In our world as we go on our journey through it, just as at times a person can gradually lose their hearing, and how true this is for us spiritually as well. Gradually we can stop hearing God's voice in our lives and how to follow Him, forgetting how much we are loved and that much like Jesus, who goes far from his home territory to reach out to the Gentiles in the Gospel today, He is always seeking us out too. When we do, two things happen: our ears are opened and we hear and understand the love of God, and we too have the power to like those in the Gospel help the lost to have their hearts opened so they can hear and come to know how much God loves them.

Not too long ago, Ron Keine was on death row in New Mexico.

And as he awaited his sentence, he refused to become one of those people who find religion in prison on their way to die. No, he decided, repenting is for the ones who are here for a reason. I have done nothing wrong.

He felt the justice system was a joke.

“Justice was only a word that the court system was using to put four innocent men, myself among them, to death for a murder we did not commit,” he said.

As the days drew closer to his publicly administered death, his faith in God withered. “You did this to me, God,” he cried out. “I’m not going to get on my knees and beg, because I don’t want your help! I am an innocent man!”

Not long before the date of the execution, the men decided: *They may take everyting from us, but it’s we who will take our own lives*. They planned to do themselves in as a way to hold onto a small shred of freedom that unjust men had ripped away from them. But as the reality of such a choice sank in, something stopped Ron. He thought this would result in hell, a face worse than even death row.

He looked at his life and could not believe how it had turned out. What would the Ron of years before, the altar boy from Detroit, have said if he could envision sitting in a prison cell, days away from an execution by the state of Arizona? After high school, Ron rebelled and joined one of Detroit’s motorcycle clubs. His best friend, Doc, convinced him to ride to California.

They were young, had bikes, and wanted a free-spirited life. On February 14, 1972, the day after Ron got his mechanic certification, Doc and he rode the cold Northern Route all the way to California. In California, they joined the “baddest” motorcycle gang out there.

After a couple of years riding in California, Doc and Ron and three of their club brothers decided to return to Detroit for a visit. Since it was winter, they all piled into a van. They picked up some hippies on the way, but kicked them out when one of them was caught stealing beer, one having a black eye.

A couple of hours after the hippies were dishonorably discharged, six police squad cars pulled over the van and all were arrested. The hippies had used a pay phone to alert the police to the van. The 5 were charged with armed robbery of a party store on Route 40. It went to trial but was dismissed when the judge realized that the party store that they allegedly had robbed had burned down two years earlier.

When the judge threw out the trial, the detainees expected to be released. But instead, after a couple of weeks, two detectives from Albuquerque,

New Mexico, extradited them to their state. Suddenly what seemed like an inconvenient incident turned into the 5 men being charged by the state prosecutor with murder in the first degree. In the mountains outside of Albuquerque, the body of a New Mexican college student had been found. Though these men had not even been in the area, it did not matter to the prosecution. The whole ordeal was a sham. Even before the trial began, the five had moved from the jail to death row and were told to “get used to it, because that’s where you’re going to end up.”

To their utter disbelief and complete horror, the verdict at the trial was guilty and the sentence was death. Still, Ron would not turn to God. As he put it, “I would not pray, because any God who would let an innocent man die like this was not one I wanted to talk to.”

When Ron was weeks away from his death, a South Carolina drifter, the real murderer, read about the trial in a paper. He walked into a Southern Baptist church where he had a conversion and confessed. Amazingly, the prosecutor refused to hear the confession, stating that those responsible were already behind bars. The imprisoned men had been back to court five times, but motioning for a new trial was always shot down.

Then, one of the men on death row had a girlfriend back in Michigan who alerted a court reporter from the *Detroit News* that her boyfriend, also from Michigan, was about to be executed in the state of Arizona. As the reporter investigated and pursued through files on the case, he inquired as to why so many of the documents were missing. That night, two deputies knocked on his motel door and told him to get out of town unless he wanted to end up on death row too. The reporter had covered the court beat for 22 years, and was not afraid. He called his boss who sent two more reporters to Arizona.

This put the wheels in motion. The judge ordered a retrial. The holes in the case were easily revealed. For example, the man, who had testified as the pathologist for the murder victim, was found to have been paid $50,000 for his false testimony. The woman, Judy Weyer, a hotel maid, whose testimony had sent the men to death row was ready to tell the truth - something she had always wanted to do but had been blackmailed by the prosecutors. In fact the taped interviews with her were a part of the information that mysteriously vanished after they were handed to the prosecutor. The reporter had tracked her down in Minnesota. Once she

was assured there would be no retaliation against her, she was only too happy to testify. The woman revealed that she had been tutored in what to say and how to say it. In the end, a week before the men's execution date, the original indictments were dismissed in a retrial. The murder weapon was eventually traced to the real killer, who confessed to the crime. Because of the corruption surrounding this case, the assistant prosecutor was disbarred and three sheriff detectives were fired.

Ron recalls after the verdict, one of the guards was trying to handcuff him again, so he indignantly asked him if was arresting him for something. The guard said he had to sign him out, to which Ron said he didn't sign to get in, so he's not signing to get out. He then said "Your honor, would you tell this man I'm free?"

The guard said he had to take them back to process them for release, but the judge looked at the men and asked if any of them wanted go go back, to which they all shook their heads and walked out into freedom after 22 months on death row.

While convicts on parole have programs to help them find places to live and work, they were giving nothing. Their lawyer arranged for some clothing, and Ron hitched a ride back to Michigan with the reporter from the *Detroit News*. The other 3 returned to California to their gang; within a few years, to lost their lives to gang violence, the other took his life.

Ron, who came from a dysfunctional family from whom he was estranged, found friends to stay with, and sometimes lived on the streets. He'd do odd jobs to survive, eventually becoming a plumber. Initially the rage he carried against those who had hurt him boiled up within him. He could not sleep at night and was still angry with God. But eventually, he spoke to a nun who changed everything. She said to him "It's okay that you feel angry with God. But you need to give everything over to Him."

He says he did not understand what she was saying. "This is more than you can handle," she explained. "Tell God of your anger and hurt, and tell Him you are giving everything over to Him. He will carry this burden for you. But there is one more thing you must do," she added. "You must forgive those who have hurt you."

Ron did not see how he could possibly forgive, but this nun told him: “You will just let them continue to hurt you if you let the anger eat away at you.”

He went home that night and for the first time in a long time, he spoke with God. He told him “It’s all yours. I can’t take it anymore” and he said he was worn out by the anger and sleepless nights. He asked God to help him do the seemingly impossible: to forgive those who had committed such evil against him. He said “I don’t know why you did this to me. Maybe it was to stop me from the life I was living, but this hate thing is part of what I got. Help me to stop it.”

By the next day, Ron was a different person. He says it was like a boulder that had been pinning him down was lifted off his heart. He could finally sleep again. For about a week he struggled with forgiveness, but then it came, slowly and easily. It had once infuriated him that God allowed him to go to prison for something he did not do, but Ron says he now believes that if all that had not happened to him, he would either have been killed or have killed someone himself, given the life he lived as part of the biker

gang. Now nearly 50 years later, he says he has a greater purpose for having lived through such a nightmare.

He travels around the country speaking against the death penalty as part of an organization called “Witness to Innocence.” He says he feels he can make a difference in the lives of others who are so often forgotten by society. “It’s easy to lose faith when things seem awful, but now I know that sometimes it’s these terrible struggles that God uses to build us into the people He needs us to be,” he says. When hs speaks at schools and universities, he stresses the dignity of life of every human being, and that he was just 10 days from being wrongfully executed. He also says that God is the author of all life, and Jesus stresses forgiveness and love, and he does what he does for those who were with him who aren’t here anymore, and for those who are locked away and forgotten. He’s still active to this day, and you can read his full story at “Witness to Innocence” . org.

In his life, he did not go from altar boy to biker gang member overnight. How he lost his faith was through a series of experiences in his family, and also through a series of choices he made. Note in the Gospel Jesus goes to something called the “Decapolis,” or “Ten Cities.” This is a secular area

outside of Israel. Think of the younger son in the Prodigal Son story going off to a far away land. This is the secular world where one does not hear the voice of God. For Ron it was the biker gang, but for many of us it's probably something different, but the point is when you stop listening to God, be it through hearing His Mercy and Love through the Eucharist and Prayer, or stop listening to His guidance through the law which we reflected upon last week, you listen to the wrong voices. It might be the voice that makes the individual supreme; I'm the source of truth and value, what I say goes. Or Moral Relativism; what's true for you is whatever you want, let's tolerate others views. Or it's all about the now and the world, so live for the moment. We might not be in a biker gang, but so many in our world are deaf to the voice of God. We are deaf to what it means to live the faith. We are deaf to what it means to follow the faith and have morals. We see this in so many ways; from how we treat others, born and unborn; to the hate we have for people; to redefining of morality. This is where first, we have to look at our lives and ask ourselves how our hearing is. At baptism our ears our touched and we are prepared to hear the Word of God; but just as physical ears need cleaning, so too do we need this spiritually; we do this when we let go of our ego, when we listen for God like Ron did talking to the nun and then to God; when we look at what in God's law we struggle

with, as did Ron which was forgiveness and mercy, and then we listen to what God is challenging us to do.

Second, it's important to look at how the crowd is impacting our hearing. Note in the Gospel what happens - the crowd brings the man to Jesus. We are in charge of our own actions, but the crowd in our lives is so important to look at. Sometimes a crowd can drown out the voice of God. Maybe it's the wrong sources on social media, or like in Ron's case running with the wrong crowd; maybe it's a family that's not supportive or people telling you what you want to hear, be it people you know or people on social media. Deep down we know right from wrong - but our conscience needs formation. So we have to ask ourselves who is the crowd we run with?

Lastly, are we going to be like Ron and like the crowd who brings the man to Jesus? What I love with Ron's story is that it was many people who were involved to help him be free - the reporter, the reporter's boss, the brave hotel maid who was put up to testify, the actual killer who owned up to what he had done when he accepted Christ. Evil would have triumphed without this crowd helping Ron. And now Ron works to help inform people on the dignity of the human person. I see the same thing in folks involved in prison

ministry like we have here at Saint Joes. I see the same thing in people involved in defending the unborn like our Respect Life group. And I see it in so many families I meet who talk to their children and relatives about the faith. In our lives, we have a mission which is to help others to hear. It is not an easy one, but when we are not afraid to speak about our faith, to encourage, to challenge with love, to talk about hard to talk about issues in the lives of people who are making bad choices, to invite people to think more deeply about their beliefs when they are in opposition to the faith, we can do so much to help people hear, and understand, the truth. On our part though you can't speak well if you don't hear well - so we need to always be formed through our relationship with God and the Church so we understand the faith, and then be not afraid to testify to what we believe in. "Ephphatha" means to "be opened," and there is so much spiritual laziness in our lives; a laziness to open our ears, and a laziness to speak about the faith. It's so important to plug ourselves into Christ and to help others to do the same.

In a world where it can be so hard to hear with all the noise around us, hopefully through it all we can hear the words of God to all of us, no matter what our story or background is, no matter what choices we may have

made, that we are loved, and then hear the way we can respond to that love by following God's guidance and receiving His mercy. What a gift that is - may we hear it and respond to it like Ron, and also like Ron, help others to come to know it too. As Emily Dickinson wrote:

If I can stop one Heart from breaking
I shall not live in vain
If I can ease one Life the Aching
Or cool one Pain

Or help one fainting Robin
Unto its Nest again
I shall not live in vain.

God is there to cool our pain and suffering - if only we hear Him. Let us do the same for one another as we prepare to receive Jesus Himself, helping us to hear and see Him in our lives.