Ephphatha, Be opened!

Mark 7:31. Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. 32 They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. 33 He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. 34 Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, “Ephphatha,” that is, “Be opened.” 35 And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. 36 Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. 37 They were astounded beyond measure, saying, “He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.”

Initial Observations

This story takes place in Gentile territory and portrays Jesus as a missionary, giving hearing and speech. In contrast to his disciples and other fellow Jews (who hear but do not listen), this deaf and dumb Gentile becomes a herald of God’s mighty deeds in Jesus.

Old Testament Background

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert. (Isa 35:5-6)

Therefore the righteous plundered the ungodly; they sang hymns, O Lord, to your holy name, and praised with one accord your defending hand; for wisdom opened the mouths of those who were mute, and made the tongues of infants speak clearly. (Wis 10:20-21)

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. (Ps 146:7-8)

What kind of writing is this?

This is a regular healing story with the following format:
1. There is a sick person, whose symptoms are described
2. Jesus and the sick person meet
3. A gesture is made, often with an accompanying healing word
4. The cure is immediate
5. Various reactions are registered

All the above “moments” are present in this story. What is intriguing here is that a Gentile is brought by Gentiles to Jesus. Gentiles were those to whom the word of God had not been given: He declares his word to Jacob, his statutes and ordinances to Israel. He has not dealt thus with any other nation; they do not know his ordinances. (Ps 147:19-20)

New Testament Foreground

The only other story that resembles this one in Mark is the cure of the epileptic boy in chapter 9, which closes with this scene:

Immediately the father of the child cried out, “I believe; help my unbelief!” When Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, “You spirit that keeps this boy from speaking and hearing, I command you, come out of him, and never enter him again!” After crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, “He is dead.” But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he was able to stand (Mark 9:24-28)

St Paul

Moses writes concerning the righteousness that comes from the law, that “the person who does these things will live by them.” But the righteousness that comes from faith says, “Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’” (that is, to bring Christ down) “or ‘Who will descend into the abyss?’” (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? “The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe
in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. The scripture says, “No one who believes in him will be put to shame.” For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. For, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” (Rom 10:5-13)

Brief Commentary

Verse 31 A glance at the map will show just how odd the directions for the journey are. Sidon is 20 miles north of Tyre and the Decapolis lies east and southeast of the Sea of Galilee. Perhaps another indication that Mark is unfamiliar with the Holy Land? Tyre is mentioned a few times in this Gospel (Mark 3:8; 7:24, 31). The Decapolis (lit. the Ten Cities) is also mentioned earlier in Mark (Mark 5:20). If Mark were written in Syria, he may simply have wished to place stories in the vicinity of his audience.

Verse 32 The description is very complete and in the right order—perhaps he had an impediment in his speech because he was deaf? In rabbinic sources, a deaf person is often placed in the category of the mentally ill, i.e., someone who is excused from keeping the Law. The laying on of hands is a traditional gesture. Saliva was thought, according to Pliny, to have healing power. This healing is one of the Markan stories omitted by Matthew and Luke. This could have been because their copies of the Gospel did not contain this tale. However, it is more likely that they were wary of the “magical” elements and so chose to leave it out.

Verse 33 The physical gestures would not have surprised Jesus’ contemporaries. Healing stories are common in Hellenistic writings and often the healer uses some such action or gesture.

Verse 34 Looking up to heaven is a gesture of prayer. Sighing was thought to indicate the drawing down of spiritual power. The healing word is spoken in Aramaic, a witness attesting the original language of the oral tradition and the antiquity of the story. “Be opened” applies to both the man’s ears and his mouth. There may be reference to Is 42:6-7 and 49:8-9.

Verse 35 As often in Mark, the immediacy of the cure is evidenced. Mark has the sequence of the cure exactly right: cause, benefit, proof.

Verse 36 This command is often disobeyed in Mark: 1:34, 44, 45; 7:24. It is probable that the historical Jesus was wary of misunderstandings in relation to what kind of Messiah he was called to be. It is also probable that Mark has increased the command to silence as a theme in his Gospel, the so-called “Messianic Secret”. It is an attempt to answer the question, how was it that after all the preparation, the chosen people did not in reality recognise Jesus at all? The (difficult) answer is, in order that salvation might be opened to the Gentiles. Cf. Romans 11. At the level of the narrative, the contrast between the command (36a) and the spontaneous reaction of the crowds (36b) creates a strong effect of irony. Asking a man who has just recovered the power to speech to be silent seems a little harsh!

Verse 37 Being astounded is part of the reaction of the crowd in Mark. Apparently engaged, astonishment turns out to be a static reaction, actually going nowhere.

The quotations echo Isaiah 35:3-4 and Wisdom 10:21. “He has done everything well” echoes similar statements elsewhere, such as: God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. (Gen 1:31) “All the works of the Lord are very good, and whatever he commands will be done at the appointed time.” (Sir 39:16)

Pointers for Prayer

1. The healing of the deaf mute provides us with an opportunity to reflect on the importance of communication in our lives. The healing touch of Jesus brought the man from isolation into community. Who have been the people who touched you when you felt isolated and alone and helped you to come out of painful aloneness? For whom have you done this?

2. Deafness is symbolic of being unable to hear what is being said to us. What a difference when our ears are opened! Perhaps you can recall a time when your ears were opened and you heard in a new way that you were loved - by God or by another person.

3. Words are not the only form of communication. Actions can speak louder than words. Recall times when this was brought home to you.

4. Being able to say what is in you is the other side of communication. Perhaps there have been occasions when you have struggled to find words to express what is deepest in you—your faith, your values, your love. Then something changed and you found the words. What was it like to be able to express your deepest self?

Prayer

Open our ears to your redeeming word and move our hearts by the strength of your love, so that our every word and work may proclaim as Messiah, Jesus the Lord, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.
The ears of the deaf shall be unstopped

Is. 35:4 Say to those who are of a fearful heart, “Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you.”

5 Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams and 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.

Initial Observations

The reading is perhaps familiar from its use in Handel’s Messiah (the NRSV retains the quaint “unstopped” from the Authorised Version - are we to think of organ stops?). It is a vision of reversal of fortune, so exultant and reassuring that we can hardly dare believe it. To enjoy the reading, why not read all of Is 35 (it is quite short)?

Where does the reading come from?

Our reading comes from First Isaiah, that is chapters 1-39 reflecting generally the work of Isaiah of Jerusalem, a prophet with a profound sense of the holiness of God. Like other prophets, this Isaiah is dealing with political and religious collapse. His message, however, is to trust the process, that is, trust that God is bringing about renewal of his people through very difficult circumstances.

First Isaiah may be appreciated using the following outline:

I. Isaiah 1 –12: Judah and Jerusalem will be condemned and saved. Assyria is God’s instrument.

II. 13–23: Oracles concerning Foreign Nations Isaiah

III. 24–27: Judgment on the Entire World Isaiah

Old Testament Background

Using a different range of images, the message of Is 35 resembles that of Is 32.

For the palace will be forsaken, the forest deemed a forest. Then justice will dwell in the wilderness, and righteousness abide in the fruitful field. The effect of righteousness will be peace, and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever. My people will abide in a fruitful field, and the fruitful field is a straight path in the wilderness, and righteousness will be peace, and the city will arise forever, justice will well up, and righteousness will look on it. Then the blind shall be a第一 reading prepare for the Gospel?

The promise of salvation from the first reading is chosen to point to the healing of the deaf man in the Gospel. In Greek, the word salvation also means healing and so the healing miracles of Jesus are to be read as metaphors for the healing we find in Christ’s death and resurrection. In that light, the various images can be explored, both those from nature and from medicine.
THE WORD OF GOD

Brief Commentary
Verse 4 This reassurance is the central message of Isaiah, reaffirmed here (Is 7:4; 8:12; 10:24; 12:2). “Here is your God” (cf. Is 40:9). Vengeance here means restorative justice. In our passage, vengeance is in parallel with recompense, and so it means more to undo a wrong than to take revenge.

Verse 5 There are two levels here. There is the blindness and deafness of those who reject God’s message (6:9-10). At the same time, “blind”, “lame”, “deaf” and “dumb” resemble names for four heavenly beings (“gods”), holding people in thrall (cf. 2 Sam 5:6; Ps 51:8; Is 3:3). Their power is likewise at an end.

Verse 6 The leaping of the deer seems effortless in its agility and grace. Likewise, not only shall the dumb speak, they will sing for joy.

Verse 7 The poetry is powerful here: who has not felt the burning sand? Here the regular autumn transformation is “writ large”: the desert shall become an oasis. The haunt of jackals is the desert, again turned into its opposite.

Pointers for Prayer
1. The invitation to be strong is really an acknowledgement of fear and anxiety. Can you remember times in the past when you have needed the deep reassurance of faith? The same God is with us today, offering the same gift of “being with us always”.

2. We are all at different times deaf and blind—to others, to God, to our inner selves. Let us ask God to open our ears to his word, our hearts to his love, our lives to our neighbour.

3. The thirsty ground suddenly awash with life-giving water is an appealing image of transformation. Can I name my own need of God in my life? God is simply waiting for us to open our selves to life abundant, if only we say our “yes” to his constant “yes” in Jesus. Cf. For in him every one of God’s promises is a “Yes.” For this reason it is through him that we say the “Amen,” to the glory of God. (2 Cor 1:20)

Prayer
God of the autumn rains, come to us with your gifts of refreshment and new life. Take us to the oasis of your word, so that, knowing at your hands life in abundance, we may open our mouths and sing for joy. We make our prayer through your Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.

Sunday Introductions
First Reading
Isaiah 35:4-7
We are all deaf at times—even to the people we love, to God’s word, and to our inner hungers. This reading is an invitation to hear again words of life and encouragement.

Second Reading
James 2:1-5
Do we or do I favour people according to social class and wealth? The straight-talking reading from James should put us straight on that one!

Gospel
Mark 7:31-37
This Gospel story—unique to Mark—is evoked at Baptism, when the minister touches the ears and mouth of the newly-baptised and even says the word “Ephphata” (be opened). At our own Baptism, we were all touched on the ear and the mouth. In this way, we are in the story and we are invited to see ourselves in the man who was cured.

Weekday Introductions
Monday 10 September
1 Corinthians 5:1-8
Paul can be shocked by the behaviour of the Corinthians and in this reading he really is taken aback. Of course, he doesn’t hold back either! Paul is motivated by the vision of our new life in Christ, our passover.

Tuesday 11 September
1 Corinthians 6:1-11
All communities experience conflict and Christ was no exception. In this reading, Paul tries to apply the teaching of Jesus on how to resolve situations of confrontation. The heart of conflict resolution is conversion and Paul insists on change of heart through the Holy Spirit.

Wednesday 12 September
1 Corinthians 7:25-31
With the current discussion of the celibacy of the clergy, we will listen to this reading in a special way. Paul imposes nothing and freedom is the watchword. Paul himself has chosen celibacy for the same of the Gospel and because the urgency of the proclamation involves some sacrifice of what is good.

Thursday 13 September
1 Corinthians 8:1-7,11-13
In the time of St Paul, poor people used to eat the meat left over from pagan sacrifices. For Christians, this became a problem—was it okay? Some people says yes and others no. Paul invites the people of mature conscience to respect the sensitivities of the “weak” members.

Friday 14 September
The Exaltation of the Holy Cross
Numbers 21:4-9
This reading is chosen because the Gospel refers to it. Symbolically, it presents something which is true to experience: when something is troubling us in any way, the solution is to face it.

Phil 2:6-11
For the feast, we read an early Christian hymn. Even though very old, it can still move us today as we reflect on all God has done for us in Jesus’ death and resurrection.

John 3:13-17
The Gospel takes up the arresting image of the bronze serpent. It is a metaphor: Christ looked death in the face for us. We are the woe people, and heavens opened as he faced us again. We see him who was destroyed on the cross, and in his death and resurrection, we are made to trust what the Spirit promised us today: life abundant, now at home with Jesus Christ the Lord.