

Gospel Reflection for Sunday September 8th 2024 – 23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

By Fr Brian Maher OMI



“

...And amid all the fear and turmoil of our world, I have met a God “who does all things well...who makes the deaf hear and the mute speak.”

“Ephphatha” by Thomas Davison, 1872



*Sunday GOSPEL Reflection | By Fr Brian Maher OMI
23rd Sunday of Ordinary Time, 8th September 2024*

Gospel Reflection for Sunday September 8th 2024, 23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time | Mark 7:31-37

I have always been fascinated by how frequently the people of the Old Testament and even the Acts of the Apostles speak almost casually about God speaking to them. How frequently do we hear someone say, “*It is the Lord who speaks...*” or “*...the Lord said to me...*” as if it were an everyday occurrence. I wondered at times if God had stopped speaking to us in the way he/she spoke to those who went before us. Certainly we have become more cynical when it comes to hearing God speak to us and we are much happier saying, “it is Alexa...” or “It is Google...” or “It is X...” who speaks!

Yet, I am sure that if God spoke to our ancestors he speaks also to us. Perhaps the trouble is that we have become so used to getting instant answers to our questions (“Hey, Alexa, what is the present temperature on

the dark side of the moon?...’ try it!) that we are no longer prepared to think for ourselves, wait and then listen to the God who whispers to us in the breeze!

I begin with this musing because this week’s Gospel, I believe, is a very good example of how easily we can skip over “the word of the Lord...” and miss what that word is actually saying to us.

On first reading, this Gospel seems to be a nice, simple, uncomplicated cure of a man who is deaf and almost dumb. The story goes a bit like this... A caring and probably desperate family ask Jesus for help... Jesus listens and has compassion... he cures the man... the onlookers are “*overwhelmed with amazement*”... Wow! ... now let’s get on with the rest of our Sunday!

However, if we are prepared to pause and allow the questions hidden in the reading to come from within us; and if we are then prepared to reflect on those questions until we can ‘be there’ with Jesus in the story; and if we then invite God to speak to us in the same way that we invite Alexa or Siri or Google to speak to us; ...then I believe our God will speak to us... and we will be able to say with conviction, “It is the Lord who speaks...”

This week’s Gospel is found only in Mark’s Gospel. This, in itself, raises questions. It is generally believed that both Matthew and Luke had a copy of Mark’s Gospel when they came to write their own Gospels, maybe fifteen to twenty years after Mark. We must conclude, then, that they both decided not to include this miracle in their Gospels.

It is strange that they would do this, particularly since the healing is quite a dramatic one and making the ‘*deaf hear and the dumb speak*’ has strong resonances with the prophet Isaiah and God’s plan to save his people. This would have been an ‘attractive’ miracle for Matthew or Luke to include in their Gospels, yet they don’t!

This, for me, is fascinating. It may be totally unimportant but it makes me wonder if the story had some special significance for Mark, and further, if God is maybe saying something specific through him and to me (us).

This is not the only ‘strange’ thing about this Gospel. It raises other questions too.

Why, for instance, does Mark give us so much very specific information about the journey Jesus made from “*the vicinity of Tyre, through Sidon, down to the Sea of Galilee and into the region of the Decapolis.*” What is even stranger is that this entire journey seems to make no sense. As Mark tells it, Jesus’ destination was south-east of his starting point. Why then, does he set off due North, for no particular reason, before turning south and then east to his destination? In all, he travelled twice as far as he needed to travel, and since he was travelling on foot, he took twice as long to get there!

As if that is not strange enough, all of this journey is through Gentile lands, where he rarely ministered and where he would hardly be known. The people who brought the deaf man to Jesus would, almost certainly, not be Jews, and the man himself, living in a world of total silence, had probably never heard of Jesus.

It could well be that after the tensions and conflicts Jesus encountered from the Jewish authorities he simply needed a rest. Remember, the Pharisees, and their spies, were almost stalking Jesus, constantly questioning him, undermining his message and accusing him of breaking the Law of Moses. We can only imagine the stress he must have felt finding opposition waiting for him wherever he stopped. It might well be true that he was purposely avoiding Galilee in his journey.

The healing itself also raises questions. Not only does Mark give us the visceral details of the cure itself (putting spit on the man’s tongue, for example), but he also brings us into the mind of Jesus as he “*looks up to Heaven and sighs deeply*” before speaking.

I always imagined the miracles and healings of Jesus being associated with his ‘power’, but in this miracle the very act of healing seems to take a toll on Jesus. It is as if Jesus is himself vulnerable as he reaches out to heal the man.

There is a lot more than 'power' at work here. Alone with the man, Jesus sees and hears for himself the awful, absolute silence of the man's world. Somehow it seems that Jesus entered into, immersed himself, in the man's suffering and it was in this immersion that Jesus was able to cure him.

His deep sigh, almost a groan, and his cry of "*Ephphatha – Be Opened!*" was a cry of understanding as well as command.

For me this is 'new' and extraordinarily powerful. I have always focused on the Cross as Jesus' taking on the pain and suffering of the world. But in this miracle – in this 'deep sigh' of Jesus – we see that every time he cured someone, every time he encountered suffering and pain, he entered into it, understood it, accepted it, and in this way he healed it.

Yes, Jesus redeemed us through the Cross, but the Cross was so much more than one act on the hill of Calvary. Jesus entered into the suffering and silence of the deaf and dumb man...and of the blind...and lame...and lepers...the poor...the excluded...the sinners... and by entering into their pain he could heal and cure it.

The 'deep sigh' of Jesus in this Gospel is not the sigh of one who is distant from us. It is the sigh of one who is very close, near enough to understand, and have compassion; it is the sigh of one who can touch our deaf ears and our blind eyes and our dumb mouths and heal them.

In some mysterious way the deep sigh of Jesus and his cry, "*Ephphatha – Be Opened!*" was a cry for all humankind.

"He who sees me, sees the Father..." are words that sum up the very mission of Jesus on earth. If, in this week's Gospel, we see a Jesus who is close to us, entering into our pain in order to heal it, then so too, in this Gospel, we encounter a God who is not distant from us or indifferent to our pain and suffering.

Ours is a God who is with us every day, in all of our deafness and lack of speech ... and in our blindness ... and our paralysis and sin... and in all of it he "*sighs deeply and cries Ephphatha – Be Opened!*"

This awareness of a God who is close seems to be something all of the great mystics had. Speaking about prayer, Teresa of Avila said, *"...Prayer is not a kind of spiritual optional extra, but an affirmation of the extraordinary reality that God is accessible to human beings in a personal, one-to-one relationship."* Even more simply. Julian of Norwich said, *"...Between God and the soul there is no between."*

At the very end of the Gospel those who witnessed the miracle *"were overwhelmed with amazement."*

They were Gentiles, despised by the Jews, yet it was they who were able to say what the Jewish authorities could not say: *"He has done everything well ... He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak."* The Kingdom of God is for everyone – Jews, Gentiles, Greeks, Romans, slaves, free, poor, wealthy, you, me, us.

We live today in a time of uncertainty and political and cultural volatility, and it is easy to become overwhelmed and lose hope. In these times this Gospel can speak to us very powerfully.

In Jesus we have someone who *"has done everything well, ... He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak."*

And so, back to my original question: "Does God speak to us today as he spoke to our ancestors?"

I have seen a 'new' face of God this week. I have met a God who enters into my pain and suffering, my betrayals and failures, my loneliness and isolation, and in so doing he heals them.

And amid all the fear and turmoil of our world, I have met a God *"who does all things well..... who makes the deaf hear and the mute speak."*

This is a God I can trust; a God who sighs deeply on my behalf, and who cries out, "Ephphatha, Be Opened!"

Yes, indeed, this week "...the Lord spoke to me..." Amen.

Many thanks,

Brian.

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Gospel Mark 7:31-37

'He makes the deaf hear and the dumb speak'

Returning from the district of Tyre, Jesus went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, right through the Decapolis region. And they brought him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they asked him to lay his hand on him. He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, put his fingers into the man's ears and touched his tongue with spittle. Then looking up to heaven he sighed; and he said to him, 'Ephphatha', that is, 'Be opened.' And his ears were opened, and the ligament of his tongue was loosened and he spoke clearly. And Jesus ordered them to tell no one about it, but the more he insisted, the more widely they published it. Their admiration was unbounded. 'He has done all things well,' they said 'he makes the deaf hear and the dumb speak.'

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