

**Sermon**

Sunday 9 September 2018

Lessons

James 2: 1 – 10, 14 – 17

St Mark 7: 24 – 37

*Prayer of Illumination*

Let us pray.

Through sacrament and word, silence and music, bless our meditations. Above all, may we be at one with You: You in us and us in You. Amen.

Jesus journeyed from the Gentile region of Tyre by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee. As He made His way, a man was brought to Him; a man who was deaf and had a speech impediment. Those who brought the man begged Jesus that He might lay His hand on him. Jesus took the man aside to a private place where they could be alone, sheltered from the crowd. Once alone, Jesus put His fingers in the ears of the man, spat and touched the man's tongue. Then, looking up to heaven, Jesus sighed and said, 'Ephphatha', which means 'Be opened'. In that moment, the man's ears were opened, his tongue released and, for the first time, he spoke clearly. The writer of the Gospel concludes this story of Jesus: 'He even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to

‘speak’. To our ears, this is a strange, if not superstitious, story. It smacks of magic and sorcery. We will be rewarded if we delve deeper than the surface meaning.

However, let me begin with some context. Let us return for a moment to the ancient world and what it meant to be deaf or without the gift of distinct speech. Oral debate and dialogue were central features of both Greek and Jewish society. Within ancient Judaism, through speech and discussion, the Torah, *Torah from the mouth*, was passed from one generation to the next. Language was the hallmark of human achievement but to be deaf in the ancient world, to be deaf without speech, meant stupidity.

Following Aristotle, ancient Judaism also believed that people who were deaf had an inability to reason; they could not be educated. Excluded from so much of society, so much of life, exiled in a silent world, those who were deaf, the deaf-mute, were categorised with those who were mentally

ill. The deaf man, it seemed, lacked cognitive ability and moral reasoning. In the Gentile region of Tyre near Sidon, in a land permeated by Greek thought, a deaf man was brought to Jesus. Are we capable of truly imagining the man's intolerable isolation, stigmatization and shame; what it meant to be deaf in those days? On one interpretive level, this is an incredible story of the most profound inclusion. The Gospel does not record tears in the man's eyes but, if we have any empathy at all, we see them there.

If we engage with the story as faith narrative, as richly crafted mythology, what do we find? Jesus put His fingers into the man's ears. In the Book of Exodus, it was the finger of God which brought the plague of gnats to persuade Pharaoh to release the Hebrew people. Later, on Mount Sinai, Moses was given the tablets of stone inscribed with the covenant written by the finger of God. In Scripture, the finger of God is a metaphor of God's power.

In this spiritual writing, in the story of Jesus and the deaf man, we eavesdrop on an intimate, personal encounter.

This story is more than a chance meeting, a one-off physical healing. This is about you and me, about our isolation, our aloneness, and our intimate encounter with the Sacred, our meeting with Jesus. In public services, we enjoy worship together but on our own spiritual journey, on the inner journey, we meet Jesus alone. If we allow ourselves to go to that private space, that place away from the crowd, we too will meet the Christ. We too will experience the Presence.

It was in the world of silence that the man encountered Jesus. We are to use the story metaphorically; interpret it for ourselves. The Augustinian friar Benignus O'Rourke tells the story of a woman in the Orthodox tradition who had gone to her priest to ask for help with prayer. She complained that in all her years of praying she had never felt the presence of God. The priest told her to pray in the morning after breakfast. He said that she should place in

one corner an icon of Jesus on a table with a small lamp or candle beside it. She should have her chair with its back to the rest of the room. He told her to enjoy the peace of the room and have her knitting to hand. Some time later, the woman told the priest of sitting in her room, the clock ticking and everything feeling so still. She said she had to remind herself to knit before the face of God. As she knitted, she became more and more aware of the silence. She said:

[After a while,] the needles hit the armrest of my chair.....I had not need of straining myself. Then I perceived that this silence was not simply an absence of noise, but that the silence had substance. It was not an absence of something but a presence of something. The silence had a density, a richness, and it began to pervade me. The silence around began to come and meet the silence in me.

This is the spiritual truth, the priceless treasure, in the story of the deaf man with Jesus. In the silence he was touched by Jesus; the man felt the indescribable power of Presence. St Benedict said that we are to listen with 'the ear of the heart'. With spiritual imagination, this story is about discovering

Christ with in us, on our own journey, in our protected  
silence.

We find the same truth in Sufism, in the mystical tradition of  
Islam:

If you wish to find what you are looking for,  
remove that which hides your heart.

In Hinduism, we read of the path within:

Deluded, the musk deer searches everywhere  
for the origin of the fragrance,  
without realizing it lies within himself.....  
If you wish to find your home,  
look within.  
If you wish to find the Lord,  
seek Him within yourselves.  
This is true wisdom.

The Taoist writes:

If you want the treasure,  
don't look for it outside of yourself.  
You already carry it within,  
so why not use it without restraint?

In one late Egyptian manuscript, found some centuries after  
the Biblical canon was closed, we hear Jesus say:

The Kingdom is within you, and whoever knows oneself will find it. All those who find the kingdom will know that they are heirs of the Father. Know that you are in God and God is in you.

To the deaf man, Jesus said, 'Ephphatha', which means, 'Be opened'. The appellation *Buddha* comes from the verb *budh*, which means to wake up, to understand, to know what is happening in a very deep way. This is what Jesus said to the man in his silent world, to us in our in our times of sacred silence: be open, wake up, understand, and know what is happening, appreciate life in a very deep way. We are to let the Mystery, the Eternal Emptiness, fill us with shalom, with inexpressible peace.

Peter Russell, who began his intellectual life as an atheist and scientist, has grown to see the harmony between science and religion, and the spiritual unity deep within the world's great faith traditions. Russell writes:

Reducing mental activity, one can arrive at a point where all verbal thinking ceases. At this level of consciousness, one discovers a much deeper, all-

pervasive peace. Some call it bliss, others joy or serenity; but all agree that the pleasures of everyday life pale in comparison to this profound feeling of inner well-being.

Another quality that is found in this inner quiet is love....It is pure love, love without an object. It is 'being in love' in a new sense; one's whole being is bathed in love. [We discover] 'the peace of God that passeth all understanding' .....an all-pervading love.

Each of us is at a different stage of the inner journey. We are to be open, at one with the Holy One. In the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the mystic Meister Eckhart, intoxicated with the Spirit, said in a sermon, 'God and I are One'. Eckhart was brought before Pope John XXII and told to recant such heresy. In history, others have suffered a worse fate. The tenth-century Islamic mystic al-Hallāj was crucified for using language that claimed an identity, oneness, with God. Yet, oneness, unity, communion, each of us in God and God in us: that is the whole point of religion; that is the point of life.

Amen.