

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 23 Year B 2024

Well, this is the last time I ascend this pulpit – or any pulpit I imagine! – for the next ten weeks! So, a little holiday for you as well as you are exposed to a range of preachers for the next little while. Preaching of course, has been part of the Christian tradition from the very beginning. We might take it for granted. But, of course, not every religious tradition incorporates a practice of preaching. Our custom reflects our Lord's own ministry of teaching and preaching. And emphasis given to the word proclaimed is of course appropriate given our faith in the Word Incarnate. In this church the importance of the word proclaimed is reflected in this very pulpit. Its size and solidity communicates something: namely that whatever happens here – in this space – is important. Many churches now with a similar architectural feature have abandoned their pulpits. Perhaps for something flimsy or temporary. Or perhaps for the preacher just to roam around in front of their unsuspecting congregations.

A not infrequent complaint - or criticism - (and not unique to this church!), is 'we can't hear you'. A criticism that shouldn't go unchallenged, I might say, if people sit at distance, or fail to put in, or turn on, their hearing devices.... But we rightly share sympathy with those for whom this is a serious condition. 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 in the ancient world isolated, as it still does in many places today. Now it might be tempting to see the story placed before us today from the gospel of Mark as just another important example of Jesus' ministry of healing. A healing which liberates an individual from a certain debilitating condition, and which restores them to the life of the community. And the gospels give us numerous such examples.

But we might single out this story as having particular significance. Because it not only reflects something of the entire dynamic of Christian faith. It emphasises the central importance in our tradition of the word proclaimed. This story, then, is not only about an individual who is healed. It is the story of how we hear and receive the saving Word, Jesus Christ himself. The first signal that this story is more than just another healing story is the detail about geography. As I've said before, details are important in the Gospel. In the Gospel today, geography is important. We just skip the details because I suspect we don't know the geography being spoken about.

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. What we see in this is

really an anticipation of Pentecost. At this stage in Mark's gospel, we are being given a hint that the good of God in Jesus Christ is not limited to one people in one corner of the world but is for all people for all parts of the world. This geographical detail simply reflects why the church has continued for 2000 years to proclaim the Word, has continued to preach the good news. Yes, in humble obedience to the command of Our Lord at the end of Matthew's gospel: *go teach all nations...* But also because if the gospel is good news for me, for you, for us, then it is good news for everyone! And Jesus taking this round-about course and going into non-Jewish areas is highlighting that his good news *is* for all.

Now, you probably picked up in the news that this past week Pope Francis is making a 12-day trip to SE Asia and Papua New Guinea. And as part of this trip at the Grand Mosque in Jakarta, Indonesia, he signed a Joint Declaration with the Chief Iman. Perhaps we should not hold out too much hope for such statements. The statement called, 'fostering religious harmony for the sake of humanity' sounds innocuous enough. And in his address Pope Francis said, *'religious values should be directed toward promoting a culture of respect, dignity, compassion, reconciliation and fraternal solidarity in order to overcome both dehumanisation and environmental destruction.'* Fine, except as Christians we do not believe respect or compassion or solidarity is what will save us. Jesus Christ alone saves! And dehumanization and environmental destruction, serious though these are, are not the core business of the church. And the gospel cannot be conflated or diminished to such.

Despite the appearance of friendliness in Jakarta this past week, such occasions only give a false impression. In his address at this occasion Pope Francis failed to mention Jesus even once (surely a missed opportunity!) and effectively said that we are all on the one but different paths to God. This is quite wrong, as we confess Jesus Christ the Way, the Truth and the Life, not merely a way, a truth, a life. The difficult work of proclaiming Christ into our world includes saying that Islam is a false religion, and that Muslims have been deceived. Now, a state visit is probably not the occasion to do this. But the gospel is not served by saying the world will be saved if we were just nicer to each other. We have seen, then, that someone who sports the title 'Vicar of Christ' has failed to represent Christ at all! On the contrary. The Grand Iman felt moved to comment that he saw in Francis someone modelled after the example of the 'prophet'...

In the gospel text today, Our Lord says to deaf man *Ephphatha*. That is *be opened*. We cannot hear and receive the good news of Jesus Christ unless the blockages are unstopped! We cannot effectively proclaim the good news if we do not accept that there are things

which impede the good news. In the gospel story we are told that with *Ephphata* not only are the deaf man's ears opened but his tongue is loosed. And this highlights the two directions the gospel life is lived out: the inner - in which we receive the Word, we hear it, 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 the good things Christ has done for us. In other words, in the encounter with Christ, silence is not an option. We cannot be mute in face of what Christ has done for us.

So, in the gospel we see anticipated the movement in which the good news is brought to all. And we see the movement in which we both hear and receive the Word, and then are able to proclaim the Word. But here is another important movement which, again, reflects a key dynamic in the Christian life. And this 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. Left to his own devices nothing will happen for the deaf man. In the life of faith – especially in the time of need - 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 lives that cannot be healed by our own effort or by our own strength, even the effort and strength of those around us and 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. And this is part of that work of going out and proclaiming the good news. But it need not be difficult or complicated. When we hear of family members or friends being ill, suffering serious hardships or difficulties, don't be afraid to say to them, *'I'll pray for you.'* 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! People so often feel they have to struggle alone, that they 'have to be strong', that they have to put up and shut up, that they shouldn't bother us. If we can assure people that it is absolutely no bother for us to care, no burden for us to offer their needs to God in prayer, then that in itself will carry a certain healing power.

At the heart of the Christian faith is the good news that Christ truly heals, that he truly saves. Now, some may be embarrassed about this. Some may step away from the implications of this. And all of us have a certain deafness. All of us have a certain reluctance to speak. But if we allow Christ to speak his word over us - *be opened* - then we too will be moved to say, *he has done all things well.* Amen.