

The Twenty-third Sunday of Ordinary Time

(Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	Isaiah 35:4-7
<i>Response</i>	Praise the Lord, my soul!
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 146:7, 8-9, 9-10
<i>Second Reading</i>	James 2:1-5
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Jesus proclaimed the Gospel of the kingdom and cured every disease among the people.
<i>Gospel</i>	Mark 7:31-37

The Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time for Year B takes us to one of Mark's most intriguing stories; it's the story of Jesus healing a man who is both deaf, unable to hear, and mute, unable to speak. So the story is in Mark 7:31-37. It's a shorter pericope, it's a shorter passage, but it's worth our attention. So let's focus on it together. It says this:

Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, through the region of the Decap'olis. And they brought to him a man who was deaf and had an impediment in his speech; and they besought him to lay his hand upon him. And taking him aside from the multitude privately, he put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue; and looking up to heaven, he sighed, and said to him, "Eph'phatha," that is, "Be opened." And his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. And he charged them to tell no one; but the more he charged them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. And they were astonished beyond measure, saying, "He has done all things well; he even makes the deaf hear and the dumb speak."¹

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

Okay, short passage, a short account of Jesus' miracle but there's, as always, a lot going on here. So let's just walk through it point by point. First, notice the geography here in the region of Tyre and Sidon. That's North of what we call today the land of Israel, and is tied to this Decap'olis. *Déka* means 10 in Greek, *polis* means city, so there were these 10 Greek cities together called the Decap'olis, a cluster of cities in that territory. So Jesus here appears to be passing through a Gentile, predominately Gentile, territory as he is proclaiming the kingdom of God. This is something we see in Mark's gospel on more than one occasion, such as elsewhere in the gospel, where the feeding of the 5000 takes place in Jewish territory but the feeding of the 4000 takes place in Gentile territory. So this is one of the miracles Jesus performs in that context in the region of the Decap'olis. That's the first point.

A second point is just the nature of the illness that the man has. We've seen in Mark's gospel lots of different situations. We've had people who were paralyzed, we've had people who were possessed by demons, we've had people sick with a fever, Ja'irus' daughter who has died. In this case a man has two impediments, first a speech impediment and second a hearing impediment. So he's both mute, unable to speak, and deaf, unable to hear. Older translations will translate mute as dumb. Obviously it doesn't have anything to do with his intellectual capacities, that's just an archaic use of the English word to describe someone who is unable to speak, mute or dumb. So we have a deaf and mute man. And what's interesting here is that the people are besieging Jesus to lay his hands upon the man. So we notice here something interesting, the idea that Jesus' touch communicates the power of healing. We've seen that elsewhere in Mark's gospel too, like the woman with a hemorrhage who touches Jesus' garments and says if I just touch the hem of his garment I'll be made whole, I'll be healed. So they asked Jesus to touch the man and interestingly Jesus doesn't. He could've just laid his hands on the man and healed him, or he could have just spoken the word and the man would've been healed, like he says to the paralytic "rise and walk." But in this instance Jesus does something a little different, he takes the man who is deaf and mute aside from the crowd, he's going to perform this privately away from the multitude. Then he does two things. First, he puts his fingers into the man's ears, and then second, and even more striking, he spits and touches the man's tongue. Now the implication here is

that Jesus spits onto his own fingers, onto his own hand, and then touches the saliva to the man's tongue.

Now that's a striking action. You can see if you were the person receiving that you might recoil, like what are you doing spitting and then putting that saliva onto my tongue. It's a strange action. Jesus doesn't do this all the time, this isn't his ordinary way of healing people. We see, in some sense, he seems to be particularly grieved by this man's state. If you think about it for just a moment, although in our day and time people who are either deaf or who are mute are able to communicate in lots of different ways, we've developed lots of helps and aids for people in those conditions to function in society, to be highly functional in our society, that was not the case in the First Century A.D. Sign language, for example, had not been invented. So if someone was both deaf and mute they would be effectively cut off from a lot of ancient society. So here Jesus interestingly in a deep act of compassion sighs and looks up to heaven and says, "*Eph'phatha*," be opened, he speaks in Aramaic. That's an interesting thing. On a few occasions in Mark's gospel Jesus is explicitly stated to have used an Aramaic term or expression. The last time we saw this was with the raising of Ja'irus' daughter. Remember, he's in private, he takes the little girl aside with Peter, James, and John and he says, "*Tal'itha cu'mi*," right, little girl get up.

So scholars debate about why Mark relays the Aramaic in this instance. One really plausible possibility is that on these moments Jesus was remembered as having used the Aramaic language when he spoke the words of healing over a particular person, in this case the man who is deaf and mute. *Eph'phatha* means be opened, right, in this case opening his ears and releasing his tongue and the man is able to speak plainly. So this is a great miracle, it's a very powerful miracle. What's fascinating about it is that when Jesus performs it, Mark says that he charged them to tell no one, but the more he charged them the more zealously they proclaimed it. So notice another aspect that's distinctive of Mark's gospel here. We've talked about it before, the so-called messianic secret, which is that on certain occasions when Jesus either heals someone or casts out a demon, he says to the people shh, don't telling anyone, be quiet, right. Some scholars have postulated that that is a kind of reverse psychology largely because of this verse, because it says that the more he told them to keep quiet, the more they went out and spread it. I've spoken

elsewhere about the fact that I don't think that's the reason. I do think Jesus is legitimately trying to keep quiet until the time for his passion, death, and resurrection has come. So he's going about, he's performing signs and wonders, but in certain cases he's going to try to keep a low profile until the time is right for the opposition to mount against him so that he would go to the cross. In this case, however, his exhortation to be quiet is ineffective and they begin to proclaim him. What is the response of people to the miracle? It's two-fold. They say first he has done all things well, right, they're just amazed by this person, and then secondly, and even more important, he makes even the deaf to hear and the dumb to speak.

Now what does that mean? He even makes the deaf hear and the dumb speak. It means that this miracle of Jesus was extraordinary. This miracle of Jesus was unprecedented. This was startling to the people. I mean there had been different healers and wonder workers but this guy even makes deaf people be able to hear and mute people be able to speak. It's that last one that's particularly fascinating because, I'm not not a speech therapist or an expert in any of that, but any person who has studied this will tell you that if a person hasn't spoken for their entire life, if they're completely mute, they're not going to be immediately able to move the muscles of the tongue to be able to articulate a language. It would take time to learn the language, to be able to speak. In this case the man goes from being completely mute to being completely articulate immediately. So this is an extraordinary miracle and that's how it's going to be read by ancient writers as we'll see in just a minute when we look at some of the Church fathers on this miracle. This would take divine power for Jesus to take a person unable to speak and give him the gift of language immediately, especially when he's never even heard language spoken. Okay, alright, so that's the gospel for today.

Now what about the Old Testament? If we turn back to the Old Testament reading, the layers of meaning and significance to Jesus' action get even deeper, they begin to thicken, because in the Old Testament there is a prophecy from the Book of Isaiah about precisely the kind of miracle that Jesus has just performed with the mute and deaf man. Isaiah 35 is the chapter, and in this chapter Isaiah the prophet is speaking about two future events in the age of salvation, two events. The first one is the new exodus, this idea in Jewish tradition, and in Scripture, that when the age of salvation finally came, God would save his people again in a way similar to

how he'd save them at the time of Moses in the exodus from Egypt. So Isaiah is the great prophet of the new exodus. Much of the second half of his book is all about this future exodus that God is going to accomplish in order to save his people. The second aspect of the new exodus though is that Isaiah also talks about the coming of God, right, so that when that new exodus takes place it's not going to be that he sends Moses to carry it out but God himself will come and accomplish the new exodus. He calls it the coming of God or the coming of the Lord. So Isaiah 35 is a prophecy of the new exodus and of the coming of God, and in that prophecy one of the ways you will know that the new exodus has come is that God is going to perform certain miracles, which includes making the deaf to hear, right. So I will just give you the key verses here, Isaiah 35:4-7, it says this:

Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, fear not!
Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God.
He will come and save you." Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a hart,
and the tongue of the dumb sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the
wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a
pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall
become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes.

Okay, so you don't have to look too hard to see the immediate significance of this prophecy for Jesus' action. First, Isaiah's prophesying the coming of God. What will happen when God comes? Well two key elements here are being described. The ears of the deaf are going to be unstopped and the tongue of the mute will sing for joy. So there we find a clue as to why Jesus heals the man in the way he does. Why does he put his fingers into the man's ears and say be opened? Because he is deliberately fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah 35 that when God comes the ears of the deaf will be unstopped, they'll be opened. Why does he touch the man's tongue, right? Well because he's deliberately fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah 35 that the tongue of the mute, of the dumb person, will sing for joy, right, at the healing that they received. So this is a really fascinating prophecy. Of course it also mentioned the eyes of the blind being opened, we've seen that elsewhere in the gospel where Jesus heals the blind.

So what is Jesus doing? This is so crucial. Jesus is deliberately enacting in his own person the miracles that Isaiah said God would perform at the time of the new exodus. So the healing of the man who was deaf and mute isn't just a revelation of Jesus' messianic identity, it is that, the healing of the man who is deaf and mute isn't just a sign that the age of salvation has come, it is that, but the healing of the man who was deaf and mute is also a revelation of the divinity of Jesus. The healing of the man who was deaf and mute is also a revelation of the fact that what the Old Testament says God would do, Jesus now does himself, right, as an implicit revelation of the fact that he's not just the Messiah, he is the God of Israel who has come in person to set in motion a new exodus, to save his people and to bring them healing, and to bring them deliverance, and to begin the undoing of the effects of the fall of Adam and Eve, through which sin and suffering and death enter into human history and overtake the human race in all kinds of ways. Whether it be blindness or deafness or muteness, or any other malady, or just being under the power of the devil and the demonic, all these things Jesus is coming to undo in this inauguration of the new exodus and of the new creation.

One last element about Isaiah before we move on. You'll notice that it says water shall break forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert. You might be thinking well what does that mean? Well if you're a First Century Jew, when was the last time that streams of water broke forth in the desert? It was in the Book of Numbers 20 and the Book of Exodus 17 whenever Moses struck the rock to provide the water flowing for the people to quench their thirst. So the image of a stream in the desert is an exodus image, and it's not just an exodus image, it's an exodus image of one of the most memorable miracles from the exodus, which was the fact that God made water spring forth from a rock to give his people water in the desert. So Isaiah there is saying that when the new exodus takes place they're going to be miracles that echo the exodus of the Old Testament but there are also going to be new miracles like the healing of the blind, the giving of speech to the mute, and the giving of hearing to the deaf. So that's the context of that image right there, it's a new exodus image.

Okay, and in this case the Psalm is very clearly a bridge between the Old and New Testaments. The Responsorial Psalm for today is Psalm 146. The focus is on verses 7-10 and it's a Psalm of praise to the Lord, it's one of the hallelujah Psalms. Lots of

Psalms begin with *hallelujah*, which is the Hebrew for praise the Lord, and in verse seven of this Psalm it's praising the Lord. Why? Because he executes justice for the oppressed. He gives food to the hungry. And then it says:

The LORD sets the prisoners free;
the LORD opens the eyes of the blind.
The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down;
the LORD loves the righteous.

So who is it that sets people free, who brings healing? It's the Lord, and the Hebrew word there *YHWH*, the unpronounceable divine name, the Tetragrammaton, is the name, the personal name of God. So once again, what the Lord is doing in the Psalm is what Jesus is going to do in his public ministry because he is the Lord come in person, come in the flesh.

Alright, so the readings for today are a bit short, a little shorter than some other passages we've looked at from Mark, but that's really the essence of what's going on here. I'd like to bring it to a close with a short passage though from one of my favorite authors, St. Ephrem the Syrian. Just to give you an example of the fact that what I'm sharing with you in these videos...it's not stuff that I'm making up. I'm really trying to draw on the church's teaching, not just in the Catechism and in contemporary scholarship, but also with the writings of the ancient church fathers. And in this case, there's a beautiful quotation from St. Ephrem the Syrian. He was a Fourth Century writer living in the East in Syria. He wrote a number of wonderful hymns and commentaries and in this case he has a homily on this specific miracle from the Gospel of Mark, and I just want to read to you what he says about it, it's very beautiful. So Ephrem wrote this:

That power which may not be handled came down and clothed itself in members that may be touched, that the desperate may draw near to him, that in touch his humanity they may discern his divinity. For that speechless man the Lord healed with the fingers of his body. He put his fingers into the man's ears and touched his tongue. At that moment with fingers that may be touched, he touched the Godhead that may not be

touched. Immediately this loosed the string of his tongue, and opened the clogged doors of his ears. For the very architect of the body itself and artificer of all flesh had come personally to him, and with his gentle voice tenderly opened up his obstructed ears. *The One who immediately had given to Adam speech without teaching gave speech to him so that he could speak easily a language that is only learned with difficulty.*²

When I was reading that it really struck me because when I just read through the passage in preparing the video for the first time I really hadn't noticed just how important the element of touch was, but Ephrem puts his finger here on something really important. The fact that Christ touches the man isn't just a fulfillment of these Old Testament prophecies in Isaiah 35, it's also a revelation about the kind of God that we worship, right. That in Christ, the creator of the universe, the one who made us, wants to come into our lives and to touch us so that through his humanity we can touch the divinity that is untouchable, right. He also shows here too that just as in Genesis God creates Adam and gives him the power of speech, right, so too Christ, who is inaugurating the new creation, gives the power of speech to a man who's never even heard a human language, much less articulated it on his own. If you think, if you have your own children, you can think about the fact that it takes years for them to hear language spoken and to learn how to speak on their own, but in this case because Christ is omnipotent, because Christ in his divinity has all power, because he is the one who made the universe, he has the power to give this man speech in a moment, in an instant of time, and that's why the crowds recognize that. They say this guy not only does all things well, he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak, right.

So it's just something that I encourage you to ponder and pray with, the fact that our God, the God who has come to us in person in Christ, is a God who desires to touch us but who also, as St. Ephrem puts it, wants to be with us so that the desperate may draw near to him. I mean I just think about the suffering and the sadness, the sorrow, the isolation that this man who was deaf and mute must have experienced in his life. He must have lived a life that at least at moments was desperate, right, that was filled with desperation and pain and suffering, and yet

²Ephrem the Syrian, Homily on Our Lord 10; trans. NPNF 2, 13:309

Christ comes to him so that in touching his humanity he also is able to touch his divinity, to touch the very God who made the universe and who has the power to restore life to all of us, and will do so in the inauguration of the new creation in the resurrection from the dead.