

Sermon preached at St Stephen's

6 September 2015

Readings: Isaiah 35: 1–7

Mark 7:24–37

“How well he does everything!” they exclaimed. “He even makes the deaf to hear and the dumb to speak.”

I can't hear. I assume everyone is talking about me.

I can't hear. Unless someone definitely makes it clear that I am being talked to, I assume everyone is leaving me out.

I can't hear. As far as most other people are concerned, for most of the time I needn't exist.

I can't hear. I judge by the way people look, the things they do, the way they touch, not by what they say.

Some of the bones in my ears do not function properly. That is the cause of a disability. It is a fact of life. It is not the cause of the handicaps I experience. Handicaps are what society and I make of it, and whether they are handicaps is largely a matter of other people's attitudes towards me.

Those reflections are our context for listening to this story of healing by Jesus. There was an Old testament vision which looked forward to a day when handicaps would be no more, not by the removal of the disabled, but by the overcoming of the disability. We know of stories of babies with disabilities being abandoned, not just in those ancient Middle Eastern societies, but in societies that do this in the twenty first century.

Are we any more enlightened here in New Zealand. We like to think so, but often our actions indicate we have not lost those attitudes. Place them in Homes, and make sure those Homes are not in my backyard. The vision that gets quotes of making the deaf hear and the dumb to speak comes from Isaiah 35:17 and includes the lame leaping and the blind seeing. These things will happen on the day of God's vengeance, the day God comes to rectify the injustices of society, a day of celebration for all those who have been cast to one side.

Where has this healing happened? Jesus has been around Galilee and goes up the coast to Tyre where he meets the SyroPhoenician woman. On leaving her, he goes back to Genessaret (another name for the Galilee region) by way of Sidon and the territory of the Ten Towns. That is like coming to Enderley from Raglan and going by way of Port Waikato and Cambridge. There's a reason for that though. Just prior to going to Tyre for a weekend at the beach, Jesus had argued with the Pharisees over what could defile a person. While there he got the opportunity to put into practice what he had been arguing with the Pharisees and others, though it took a little prompting from a gentile woman.

All these areas mentioned are the areas in Palestine where the populations of the Jews, Greeks and Syrians had all intermingled and were considered to be impure by the Pharisees and other religious leaders. They were areas which gave the authorities a good deal of trouble controlling the populations. They are areas far away from the respectable community of holiness. Here Jesus brings the healing promised in Isaiah to the very margins, to not only the disabled but also to the despised and useless places. God's 'vengeance' comes in a totally unexpected way through the actions of Jesus.

The future has become present; the handicaps are being dissolved, the barriers are being knocked down, out there in the borderlands. In the midst of this activity a group of people realise a new possibility exists and they bring this man to Jesus. A man who is deaf and who has difficulty in speaking. The word Mark uses is 'mogilalos', literally 'difficult to speak'. This word is only found in one other place in the Greek Bible and that is in this passage I have been referring to in Isaiah 35.

What happens next is a model for us in our reaching out with the gospel. First of all Jesus takes the man to one side, not his normal practice, but essential with deaf people. If you don't specifically make it clear you are trying to communicate with them, deaf people will often assume the message is for someone else. They are constant onlookers to other people's conversations. Jesus accepts the fact that this is a man who has been closed off from communication. Then he uses the methods which many in the deaf community use, touch and gesture. Using sign language he tells the man his intentions.

Jesus doesn't just use 'laying on of hands' that the man's friends requested, he draws the man into the healing process. Jesus doesn't work a miracle so much as he communicates, and in that communication healing comes. Then, after the touch and the spit he speaks. Mark says it is one word, but one word is all it takes. In Aramaic it is a lip readers gift. Ephphatha and it simply means Be opened, unblocked. It is an attack on the man's closedness. And as the man realises he can hear so his speech becomes clear.

What are the spin-offs that we can get from this? After all, Mark isn't simply telling another story about Jesus, but is wanting things to happen as a result of hearing about this. One is we can see ourselves in the people who brought the man to Jesus. The Church is the community of caring: bringing people to Jesus. Responding with compassion and calling on God to do what we have experienced ourselves in our lives for them, we are to reach out to those who have a handicap.

Second, the Church is the Body of Christ: it works as Jesus worked. It communicates with people in their terms, learns their language and uses that language to bring healing. It also crosses all boundaries and barriers. as the letter of James points out, we do not, should not make distinctions. If we show partiality, we sin.

Third, the Church is also part of the world: hoping and waiting for change. Sometimes the Church is also deaf and becomes the target for the divine opening treatment which comes patiently, appropriately, and rigorously.

And finally, the Church is the praising crowd, observing, recognising and celebrating God's justice and creative, healing activity. Like the crowd too, we should not heed the command of Jesus to be silent. The revealing of God's purposes breaks out with power and cannot be stopped.

Where are you in the story? Where would you like to be? And for us as a community, where are we and where would we like to be? I know there is a compassionate heart in this place. Did we, have we ever realised that when we exercise it we show the heart of God, and become agents of God's justice? However we might view our future and our place in Hamilton

The Word of Jesus is among us. The word is Ephphatha - be unleashed.