

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 23 Year B 2018

When I was 21 (now a little while ago) I spent a year living and working in the Manila, the Philippines alongside people with a disability. It was a marvellous year for a young man in a marvellous, if challenging country. One of the challenges, of course, was the vast gap between the rich and poor. One day I was visiting one of the churches in the wealthiest part of the city. To be sure it was a beautiful church: neo-baroque - all gold and marble. The principal project for the church that year was to get it air-conditioned. But the rich and elite of the Philippines came to this Franciscan church, stepping out of their air-conditioned, chauffeur-driven cars, in their silks and gold and gems, with their bleached skin and whitened teeth, also stepped past - oblivious - a beggar sitting at the steps, homeless, in rags, and prevented from even coming into the church for armed - yes armed - guards at the door. I don't mind saying this encounter was cause for a real crisis of faith for me. The disconnect so obvious. A religion that had so tragically missed the mark.

As we turn now to the gospel placed before us today, we encounter a man - deaf and mute - perhaps like the beggar on the steps of the Manila church. And like so many countless millions, his whole life probably marked by people stepping past and over him. A life marked by people who wished he were somewhere else, somehow different or not there at all. A life marked by people who presumed to know what he was thinking, who presumed to know what he was trying to say, who presumed to speak for him, who presumed to know what was best for him. And so, sidestepping him all the way, ever shrinking his life, with him becoming ever more isolated, disempowered; ever more silent... He is, really, totally cut off - unable, seemingly, to take anything in. Unable to give anything out...

In first century Judea, the chances of relief from hearing difficulties and associated speech impairment were minimal. Desperate people put their faith in folk healers who would often have done more harm than good. Illness and disability cut people off from full and active participation in family and religious and civic life. Healing, then, never appears in the gospels as just a personal/individual phenomenon. *It always has a communal dimension.*

Even though the story we hear today is very short, it also very dynamic. There is a lot of *movement* and action in it. And I think this movement - the dynamic action - is quite illustrative of how we understand the Christian life and the good news Jesus brings. Firstly, we note the actual *physical* movement mentioned. Details are important in the Gospel. What a Gospel writer notes - even seemingly insignificant details - are chosen and used to convey some sort of meaning, to help further the agenda of the gospel writer, especially to help answer the question: *who is Jesus and why is he important?*

In the Gospel today, the geography is noted. We look over it because I suspect we don't know the geography, so we just skip over place names and localities. We hear that Jesus travels from Tyre on the northern Mediterranean coast to the Sea of Galilee via *the non-Jewish territory* on the eastern side of the lake. It was a regular route, but *definitely not the most direct one*. The point being that Jesus' healing ministry is all-embracing. We are being told that territorial boundaries - the usual limitations we place around ourselves - are no barrier to Jesus' healing ministry. And, to proclaim the good news - to allow God's kingdom to make further in-roads in our world - will sometimes mean we have to go out of our way. In Jesus taking this round-about course and going into non-Jewish areas that his good news of healing is for all people.

The second important dynamic movement which highlights important aspects of our life of faith is seen in the people who bring the deaf man to Jesus. The deaf man cannot make his own way to Jesus: he is brought there. By friends or family, we don't know. But clearly the people of the 'Decapolis region' have heard of Jesus and recognise in him one who can do something about this situation. In the life of faith sometimes *we need* to allow ourselves to be brought before Jesus. We need to recognise our own limitations. We need to recognise there are some parts of our hearts and lives that cannot be healed by our own effort and or by our own strength, even the effort and strength of those around us and from those who love us. For all of us there are parts of our lives that can only be healed by encounter with Jesus. We just need to humbly admit before him those parts of our lives that do need healing. And sometimes *we need* to introduce *others* to the healing power Jesus offers.

When we hear of family members and friends being ill, suffering serious hardships and going through a difficult time, don't be afraid *to say* to them, *'I'll pray for you, Ok.'* Let them know that their burdens are being shared, that you take them and their needs seriously, and that you believe in the power of prayer. Say *'I'll light a candle for you at church on Sunday.'* Believe me, people appreciate that! So often, people feel they have to struggle alone, that they 'have to be strong', that they have to put up and shut up, that they don't want to be a bother. If we can assure people that it is absolutely *no bother* for us to care, that it is *no burden* for us to offer their needs to God in prayer, then that in itself will carry a certain healing power. Let us be the kind of people who carry the needs of others to Jesus.

Thirdly, we note the dynamic movement at work in the man's healing. Jesus touches the man's ears, he looks to heaven - the source of his strength and power - and he speaks, *Ephphata: 'be opened'*. Christ's word is effective. He speaks and things happen! The intentional echo we are meant to pick up here is of Genesis. God speaks once more, and a new creation is effected. And importantly we are told that with that word not only are his ears opened but his tongue is loosed. This powerful dynamic really highlights the two directions the gospel life is lived out: the inner - in which we receive the Word, we hear, we take it into ourselves, we let it work its healing power; and the outer life, in which our tongues are loosed, where we cannot help but proclaim and share in word and deed the good things Christ has done for us. We join our voices with those who say, *he has done all things well*.

My brothers and sisters, so often it seems we prefer to keep God at arm's length. Despite God's consistent revelation as shown in all of scripture and most perfectly in Jesus Christ, God actually wants us to know him, to share life with him. So often we limit or even obstruct the reach of God's healing grace. We close off parts of our lives. We create barriers within and between ourselves. But the constant pattern of God moving through our world is so that we know, love and adore him. The gospel shows us that all people, the whole of our lives, can be truly transformed by the encounter with Jesus. Amen.