

Mark 7: 24-37, Isaiah 35:4-7**6.9.15 MP (St Matt's)**

In our Gospel reading today, we hear of two healing miracles. Both of them happen in Gentile territory, away from the area around Galilee. Both of these healings happen to outsiders. Jesus is extending his ministry beyond the people of Israel.

However, it seems as if Jesus hasn't really travelled there to perform miracles. He appears to give a very unwelcome response to the woman whose daughter had an evil spirit. Maybe he just wants to get away from the limelight for a bit, teach his disciples privately. It's not that the Gentiles wouldn't receive Jesus' grace but that he intended to take the message first to the people of Israel and then through them to the rest of the world.

Despite Jesus' attempt to hide, this lady seeks him out in desperation. But after her initial burst of faith in approaching Jesus, she could so easily have been frightened away.

I imagine what it would be like if I, as a non-believer, had decided that I wanted to know more about becoming a Christian. I pluck up the courage to seek out and speak to a church leader and I'm told 'This is not for you, you don't come from the right kind of background'. I think I would run as far as I could in the opposite direction, my enthusiasm completely destroyed!

But this lady persists, she is not put off.

Her response shows amazing faith, the belief that even the 'leftovers' of Jesus' grace and blessing are enough to heal her daughter. She acknowledges Jesus' lordship and realises that she has no standing on which to expect to receive anything from him. This is the same for all of us who find Jesus when we understand our need for God, while realising that we have no right to expect to receive anything at all.

Another thing which strikes me in this story: how did this Gentile woman know what to say? Her answering in parable form is pretty profound for one who would have never read the Hebrew Scriptures. She is speaking to Jesus in his own language – that of parables! It reminds us that God can be at work, giving spiritual insight to the least likely people, regardless of their knowledge or social standing. We need to remember that God is at work in the world in ways we don't understand and can't predict.

Then another long journey for Jesus, down to the ten Roman cities to the SE of Galilee, and there Jesus is brought a man who is deaf and can hardly speak.

It's wonderful, the compassionate way in which Jesus heals the deaf and mute man. It shows him acting out his intentions in a way in which this man is able to understand – after all, there is no point in just speaking to him – he wouldn't be able to hear! So he takes him to one side, apart from the crowd to show that he is about to do something for him. Then he puts his fingers in the man's ears, spits and touches his tongue, to show him that his ears will be opened and his tongue loosened. And an amazing physical healing takes place!

Although there was physical healing, this man and the people around him, deep in Gentile territory, were also deaf in a spiritual sense. They could not hear the word of God and, without some understanding of God's word they could 'hardly speak' sensibly.

How would they hear the Good News of God, the message which will change them and deliver them?

By seeing it acted out in front of them. What a powerful method of communication! When Jesus commands the man's ears to be opened, he is also proclaiming the opening of a way for the people to hear the word of God, to be healed.

And despite Jesus' instructions not to tell anyone about the miracle 'the more he ordered them not to, the more they spoke'. The Gentiles were proclaiming the Good News of Jesus because of what they have witnessed and saying 'How well he does everything – he even causes the deaf to hear and the dumb to speak!' This miracle had a powerful effect not only on the one who was healed but on the whole community!

Right at the start of Jesus' ministry, we read at the beginning of Mark's Gospel, that Jesus went into Galilee and preached the Good News from God. This Good News was that *'The right time has come and the Kingdom of God is near! Turn away from your sins and believe the Good News'*. (Mark 1:15)

From reading the Gospel accounts, although there was some teaching, it seems as though the way in which Jesus 'preached the Good News' was mainly by healing and casting out demons. – a ministry of healing and deliverance – not just the imparting of information by speaking, but action, power that enters into the world to save and transform people's lives. These miracles show the power of God's Kingdom making its presence felt in the world. The Kingdom of God is near. The Lord of the world, the living God going into action! The time has come for something new!

This is what Isaiah was describing in the passage we heard. Isaiah's prophecy looks forward to this time of spiritual and physical healing in Christ's ministry: 'The blind will be able to see and the deaf will hear. The lame will leap and dance, and those who cannot speak will shout for joy.' – a restoration of wholeness amongst people and nature. This is what happens when God comes to earth to be King! **and** can continue to happen in God's Kingdom today.

So as we live now, as God's people under his rule, how can we continue this kind of dynamic ministry, this Gospel of transforming action rather

than words? We are blessed by a loving God, the recipients of his favour. He wants his creation to be filled, flooded and drenched with his love and presence.

How can we follow Jesus' example of proclaiming the Good news in such a saving and transforming way? Just talking won't work. We need action – stuff that will make people sit up and notice, change lives.

When we read these accounts of Jesus in the Bible, doesn't what we read inspire us to be hungry and expectant for more of this kind of active ministry in God's Kingdom on earth right now? Wouldn't it be wonderful to see more of the powerful work of the Spirit and the presence of Jesus changing lives, to see people's ears opened to the good news of Jesus, saving and healing them? How amazing would it be to see the kind of thing that was happening when Jesus was on earth, in our own communities. Could we be more open to this possibility?

Jesus promised *'I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these because I am going to the Father. And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. You may ask me for anything in my name and I will do it.'* (John 14:12-14)

The church is intended to be the power-house of mission, of changed lives, of broken, messy people finding love and transformation. Are we prepared for that? – even if it means sacrificing our cosy lifestyle.

This powerful work of Jesus is not something **we** can make happen. But if it's what we really desire, we can come before God in prayer and repentance and ask *him* to make it a reality.

Then we **will** see lives transformed, and God will be glorified in this place!