

Contexts

Mark's Gospel

- Composed between 65-70 CE
- Generally accepted as the first Gospel written.
- Authorship is unclear but possibly written by John Mark, the companion of Peter in Rome.
- Begins with the ministry of John the Baptist in the wilderness, then the Baptism of Jesus, then Jesus battling the forces of evil in the wilderness.
- First action of Jesus is to establish a community to establish the kingdom of God.
- Major work of this community is the work of healing and restoring God's right order, as opposed to the order of Rome, or the order established by the scribes and Pharisees, or religious and cultural norms of the time.
- Cleansing & healing stories restore people to their proper (rightful) place in the Kingdom and in human society (no longer outcasts, despised, unclean, etc).
- The right order of God's kingdom shatters and goes beyond the human and religious limitations placed on some of God's beloved sons and daughters.
- There is a characteristic starkness in Mark's Gospel – it is the shortest of the 4 canonical Gospels.
- Often the story is told by contrast – who is truly blind: the blind beggar or the seeing disciples, etc.

Mark 7:31-37 – things to notice

- The Lectionary unfortunately omits Jesus' encounter with the Syrophenician woman, which occurs in between last Sunday's Gospel and the text we are reading today. That explains the first sentence about Jesus returning from Tyre. He does so via a very circuitous route – firstly heading north to Sidon, then south-east past Caesarea and into the Decapolis region (a group of ten cities) on the south-eastern side of Lake Galilee. Jesus is travelling through Gentile territory, almost deliberately avoiding Israelite territory.
- Note that the Syrophenician woman and her daughter are Gentiles.
- Note that the deaf man is a gentile.
- Note Mark's arrangement of Jesus curing a Gentile woman and then a Gentile man.
- 'they brought him a man who was deaf and had a speech impediment' – sets the scene for the healing by describing the affliction the man is suffering from.
- 'they asked him to lay his hand on him' – the request is made by the Gentile people accompanying the man, not by the man himself. Note that there were many itinerant 'healers' in the ancient world. The request for healing does not imply faith in Jesus as messiah or Son of God. Earlier in Mark (5:19) Jesus had sent the man healed of unclean spirits home to the Decapolis to 'proclaim what God has done for you and how much mercy he has shown you.' Is this how the people know about Jesus' reputation?
- Jesus takes the man aside, away from the crowd. Why?
- A series of ritual gestures follow:
 - Jesus puts his fingers into the man's ears
 - Jesus spits and touches the man's tongue with the spittle
 - Jesus looks up to heaven and sighs (groans) – Jesus prays (summons divine power)
 - Jesus issues a command, "ephphatha" – 'Be opened'.

- The healing is affirmed by Mark's remark: And his ears were opened ... and he spoke clearly.
- Jesus orders them not to tell anyone about the healing, but to no effect. In fact, it has the opposite effect – 'the more he insisted, the more widely they published it'.
- Mark's has Jesus take the man away from the crowd and give the command to silence to suggest that Jesus is more than just a healer and that his real identity is only fully revealed on the Cross.
- The crowd is absolutely ecstatic: "He has done all things well..." (Is 35:5-6 part of the first reading for this Sunday) – perhaps an indication that Isaiah's vision of Israel's glorious future is being realised here and now in the person and actions of Jesus.

The Liturgical Context

The First Reading comes from the Book of Isaiah 35:4-7. It is part of Isaiah's oracle of healing and renewal spoken to a people in exile. This is how things will be when God leads his people out of exile and back to Zion – a time of great rejoicing and healing. It shall be like water gushing in the desert; the eyes of the blind shall be opened, the ears of the deaf unsealed, the lame shall leap for joy and the tongues of the dumb will sing for joy. The text is chosen because it includes the quote in the Gospel but also the whole theme of healing, restoration and transformation matches the Gospel story.

Reflection

Just before this story of the healing of the Gentile man Mark has told the story of the healing of the daughter of a Gentile woman. God's love and care for all people, not only the Jews, is made clear in these miracle stories.

Healing stories in the Gospel are not told to prove Jesus is the Messiah or the Son of God. The Gospels were written to teach would-be disciples how to live in the tradition of Jesus. The healing stories in the Gospel are about liberation, restoration and transformation, not just about the healing of a medical complaint.

Because of COVID lockdowns and travel restrictions many experienced a sense of isolation. Even with the benefits of modern technology and social media people can still feel deeply isolated. They share something of the experience of man in this Sunday's Gospel. He cannot hear and cannot speak properly. Living in the ancient world that must have been a profoundly isolating, frightening and frustrating experience for him.

As Jesus and his disciples travel through Gentile territory people bring him a man who is deaf and cannot speak properly. Without the power of communication, the man is socially isolated. The people ask Jesus to lay a hand on the man. There were many travelling healers at that time, so the people's request does not imply that they know who Jesus really is, only perhaps his reputation as a healer.

Jesus takes the man aside, away from the crowd, puts his fingers into the man's ears and touches his tongue with spittle. Both are deeply intimate gestures and somewhat confronting. I wonder what it must have been like to be that man. How much did he understand about what Jesus was doing? Being deaf, did he even know what the crowd had asked Jesus to do for him?

Jesus looks up to heaven, sighs and says 'Ephphatha,' – 'Be opened!' All at once the man can hear and speak clearly. The man's social isolation is ended. Now he can enter fully into relationship with other people. The man rejoices, the people rejoice and, even though Jesus asks them not to, they tell the story everywhere.

In telling this story Mark seem to suggest that without the intimate, healing touch of Jesus we remain deaf both to the voice of God and the cries of others, and unable to enter fully into relationship with either. We remain closed and crippled within ourselves, unable to hear the Word of God or pass it on to others. But once touched by the power and spirit of Jesus we are opened to the Word made flesh and God's vision for human life. Our inner ligaments, the things that once chocked the Life within us, begin to be loosened and we begin to speak clearly of God's loving concern for all humanity in every word and action.