

Jesus Heals the Deaf and Dumb Man

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Year B)—8 September 2024

Revd Rob Miners

Mark 7.1-8, 14-23

Lord our God, open our spiritual ears as well as our physical ears so that we may hear your word, ponder on it and do it. Amen.

Imagine living in a world where you can't hear anyone, even when they speak loudly to you. Imagine trying to speak to people without knowing whether you were shouting at them or whether they could even understand what you were saying.

The Gospel passage says that the man who was brought to Jesus was deaf and could hardly talk, and perhaps it was his inability to hear which made his speech so imperfect. I found out a little once about the relationship between hearing and speech. Some years ago, when coming back from holidays, we stopped at a café in Cowra for lunch. Angela, my middle daughter, had her Walkman radio with earphones which I thought I'd like to borrow to listen to the midday news. I turned it on, and I was amazed at the clarity of reception. I thought I'd mention it to the family. I was rather surprised when they all started to laugh, get under the table, make signs for me to be quiet and in general look very embarrassed. Apparently, when I couldn't hear myself talk, I spoke at maximum volume and the whole café was informed how good this Walkman radio really was.

Wouldn't it be awful to live in a world without the ability to really communicate? You would become so isolated. Anyone can have a sense of being isolated even if they're surrounded by lots of noisy people or when living in their own silent world. Although with modern day technology we now have available such things as cochlear implants and hearing aids, together with people who have the ability to sign language. I remember once having a fairly normal conversation with a man who had had throat cancer, and he used a talking keyboard to speak with.

So here we have Jesus going from Tyre to the territory around the Sea of Galilee. He was going from Tyre in the north to Galilee in the south and he started by going to Sidon, which was even further north, a little like going from Canberra to Adelaide via Alice Springs. One commentator believes that this journey took more than eight months.

It may well be that this journey was the peace before the storm, a long communion with his disciples before the approaching crucifixion. When Jesus arrived back in the region of the Decapolis, a deaf man with an impediment in his speech was brought to him by some of his friends. The Decapolis is also the area where Jesus had previously healed a man possessed by a demon.

In Mark 5 verse 20, we are told that the man went away and began to tell in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him. Maybe this man's friends had heard of Jesus and his healing power from the man healed of the demon possession and that's why they had brought him. It was a frequent request by those seeking help from the Lord that he would lay hands on them, but we find he didn't always comply with their requests.

You see, here lies a deep meaning in all the variations which mark the different sick and afflicted. As you look at the scriptures, you will find one person cured by a word, another by a touch, while another was sent to wash in the pool of Siloam. You see, we may be expecting God to work in a particular way and not be open to him, bringing the answer in another way.

We may not recognise his answer when it comes. That was the problem with Naaman, the famous leader of the Syrian army who became a leper in the time of Elisha. He was told that Elisha would be able to cure him, but he had a picture in his mind of how that was going to happen. But when Elisha told him to do something different to what he had expected, that is, to dip seven times in the Jordan River, he became angry and went away still with his leprosy. If he had to wash in a river, why couldn't it have been in one of those far more impressive rivers like those in his own homeland? Why did it have to be in the despised Jordan? But he had some faithful servants who lovingly reminded him that if Elisha had told him to do a great thing, he would have done it. Why not do as Elisha had said and go and wash? As he humbled himself to do so, the healing came. Naaman had to put aside his own picture of how healing was to take place before he was open to receive his healing in God's way.

I believe that if Naaman had gone off in a huff and never humbled himself to do what Elisha had told him to do, he would never have been healed. It says to me that the time for healing or blessing and the way it's received is always in the Lord's hand. Also, the process of healing was different. For some, it was instantaneous. For another, it was gradual. Remember that when Jesus healed the blind man, he saw at first men walking as trees. But from that, don't believe that gradual cures came by reason or of any restraint on the power of the Lord other than that which he willingly imposed on himself.

Then the miracle shows how beautifully Jesus treated people. He took him away from the crowd. Why? It wasn't because he wanted to pray with greater freedom. Jesus' whole life was one of total prayer. He didn't need solitude for that. But it conforms well with Jesus' injunction not to tell anyone later on. Isn't that how Jesus still operates? Sometimes the Lord leads our soul apart and often sets it in the solitude of a sick bed or in the loneliness of spirit when he wants to speak to us words of healing or reconciliation. He takes our souls aside as he physically did with this deaf man that in being withdrawn from the world's den we may listen to him.

Jesus put his fingers into the man's ears and touched the man's tongue. These are symbolic actions and it's easy to see why he would have used such symbolic actions. Other than sight and feeling, this man had no other avenues of communication. The symbolic action of Jesus putting his fingers into the man's ears represented a piercing of the obstacle which hindered the sound from reaching the seat of hearing. As we learn to speak by hearing others speak, Jesus removed the hearing obstacle first. The spit which Jesus used to loosen the man's tongue was seen to be symbolic as, in those days, spittle was believed to contain a curative quality. The dogs and cats still think so today when they have a word.

Jesus looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said, He looked to heaven to show that it was from God that the help was to come. The words with a deep sigh are seen as the deep voice of prayer which he was engaged in and also the touching of Jesus' soul with compassion and distress as he was confronted with the ugliness of sin—the sin and death that had so affected what God had originally created as perfection. The whole miracle also shows us that Jesus did not consider the man as a "case". He considered him as an individual and treated him accordingly.

In this miracle we see the fulfilment of the prophecy contained in Isaiah chapter 35. "Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then the lame will leap like a deer and the mute tongue shout for joy." When the healing was accomplished, the people declared that he had done all things well. And that really goes back to Genesis chapter 1. In the beginning everything had been created perfectly but man's sin had spoiled that original perfection. Here we see Jesus coming to bring healing to man's bodies and salvation to their souls.

This healing miracle of Jesus points to the divinity of Jesus. However, it is not recorded for us to be left there. How many are exposed to the teaching of Jesus, to the magnificent revelation of the news of reconciliation in Jesus, but remain deaf to his call? Jesus himself warned the disciples of this in the parable of the sower, when he said that though hearing they do not hear or understand.

I have met many who have sat in the pews year after year but remain totally deaf. To put it in words my granddaughter would use, they don't really get it grandpa, do they? In a previous parish one such person comes to mind. Every week we'd find her in church and during the sermon she would pointedly hold up the *Anglican News* or a pew sheet in front of her face as I preached. During the week her criticisms were many and varied; a very unhappy lady, who didn't want to hear.

The very first words that the deaf man in this reading heard was the voice of Jesus saying, "be open." How wonderful it was. We do not hear about his subsequent transformation, but we know this would have occurred. What followed the hearing was communication.

The second part was no less important. The man's tongue was loosened. We know that he would have communicated to all who would listen what Jesus had done for him and what he knew about this amazing person.

When Jesus calls us from our deafness he begins our transformation. However, there's more to it than this. Jesus wants us to communicate his teaching, not to keep it to ourselves but to tell others. In Matthew chapter 10 verse 27, as Jesus sends out his disciples he says, what "I have whispered in your ears proclaim from the housetops." Those who hear can't help but communicate.

Ponder these three things. Have your deaf ears been opened? Have you heard the voice of Jesus and what do you communicate?

Father, we thank you that you caused this miracle to be recorded in scripture for our learning. We thank you that you still come to us individually and meet us wherever we are on our spiritual journey. Help us to make time available for you from our busy lives to listen to your leading and may our spiritual ears be always open to you as well as our physical ears. Bless us Father in the coming week not according to our deserving but according to the riches of your grace. In the strong name of Jesus our Lord and healer we pray. Amen.