

In the 1980's a play debuted in Irish theaters called *Translations*, written by Irish playwright Brian Friel. The play revolves around what was known as hedge-schools. You see after the English and Irish Protestants firmly established their control over Ireland, a number of anti-Catholic "penal laws" were passed. Among other provisions, these laws prohibited Catholics from sending their children abroad to receive a Catholic education. They also excluded Catholics from teaching in Ireland. So an underground school system developed, called hedge-schools. Hedge schools were started behind hedges, with lookouts, to allow the Irish to pass on to their children their faith, their culture, their customs and their language.

The play *Translations* concerns the efforts of one of the hedge-school teachers to help a young woman overcome her speech impediment, at least to the point where she can say her own name. Her agonized struggle to form simple words that express her identity are finally successful, and she is transformed. Her face shows a new dignity; at last she can publicly profess her identity and who she is.

But in the last act of the play an officer of the occupying force is killed. And a bullying investigator gathers up all the people including this young girl, because he suspects they are hiding the killers. During the interrogation the young girl is so frightened and intimidated that she once more loses the power of speech. And it becomes clear as you watch the play, that the girl is not only the girl, but she represents all the people who have been rendered mute by the violation of their culture.

Not only that, but those who chose to accept for safety's sake the culture of the oppressor become deaf to their own people's needs.

And so this play is a parable. It is a parable of what happens to a group of people who are oppressed and used by another, more powerful group.

Remember that in the time of Jesus, an alien force, the Roman army, occupied the land. The nation was ruled by a power that not only imposed a foreign rule, but also a language, a symbol and a label; and there were those who collaborated with the Romans; and the moment they adopted the language, culture and labels of the occupying force, they became insensitive to their own oppressed people.

The oppressed people in turn, no longer clearly knew who they were because they were not allowed to form the words of their identity. They had lost their story, the story of who they were. In order to survive they had to speak the language of the oppressors and to accept the identity that the oppressors gave them as simple ignorant outcasts and peasants. They could no longer speak their own name as a people of God.

And as the young girl in the play symbolized her people, the deaf man in the Gospel symbolizes his. But there is another layer of meaning here.

The Gospel according to Saint Mark was addressed to gentile Christians living in Rome, probably shortly before the temple in

Jerusalem was destroyed in A.D. 70. The miracle of the healing of the deaf man with the speech impediment occurs only in Mark. The other Gospel writers did not feel it was important to include this miracle, but Mark did. Mark had something to say to these gentile Christians.

In the year A.D. 64 the emperor Nero declared Christianity illegal and its followers were routinely arrested and put to death in very gruesome ways. The followers of Christ were literally driven underground to the catacombs. They could no longer openly hear the word of God proclaimed to them nor speak the name of the Savior. Mark's audience could very well relate to a deaf and tongue-tied man.

That is the way of all oppressors and the people they oppress. And we have seen this too many times in history, an attempt to obliterate the story of an entire people. Under the British Empire, the communist regime, and even under the protestant authorities in colonial America, Catholics were forbidden to practice their faith, pass on their customs, or teach their children. And the prejudice against Catholics is so widespread and deep-seated; it is so matter-of-fact that it is hardly given a second thought.

It is easy for us to think "that couldn't happen here today, in modern America, the land of the free." But with each passing year the unthinkable becomes more and more a possibility.

Religious discourse is forbidden in any public or government place, and in public schools in the United States no symbol, sign, or mention of God may be named. Out there, outside of the Church, they are trying to

maintain an ethical and moral society divorced from the story that gave them that society in the first place.

Sixty-five percent of our Catholic youth have no religious education after confirmation. They cannot recite the Ten Commandments or the corporal works of mercy. They have forgotten their language, they are struck dumb. And those who accept the alien culture, the secular culture, then become indifferent to their own people. Worse yet they bring that alien culture back here in the name of progress and enlightenment and do tremendous damage to our identity.

For example, take our crucifix. Both here in the Church and in the side chapel we have a traditional crucifix. It is very similar to the type you used to see in all churches. Christ has died upon the cross and His head is inclined to His right side, always to His right, why is that? There was a time when the meaning was obvious, back before the alien culture started to wreak havoc with our churches. When Christ looks to His right, He looks to His mother.

This is how the young and the old begin to lose their voice. They forget their faith stories. They no longer sing sacred songs drawn from our rich tradition of chant and polyphony; they sing secular songs. They become deaf to their heritage and they are forced to live by the labels that the culture places on them. What labels? You are not thin enough or pretty enough. You have the wrong clothes. You live in the wrong neighborhood. You drive the wrong car. You are nothing if you do not speak the language of the culture.

It is a culture without God. And to drown out the absence of God people raise the volume of their music and fill the world with the noise of constant chatter and sound bytes. They fill that absence with TV and hobbies and drugs, and the suicide rate skyrockets.

And then Mark's Gospel comes along, with a Jesus that is like that hedge-school teacher, coaxing and encouraging all of us to say who we really are. To speak once more the ancient language, that "I am made in the image and likeness of God;" that I count; and that someone truly loves me unconditionally-no strings attached. Someone who doesn't look at my house or my clothes or my car; He just looks at me in my heart and loves me.

And in a very significant way this is a powerful Gospel for parents and faith-filled adults. Because every faith filled adult and every parent here must see themselves as a hedge-school teacher. And you must whisper the old memories into the ears of the young. You must unlock their voices so they can reclaim their identity as children of God, and take back their story. You must liberate them and give them their voice, and their worth and their meaning.

And so Mark was saying more than a little miracle story. He was speaking to all of us that are oppressed by a culture that is alien to who and what we are. It is a culture so powerful it can turn us into Sunday only Catholics. We come to church and sing the songs; we hear the Word of the Lord and praise His name. But when we leave we become deaf and dumb. The noise out there drowns out the voice of God so that

we cannot even hear Him speaking to us, and we dare not speak His name lest we be labeled ignorant or worse. Mark tells us that Jesus comes to open our ears and loosen our tongue.

And that is what we are about. We are a powerful sign. We are here in this liturgy to be strengthened and renewed. We are here so that we can go to those near and dear to us and lay our hands upon them and whisper the words of Jesus, “be opened,” be open to God, be open to life, be open to love.