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Isaiah 35:4-7a; James 2:1-10, 14-17; Mark 7:24-37

I can't claim to have got the Aramaic pronunciation correct, but it's fairly evident - even from seeing it written on the page - what a wondrously explosive word Jesus said to this deaf, mute man: 'Ephphatha!' And this is but part of one of the most vividly flamboyant healings by Jesus, unique to Mark's Gospel, which is otherwise brief and almost understated in style. The man's ears are 'opened', his tongue is 'released', and he now speaks 'plainly'. In the original text, the extremely rare word used to describe the man's speech defect, *mogilalos* - which is not what would be used if he were 'dumb' in the strict sense - is the same as that found in the Greek version of the passage from Isaiah we heard earlier, to mean 'speechless'. This is fairly clear evidence that the writer of the Gospel saw this healing as a direct fulfilment of that prophecy: 'then the...ears of the deaf [shall be] unstopped... and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy' (*Isaiah 35:5-6*). The reaction of the astonished onlookers substantiates this, as they're heard to say, "He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak" - the opening words of which seem to echo the account of God's creation of the world in the first chapter of Genesis, when God repeatedly looked upon his work, 'and it was good'.

What may not seem so 'good' to us - with our acute sense, now, of political correctness - is the way Jesus addresses the Gentile woman from Syropheonicia earlier in that same passage from Mark. Jesus enters a largely Gentile territory, Tyre, and a female inhabitant there feels, not surprisingly perhaps, encouraged to ask him to heal her daughter - to deliver her of a demon, or an 'unclean spirit'. However we look at it, and despite the Evangelist softening the term into a diminutive (some Commentators translate the offending word into 'puppies' or even 'doggies') Jesus actually uses a traditional Jewish term of racial abuse to this woman: 'Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs'. This jars against our natural sense of equity and justice - after all, doesn't the epistle of James, as we heard, encourage Christians to accept all people regardless of birth, wealth or social status?

The fact is that, at this stage of his ministry, though Jesus visited Gentile territory, he was aiming his message to fellow Jews who were dispersed in these regions outside Jerusalem. When he commissions his apostles in the Gospel of Matthew, he instructs them to go not 'among the Gentiles...but rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel'. Even St Paul -

whose whole later career, following his conversion to Christ, was as ‘the apostle to the Gentiles’ – when writing to the Romans, saw the proclamation of the Gospel as ‘to the Jew first, then to the Greek [or non-Jew]’. Jesus probably shared the hope and belief, glimpsed in parts of Isaiah and other prophets, that ultimately salvation would come to the Gentiles *through* the Jews. This would explain the necessity to minister to his own race firstly. What may seem to us racial chauvinism can be seen differently if we ask ourselves a basic question: if Israel were God’s chosen people, what were they ‘chosen’ for? In answer to this question Jeffrey John writes, in his book, ‘The Meaning in the Miracles’,

...this choosing is not that of a pampered favourite, while the rest must suffer. If anything it is the other way round: Israel is chosen to suffer for the sake of the world, to be the Suffering Servant described by Isaiah through whom salvation comes to the nations

In other words, the ‘chosen race’ was commissioned to service, just as we would consider individuals who are called to Christian ministry of any kind now. Jeffrey John goes on to show the way in which the early church came to understand Jesus himself as embodying in his ministry, death and resurrection that pattern of the Suffering Servant shown in Isaiah.

Isaiah indeed is a strong influence on the writer of Mark’s Gospel – at its very start there’s a quote from its prophecy, placed to set the scene for John the Baptist, as ‘the voice crying in the wilderness’. We’ve already seen the strong connection made between Isaiah and Jesus’ healing of the deaf mute, and it can be argued that Isaiah’s ‘Suffering Servant’ informs much of how Mark understands and presents the life of Jesus. Related to this is a theme, running throughout the Gospel, of a different sort of ‘deafness’. The disciples continually fail to understand Jesus, even when he tells a parable and then explains it to them. His own fellow Jews, typified by the religious leaders, but including also members of his own family, are largely deaf to his teaching. By contrast, and despite the lack of encouragement given to her, the Syrophenician woman seems to hear and submit to the priority of the Israelites, but still engages perceptively with Jesus with a persistent assurance that he is what she needs, and so her prayer is granted. The sensational healing of that deaf man, made at last to speak plainly, seems to be a symbol for us of the healing from deafness to Christ that we all need, regularly, to receive – with whatever ‘Ephphatha!’, or similar jolt, it takes to make our ears open to his call, and to release our hearts and tongues to sing his praise.

Father Paul