

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost, 25th August 2019

I originally intended avoiding what I am in fact going to talk about this afternoon: spit, spittle, saliva, however you want to call it - I think you know why! We hear today, indeed rather unusually, from St Mark's Gospel, with its story of Our Lord healing the deaf and dumb man through sticking fingers in his ears and putting spit on his tongue. Perhaps this was all too much for both St Matthew and St Luke, who do not include this story in their respective Gospels.

In the succeeding chapter of St Mark, chapter eight, there is another healing miracle involving a bit of spit, and again which is avoided by the other two Synoptic Gospels: "they bring to him a blind man, and they besought him that he would touch him. And taking the blind man by the hand, he led him out of the town; and spitting upon his eyes, laying his hands on him, he asked him if he saw anything" (Mk 8:22-23). Now listen to today's Gospel: "they bring to him one deaf and dumb; and they besought him that he would lay his hand upon him. And taking him from the multitude apart, he put his fingers into his ears, and spitting, he touched his tongue" (Mk 7:32-33).

These two stories are remarkably similar: "they bring to him a blind man" or "one deaf and dumb"; they beseech him either to "touch" the man or to "lay his hand upon him"; Christ takes the men from "the town" or "the multitude"; and then puts spittle on the "eyes" and "tongue" respectively, with an accompanying gesture: "laying" of "hands" or "fingers into [...] ears". In both cases, Christ does more than what the people had asked of him: they certainly had not asked for any spitting! As regards his taking the men apart, you could indeed read into it a desire for some privacy in performing a miracle which was somewhat messy. But why would Our Lord go to all the bother of applying some saliva on the eyes of the blind man and the tongue of the dumb when he could have simply said some words and they would then have been healed (cf. Mt 8:8)?

The truth is that he was not performing miracles for his own benefit, or even for those people who had brought the sick, but for those he was actually healing. If it was more beneficial for the blind man and the dumb man to be healed in a more tactile way, through touch and

spittle, then that was what was most appropriate. Besides, the presence of spit would have perhaps reassured them rather than startled them; since saliva was widely used in the ancient world for healing. Maybe you have memories of your mother cleaning you up with her own spit, or maybe that is something you would rather forget! Researchers, however, in fact tell us that a mother's saliva can assist with her child's immune system - Do not waste your money, therefore, on wet wipes and trust in the power of good old-fashioned mummy spit!

Hopefully, this makes those miracles involving the smearing of spit less disgusting and more comforting: Christ is truly being motherly. After his healing of the deaf and dumb man the people exclaim: "He hath done all things well; he hath made both the deaf to hear, and the dumb to speak" (Mk 7:37), echoing the prophecy of Isaiah: "Then shall the eyes of the blind be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped" (Is 35:5), which as such is fulfilled in the healing of the blind man as well as the deaf and dumb one. The Gospel of St Mark therefore contains two references to spitting in the context of healing; the Gospel also has three further references to spitting, but these, in contrast, are of spitting as a means of harming as opposed to healing. And just as it was Our Lord who was doing the spitting; now it is he who is on the receiving end.

On his final journey to Jerusalem, he takes the twelve aside and informs them of what is about to take place: "Behold we go up to Jerusalem, and the Son of man shall be betrayed to the chief priests, and to the scribes and ancients, and they shall condemn him to death, and shall deliver him to the Gentiles. And they shall mock him, and spit on him, and scourge him, and kill him: and the third day he shall rise again" (Mk 10:33-34). This seems to give the impression that only "the Gentiles" will "spit on him", and yet the Gospel will go on to describe the Jews doing so as well, during Christ's trial before "the high priest; and all the priests and the scribes and the ancients assembled together" (Mk 14:53): "And some began to spit on him, and to cover his face, and to buffet him, and to say unto him: Prophecy: and the servants struck him with the palms of their hands" (Mk 14:65).

When we come to the trial before Pilate, the Gentile soldiers, although they of course scourge Jesus, are actually less violent in their

mocking of him, and naturally mock him for claiming to be a king rather than a prophet: "they clothe him with purple, and plating a crown of thorns, they put it upon him. And they began to salute him: Hail, king of the Jews. And they struck his head with a reed: and they did spit on him. And bowing their knees, they adored him" (Mk 15:17-19). We are certainly familiar with this scene through our meditating upon it in the third of the sorrowful mysteries of the Holy Rosary, which is indeed depicted here in the stained glass of the Lady Chapel. When I, however, think specifically of the soldiers spitting on Our Lord, I instantly remember the reconstructed medieval wall painting which I saw, as a novice, in the church of St Teilo at St Fagans Museum near Cardiff. It shows two men either side of Christ and very visibly spewing out spittle at him: a rather disturbing but, at the same time, powerful image.



Have we not recently heard about another two men? - Yes, the deaf and dumb man and then the blind man. Our Lord had applied them with spittle in a loving, indeed motherly, gesture; here he himself is being applied with spittle as the result instead of insult and hate. And yet the first gesture was for the healing of bodies; the second, as part of Christ's saving Passion and Death, for the salvation of souls. All of which was according to God's own plan - since the prophecy of Isaiah, while foreseeing that: "Then shall the eyes of the blind be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped" (Is 35:5), would also speak of the Messiah as the Suffering Servant: "I have not turned away my face from them that rebuked me, and spit upon me" (Is 50:6).