the understanding and skills necessary to communicate effectively with deaf people. However, the following true story illustrates how even those who do not possess particular skills such as sign language may nonetheless communicate powerfully through the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

An elderly man, deaf from birth and without speech, whose wife had recently died, was visited by the chaplain for the deaf, who lived some distance away. Before making his call, the priest dropped by at the local parish church to introduce himself to the parish priest. The Canon explained that he had called regularly for some two years upon the deaf man, bringing him Holy Communion every week. 'How do you communicate?' asked the chaplain. 'Oh, I write everything down', said the parish priest. 'And he understands you?' 'Yes, he is always pleased to read my notes', answered the Canon, 'although he doesn't write anything himself. I often wonder if I'm really doing any good, but it's all I can do for him'. The chaplain then visited the deaf man and after talking a while in sign language, mentioned he had just called on the parish priest. The old man's face lit up and he signed: 'Wonderful man, holy priest. I like him very much. He comes every week with Holy Communion. Always comes. Wonderful!' Then suddenly a thought struck him and he reached into a drawer, bringing out a pile of papers. 'What do they say?' he asked. The notes were of course the Canon's weekly messages, which the chaplain began to interpret into sign language. Each was in a similar form, simply written: 'The gospel this Sunday is the story of . . . We should try to follow our Lord's example . . . We prayed for you and your wife on Sunday . . . The children are making their first Holy Communion next month . . . Please pray for them'. Each note preached the Good News, meditated upon it, spoke of the Church's concern for the man and his wife, gave news of the parish and invited him to join in some intention. The deaf man could not read, but the Canon had conveyed his essential message more effectively by his actions and perseverance than perhaps he could ever have appreciated, and his parishioner had no doubt at all that he belonged to the parish. Pious story? Perhaps, but true—and a practical example of how powerful alternative forms of communication can be.