Jesus said to him, “Ephphatha,” that is, “Be opened”

Mark 7:31 Then Jesus 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, restoring hearing and speech. In contrast to his disciples and other fellow Jews (who hear but do not listen), this deaf and mute Gentile becomes a herald of God’s mighty deeds in Jesus.

KIND OF WRITING
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)

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND
Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be 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)

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.

Thought for the day
The five senses enable us to engage with others, with the world and with reality in general. We realise their significance when for whatever reason our senses no longer “work” as well as before.

The senses are also used in a transferred meaning, especially hearing and seeing, to point to faith.

Hence it is that at Baptism a special and quite beautiful prayer is said over the newly baptised. It is prayer we can use again and again all our lives.

Prayer (from the rite of Baptism)
The Lord Jesus made the deaf hear and the dumb speak. May he soon touch your ears to receive his word, and your mouth to proclaim his faith, to the praise and glory of God the Father. Amen.
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 some 32km 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) was 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 rabbinc 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 possibly have been because their copies of the Gospel did not contain this tale. However, it is more like that they were wary of the “magical” elements and therefore 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 49b-9.

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

**Verse 36** This command is often disobeyed in Mark: 1:34, 44, 45; 7:24. It is probable that the historical Jesus was indeed 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 recognize 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 (v. 36a) and the spontaneous reaction of the crowds (v. 36b) creates a strong effect of irony. Asking a man who has just recovered the power to speech to be silent seems on the harsh side!

**Verse 37** Being astounded is part of the reaction of the crowd in Mark. Appar-ently 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.
Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith?

Jas 2:1 My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favouritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? 2 For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, 3 and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, “Have a seat here, please,” while to the one who is poor you say, “Stand there,” or, “Sit at my feet,” 4 have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? 5 Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? 6 But you have dishonoured the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? 7 Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

James manages to be both clear and uncomfortable. His plain illustration of discrimination, taken from his own time and culture, really fits any period in social history and any society—not excluding our beloved hierarchical church!

KIND OF WRITING

James 1:2-27 provides an epitome of the teaching of this letter, which is subsequently expounded and explored in the following chapters. The teaching of James 2:9-11 is now presented more amply. Our verses come from a “warning against partiality.”


ORIGIN OF THE READING

A three-fold context helps us to measure the impact of the teaching in this passage. In the background, you have the teaching of Jesus in the social setting of Galilee of his time. Later, the tensions between the rich and the poor were exacerbated in the catastrophie of the Jewish War (AD 66-73). Finally, towards the end of the first century and in the following century, small holdings were being swallowed up into grand estates, creating a mass of urban poor. Hence, the hostility of this letter towards the rich (see below).

RELATED PASSAGES

Let the believer who is lowly boast in being raised up, and the rich in being brought low, because the rich will disappear like a flower in the field. For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the field; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. It is the same way with the rich; in the midst of a busy life, they will wither away. (James 1:9–11)

Then he looked up at his disciples and said: “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. (Luke 6:20)

Come now, you rich people, weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you. Your riches have rotted, and your clothes are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have rusted, and their rust will be evidence against you, and it will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure for the last days. Listen! The wages of the labourers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You have lived on the earth in luxury and in pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered the righteous one, who does not resist you. (James 5:1–6)

You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbour. (Leviticus 19:15)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 1 Notice the perfectly inclusive and egalitarian address at the start. The way this rhetorical question is framed in Greek, the expected answer is a plain no. As a result, the question is not really as open as it might appear and it leads directly to the illustration which follows. Curiously, this is only the second [and final] mention of Jesus in the letter. Discrimination is sometimes contrasted with God’s impartiality but the tension here is with faith in Jesus Christ.

Verse 2-3 Assembly here is literally synagogue. At this point in the evolution of Christianity, this need not mean an exclusively Jewish gathering. Ekklesia and synagōgē continued in use until the third century (e.g. Ignatius, Polycarp 4:2 Let meetings (= synagogues) be held more fre-quent; seek out everyone by name.). We are to imagine a meeting of the local community / synagogue at the moment when two visitors enter. The tone of invitation is adjusted according to the perception of each visitor, the one polite, oleaginous, the other brusque, discourteous.

Verses 4 After all the imperatives, the writer switches to a penetrating question. This time, the way the question is formed leads to the expected answer yes (further questions appear in vv. 5–7). Two stages are imagined: becoming judges in action and having an evil disposition. A few verses later, we read: You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. (James 2:8–9) No community really ever fully evades the critique here, so James is always up-to-date.

Verse 5 The inclusive address is repeated and intensified with the addition of beloved. The following questions allow a very little wiggle room. Reversal of status was part of Jesus’ teaching: Mat 19:30 (= Mark 10:31). The poor in the world are really rich in the faith. Cf. We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. (2 Cor 8:1–2)

POINTERs FOR Prayer

1. It is always possible that we ourselves have been discriminated against, on the basis of appearance, role and presentation. How did you feel?

2. We all make distinctions—just instinct and the art of survival. When did you last catch yourself doing the kind of thing illustrated here? Was there any sense of unease or tension?

3. It seems to be true that economically advantaged people have a harder time with the faith. The Germans have a saying: “Wealth spoils faith” (Wohlstand verdichtet den Glauben).

PRAyER

Faithful God, we know and believe in our hearts that you show no partiality. Help us to rise above our natural inclination to make distinctions between persons and joyfully to recognise all as our brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ, 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;

6  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;

7  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 Isaiah 35 (it is quite short)?

KIND OF WRITING

The reading is poetry, as it plain from the layout. V. 4a is thematic. V. 4bc shows the usual parallelism. V. 5 begins to use healing metaphors. V. 6a touches on what we may called impediments or handicaps. V.6b, perhaps inspired by the metaphor of the deer, begins to speak of nature. V. 6c talks about making the desert into an oasis and that continues into v. 7. It may well be that the poetry was inspired by the arrival of the autumn rains after the scorching summer.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

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
IV. 28 –33: Judah and Jerusalem in Confrontation with Assyria and Egypt Isaiah
V. 34 –35: Salvation for Judah and Doom for their Enemies
VI. 36–39: Historical Accounts of Isaiah, Hezekiah, and Jerusalem

Our reading comes from section V, offering consolation and hope. There are signs that this particular reading should be linked really with Second Isaiah and the images found in it resemble those of Is 40, as does the “theology” of the return as a new exodus. All of chapter 35 constitutes an exultant proclamation of God’s fidelity and offer of salvation.

RELATED PASSAGES

For the palace will be forsaken, the populous city deserted; the hill and the watchtower will become dens forever, the joy of wild asses, a pasture for flocks; until a spirit from on high is poured out on us, and the wilderness becomes a fruitful field, and the fruitful field is 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 peaceable habitation, in secure dwellings, and in quiet resting places. The forest will disappear completely, and the city will be utterly laid low. Happy will you be who sow beside every stream, who let the ox and the donkey range freely. (Is 32:14–20)

In the same spirit as Is 35, there is delightful passage in Jeremiah 31:7-9.

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, but they will also sing for joy.

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

POINTER 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.

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 lift up our as we rely on Jesus, who lives and reigns forever and ever. Amen.
**THE LITURGY**

*Isaiah 35:4-7; Psalm 146 (145); James 2:1-5; Mark 7:31-37*

**READINGS 1 AND 3**

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 saving death and resurrection.

**THE RESPONSORIAL PsALM**

Psalm 146 (145) takes up the themes and metaphors of the reading, so it is very suitable. This God, “who keeps faith for ever,” is the one “who gives sight to the blind, who raises up those who are bowed down.”

**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 *Ephphatha* (be opened). We are in the story and we are invited to see ourselves in the man who was cured.

**WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS**

**Monday 9 September**
*St Ciaran of Clonmacnoise, abbot*

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 10 September**
*St Peter Claver, priest and missionary*

1 Corinthians 6:1-11

Conflict is normal in communities of faith, and was frequent in Corinth. Nevertheless, Paul is shocked that they take each other to court to resolve issues. It should be possible to overcome such difficulties within the community but this is not always the case.

**Wednesday 11 September**
*St John Chrysostom, bishop and doctor*

1 Corinthians 7:25-31

In St Paul’s mind, the witness of celibacy is appropriate to the nature of the times and can be practical. In any case, he is not against getting married and may well have been married himself at an earlier stage of his life.

**Thursday 12 September**
*St Paul of Thebes, bishop*

1 Corinthians 8:1-7, 11-13

Food sacrifices to idols may seem remote. The question really is how much may a Christian compromise with the surrounding culture while still being true to Jesus and his teaching.


Compassion is a great ideal, found in the major religions: Judaism, Islam and Buddhism. Our Gospel portray the peculiarly Christian understanding of compassion.

**Friday 13 September**
*St John Chrysostom, bishop and doctor*

1 Corinthians 9:16-19, 22-27

St Paul does try to answer one question: why did he take no money for himself? Not taking money did get him into trouble because the communities felt indebted to him and wanted to express their gratitude. Refusing such help shamed them and they felt it. At the end he uses metaphors from athletics, running etc.


A very energetic series of images all point to the same teaching. Having been a carpenter, Jesus knew all about splinters and planks. There is a possibility that this earnest teaching was offered with a smile on the lips!!

**Saturday 14 September**
*The Exaltation of the Holy Cross*

Numbers 21:4-9

This strange, magical story has several layers. One layer is symbolic: snakes stand for life and death; another layer is therapeutic: when we face what harms us we diminish its hold over us. Our Gospel makes us of the same metaphor.

Philippians 2:6-11

You may have wondered where did Paul get all his knowledge and understanding. Partly from already existing traditions. In our reading, he quotes at length an early Christian hymn celebrating Jesus’ death and resurrection, the “great events that gave us new life in Christ.”

John 3:13-17

In our reading, the notion of “lifting up” looks backwards and forwards. Backwards: to the story we had in the first reading. Forwards, to Jesus’ own lifting up in death and into resurrection, so that we might have life in him. By his facing death, we are healed of its power and even of the fear of death itself.

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**UNDAY 23B**

8 September 2024

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