

## “EPHPHATHA”

Derby Cathedral – Saturday 9<sup>th</sup> June 2007

“Derby Day” for the racing enthusiast can only mean one thing, and it’s something that has nothing, I’m afraid, to do with this fair city or the beautiful county that surrounds it. For the racing enthusiast, of course, “Derby Day” has everything to do with a few hundred yards of downland turf in Surrey and the horses that run and the jockeys that ride and the crowd that cheers and the bookies who count their money (invariably!).

Yet *this* year for *this* racing enthusiast, “Derby Day” has had a wholly different significance: nothing to do with Frankie Dettori finally getting his just desserts on a horse called Authorised, but (at last) signifying an event actually in Derby, which has nothing to do with deserving and not much with authority, either! Instead of dessert it’s about service and instead of authority it’s about the privilege that stems from service.

At last the “Derby Day” ringed for several months in *my* 2007 diary has arrived – and it’s good to be here as we stand (as it were) at the “Off”. Thank you for your welcome.

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At the other Derby Day, of course, at Epsom, the Off is marked (from the commentator’s point of view, at least) with a minimum of words: “They’re under starter’s orders, and they’re away!” For us here this afternoon it’s been a bit more elaborate than that. There’s been rather more to it – of words and music and ritual – and, I’m afraid, for those longing for a cup of tea, there’s a bit more to come yet.

But at the heart of all this ritual and ceremonial and pomp there is still a word of setting off, a word of command or even – if you like – of release. It’s a word of command and release, of setting off, that is given to us by Jesus himself in his own native language and recorded for us in today’s Gospel reading. “*Ephphatha!*” is a word of Aramaic, the very language that Jesus himself spoke and in it – it is, perhaps, not too fanciful to suggest – we may hear Jesus speaking for us, or for me as I stand at the Off this afternoon.

What Jesus speaks at the Off is a word of command, of setting off, of release, of healing, indeed and it is a word that is and will be important today for the Off and for the days, months and years that lie ahead. “Be Opened!” or “Be Open!” *Ephphatha!*

In the Gospel narrative, of course, Jesus’ utterance marks the fulfilling in the life of a nameless sufferer of Isaiah’s prophetic vision (which we also have had read for us this afternoon) that the oppressed would hear good news and the captive be set free as his ears *are* opened to hear the Gospel and his tongue set free to echo it and sing its praises. It’s not a bad word, therefore, to set at the heart of this “Derby Day” as we – or I, at least – come under starter’s orders and prepare to run.

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But there’s more to *Ephphatha* than simply “Ready, Steady Go!” There’s a manifesto and a statement of priorities implicit in the command that we shall do well to hear and to heed as well on Derby Day. “Be Open” is not just an instruction to get on with it but also an important indication about *how* we who follow Jesus are to engage in the ministry he entrusts to us. *Ephphatha* can be a slogan and a challenge

not just to a particular minister at the start of a new ministry but for a whole Church called to faithful service and ministry.

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And perhaps especially at *this* particular juncture in the Church's life, when the quality of openness may be thought to be somewhat lacking and most especially needful in our common life. Because openness is vital, surely, to our discovery at once of our common humanity, our common calling and our shared life in Church and world.

Openness is vital to our exploration of our common humanity as we discover each other and value each other as unique bearers of the divine image and uniquely valuable in the contribution each makes, the story each tells and the insight and experience each brings.

Openness is vital to our understanding and appreciation of our common calling as we discover daily what it means to be called by God into a shared pilgrimage, enriched rather than threatened by diversity of insight and wisdom, of tradition, theology, denomination or priority. Openness is vital if we are to concentrate on the calling that unites us and the baptism that seals it rather than the divisions that are both cause and symptom of our sinfulness and the smallness of our outlook.

And openness, surely, is vital at the more immediate level of our diocesan and parochial life as we discover the opportunity and excitement of new ways of being Church, of working and witnessing together, of organising ourselves and heeding God held out by such initiatives as 'Renewing Ministry' and 'Servant Leadership'.

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*Ephphatha!* A word in Jesus' mother tongue, therefore, is a word of command and of release that is also a word of healing in which and by which the Isaiah prophecy of the oppressed hearing good news and the captives being set free may be realised in our own time and in our own ministry and discipleship. It's a word to turn us away from that which is small and inward and to turn us toward the world of both need and delight that surrounds us.

But it's a demanding freedom and a challenging healing, one that expects and asks much of us, and which suggests something important about the mission that Jesus holds out for us.

In the Gospel encounter (it is worth noting) Jesus opens *first* the sufferer's ears *before* he unlooses his tongue. The habit of listening before we speak and of allowing response (even disagreement) to what we have uttered is a difficult one for Church folk in their conversation both with each other and with the outside world. Conversation, indeed, is an art and one that we are in danger of forgetting. It's a skill, frankly, in which we badly need more practice.

There is indeed an aspect of Mission that is about proclamation and declaration but we must remember that openness, by Jesus' example, comes first to ears and hearts and hands before it comes to mouth and speech. We are – *all* of us, clergy and laity – in this respect deacons who listen, wait on and attend, before we are priests who minister transformation or bishops who help one another to hold ourselves accountable in the Body.

Openness like this will be demanding – scary, even – and we will need to continue to learn the sensitivities that go with that. "Show me your vulnerability," we will have to learn to say to one another, "and quell your squeamishness or disgust when I show you mine. Open your heart and believe mine, too, to be truly open to you, enabling us to perceive and value each other's need before we regret each other's

failings. Open your mind and pray that I may, also, so that we may learn from each other, even – especially – when what we hear from each other perplexes, challenges or outrages us.”

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It is good to be here and it is good to engage in this conversation with you, in which we will exchange our wisdom and insights as well as our perplexities and confusions and listen to one another in love and carefulness. For me *Ephphatha* will be an important word in the process and that is why it is the word that I have chosen to have engraved on the inside of this ring that I wear as symbol of my new office. This is the ring I wear on the hand that I extend in greeting, in welcome and in blessing to remind me of the need for my hand – along with my heart, mind, eyes and ears – needs to be constantly open so that those actions of greeting, welcoming and blessing will always be more than mere gestures.

And I pray that you will support me in this with your prayers, your encouragement, your advice and (yes) admonition and also (and especially in these early days) with your invitations to your churches, your worship, your schools and work places, your parties and your problems. Thus together we may learn to be open and together be blessed by Jesus Christ who so often has cause to look on our deafness and silence and to pray: “*Ephphatha!*” Amen.