

Proper 18B – “And they brought to him a man who was deaf and had an impediment in his speech.” Mk. 7.32

Many have the impression that the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ life and ministry are collections of miscellaneous sayings and actions of Jesus career. They may have some order imposed on them by virtue of their chronological progression from his birth to his death and resurrection. But besides this sequence there is little thought given to their arrangement.

However, the true state of the Gospels is quite different. Each of the Evangelists (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) carefully crafted their works to impart the maximum meaning to the events that they had included in their accounts of Jesus’ life and ministry. A case in point is our Gospel today as it relates to our Gospel appointed for last week. The theme begins with Jesus being questioned by the religious officials who had come down from Jerusalem to inquire about the character of this popular teacher and the substance of his message. Instead of asking him probing questions about his thoughts about the nature of God, they asked him very practical questions about why it

was that his disciples (the ones who should know his teaching the best) were not keeping the traditions of the elders. They were not observing the purity codes that marked out the pious Jew from the rest of the Jews and the world. Those who kept the purification traditions were saying that they expected the kingdom of God to come at any moment and wanted to be ritually pure when he arrived. But Jesus responded that they were mistaken for two reasons. The first was that their traditions had the effect of nullifying the Law that God himself had given them. Their second mistake was that they didn't realize that impurity was not on the skin but in the heart. Jesus' conclusion was that anyone (Jew and Gentile alike) could be pure if they simply followed him in faith and love.

This was a controversial statement and another in a long list of controversial moments between Jesus and his opponents that Mark included in his Gospel. Jesus had talked the talk about all things being made clean by his ministry. There was no person now that was unclean by their nationality and could not come to enjoy the kingdom of God. He had talked the talk, but would Jesus walk the walk? Would he act upon this scandalous teaching and bring relief to the Gentiles?

Mark didn't leave us wondering too long. Mark wrote that as soon as he had finished his dispute with the Scribes and Pharisees that he went on retreat to Tyre and Sidon, a gentile land. There he healed the daughter of a Greek woman who expressed great faith. Then he went around his home region and arrived at another gentile region, the Decapolis, which was on the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee. There they brought to him a deaf and dumb man so that he might heal him. Jesus had spoken to the crowds saying to them that there was nothing any longer that could make a man impure from the outside. To show that this was most certainly true, he had gone and had healed the poor and sick among the gentiles. Like Elijah and Elishah before him, he had gone outside the bounds of the holy nation, Israel, and had brought healing and peace to those who were outside the people of God.

So let us consider the miracle that Jesus performed among the unclean of the Decapolis. Jesus and his disciples returned south from a private retreat to the gentile side of the Galilean Sea. Yet even here, among a people separated from the Jews not only by a wide lake but by nationality, Jesus was a celebrity. His fame had spread so widely that even here the people brought out their sick to him so that he

might touch them. More particularly, they brought to him a man that could not hear and thereby had a speech impediment. So Jesus took him aside and put his fingers in his ears and then spat on his hand and touched his tongue. Then Jesus prayed to his Father in heaven, and said, “Be opened.” Immediately, the man could hear and his speech, so garbled and confused, was now clear and intelligible. Then he told the man to keep his healing a secret. But the man, overflowing with joy, proclaimed it to everyone. And the crowds were amazed because he even had power to restore the power of hearing and speech. Jesus had come to an unclean people, and had healed an unclean and broken man in the midst of that unclean people. Before he had declared all foods clean. Now in his healing he has declared all men clean. There is not a tongue, people or nation that cannot receive the message of the Gospel or the gift of the Spirit. There is not a one who is too far removed from the grace of God that he cannot reach them by his mighty arm.

Yet, while each of Jesus’ mighty works is magnificent in its power and mercy, we should not neglect the joyful Messianic message that is included here. It is true that Jesus performed many and various miracles and cured a multitude of diseases. Nevertheless, Mark

intended to draw the reader's attention to one thing in particular as he included the healing of the deaf mute. He is referring to Isaiah's prophecy detailing the signs that would accompany the arrival of the Messiah. For Isaiah wrote, "Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you." Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy." Isaiah's prophecy foretold of the sad decline of the people of Israel until they finally would be taken away into exile in Babylon. They had lost their first love. They had worshipped false gods. They had oppressed the poor. They had forgotten the God who had given them their land and their salvation. But Isaiah would not leave them in despair. Instead, he prophesied that the exile would end. God would forgive their sins and restore them to their land. They had become unclean in their sins and had been taken away into captivity in an unclean land. But he would find them, deaf and mute in a foreign land, and he would restore them to health and to their former position as his beloved. What would be the sign that he had come into their midst? How would they know that their sins had been

forgiven and that their exile was at an end? The deaf man would hear, the mute man would speak, and the lame man would dance with joy.

But that is not all! No, the mercies of the Lord at the day of his coming would not be reserved to Israel only. No! The prophets had said that when the Lord finally vindicated his people in the sight of the nations and had forgiven them their sins, then all nations would be brought into the knowledge and love of God. What do we find here, then, in our Gospel lesson from Mark? It would have been a clear enough indication of the arrival of the Messianic age had a deaf and dumb been healed. But this deaf and dumb man is no Jew. He is a gentile. In one event, the healing of an unclean foreigner, Jesus showed that he was the Lord's messiah and that in him the whole world was being brought back from captivity to sin and that the kingdom of God had arrived in him.

There is nothing that concerns us more directly and continuously than our health. The billions of dollars that we as Americans spend on healthcare each year indicates the priority we place on fighting disease and improving our quality of life. Jesus himself grieved and sighed at the suffering he saw gathered around him as he walked the

Judean countryside. But it would be a mistake to say that Jesus' ministry was about healthcare. If it was then it was a failure. Not only did he not cure all of the crowds of all of their diseases, but he did not address the needs of the millions who lived outside the bounds of his native Israel. No, the healing miracles served to point to a greater mystery. The true God, the God of Israel, had returned in this man Jesus. He had come to bring forgiveness to those who had suffered the punishment of God for their wickedness. They had gone into exile. Now Jesus was announcing that the exile was over.

How many of us this day have lived lives in exile from God and our neighbors? How many have been the slaves of the world the flesh and the devil? How many of us have lived lives in which our ears have been shut to the sound of God's Holy Spirit and our voices have been muted so that we will not give him praise and worship for his grace and beauty? How many? Paul wrote that we all were! To the Ephesians he wrote, "And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience." We who were enslaved to sin were the most unclean – we were dead! And we were following in the paths of that

unclean spirit, Satan himself. But it pleased God that we might be brought home from exile. He would not allow us to remain scattered about like so many dry bones in the valley of death. Again Paul, this time writing to the Colossians, said, “He has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.” We had all been in exile, like the Israelites in Babylon, bound under the dominion of darkness. But now we have been ransomed by Christ’s death upon the cross. We who were slaves have been bought by a new master, Jesus himself, and we have been given an eternal inheritance. We have been forgiven!

All I have left is but to ask what our reaction to this passage from darkness to light shall be? For when Jesus healed the deaf mute man he would not be silent. Though the Lord of life, and creator of the heavens and the earth bid him to keep his remedy to himself, he ran through the streets telling the crowds all the more! Perhaps Jesus shouldn’t have told him anything at all. Then the man might not have been such an evangelist. But we must say that this man’s joy overflowed like a torrent because he had received a great victory at the Lord’s hands. Even so the Psalmist wrote, “When the Lord

restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. The Lord has done great things for us; and we are glad!” Such joy, from such a man! Have we received any less? I allow that few of us here were deaf mutes. But have we not been given everlasting life? Have we not been made sons and heirs and given a heavenly inheritance? Indeed we have. And yet we are more modest in our joy than this man. Let us instead share this man’s enthusiasm. Let us be irresistible in our praises of him, here and in our homes and in our workplaces. Let us tell everyone about how good our God is! Let us not be ashamed, for who can complain when he has become the king’s son? No let us praise him and make his deeds known among the nations. AMEN