

Fourteenth Sunday after Trinity 2021
(5.09.2021)

James 2: 1 – 17; Mark 7: 24 – 37

I'm going to begin my sermon this morning not by invoking the assistance of the Holy Trinity as I normally do – “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” – but by using the delightful prayer our Parish Deacon, the Revd Jean Fowler, always uses to begin her sermons.

Lord, I pray that my words, spoken in your name, may touch hearts and open minds to you.
Amen.

I finally got round to making a note of Jean's prayer when I was preparing this sermon – and this is a sign of the time: I did it not by asking Jean to remind me of it, but by looking through the church's Facebook page to find an example of her preaching so I could write it down. I've been meaning to make a note of it for ages because it *is* delightful, but I really wanted to use it today because of the phrase “open minds” – may my words touch hearts and *open minds* to you.

We've heard the word “open” proclaimed already this morning; proclaimed in two senses: proclaimed in the Gospel reading as it was read out loud to us, and proclaimed within the text of the Gospel by Jesus who looked up to heaven, sighed and then is reported to have used a mysterious Aramaic phrase to the deaf man with a speech impediment. He said, “Ephphatha” – that's spelt with a repeated ph: E PH PH A TH A. And the text tells us it means “Be open”; and that immediately the man's ears were opened and his tongue released.

It's not an incidental or random choice of words. There's a double meaning. The man's ears were opened in the literal sense that whatever was blocking him from hearing disappeared. But also there's another sort of opening, a spiritual or – to use a technical term – an eschatological sort of opening. When people are touched by Jesus, when they not only hear his words, but their minds are opened to them, a mystery happens. We begin to hear heavenly things and to see the Kingdom of God.

This idea is reinforced when the crowds then say “He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.” Those are words we could so easily glide over without recognising the theological freight that they carry. These words are code. They occur twice in the Bible; once here; and once in the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, words we associate with Christmas: “Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped.” It’s part of a poetic, lyrical word picture of what God’s redemption is like.

In this morning’s Gospel reading these are the words that wrap up two different, but thematically connected healing stories. Scholars reckon, though, there might have been not just two examples of Jesus’ teaching, but a whole wodge, a whole chunk or compendium of Jesus’ teaching, most of which had got lost before the text crystalised in the way we receive it in our Bibles. And it all ‘does everything well’, by opening our ears, our minds, our hearts to the reality of the presence of Jesus and the proximity

of his kingdom. What Jesus teaches is the fulfilment of the prophecy in Isaiah.

So let’s think about the two stories we do have in the Bible as we receive it which are illustrations of Jesus’ kingdom being at hand. They’re similar but not the same. One is the healing of a Syrophenician woman’s daughter; the other the healing a deaf-mute in the Decapolis. So they’re both healing stories, but the difference is in the categorisation of the places the people come from. The way the passage stresses that the woman was a Greek who was from Syrophenicia by birth emphasises that this woman was utterly and completely not Jewish: she’s a foreigner. Yet Jesus healed her daughter. The man came from the Decapolis, ten cities in the South-East that were not properly in Jewish territory: they were near at hand but Jewish people would have looked on their inhabitants with disdain. Yet Jesus heals him also.

The moral of the stories is what the letter of James, our first reading, complains about. There is a human tendency to dishonour the poor, to refuse to accept

people who don't quite fit in or are complete outsiders. So, as the reading outs it, if someone comes to church with gold rings and fine clothes, and if a poor person with dirty clothes comes in, we take notice of the one in fine clothes rather than the other.

This is where we all feel rather indignant because none of us believes ourselves to be a snob. We all sincerely believe that we are open-minded, non-judgmental people. Yet, it can happen. I'm going to tell a story that didn't happen here, so I'm not having a sneaky jab at anyone at the Priory. It happened a long time ago when I was a fresh faced curate and a young couple and their friends turned up for me to baptise their child in the Sunday morning service. They'd got dressed up. But the clothes they'd got dressed up in were the type more often seen in a nightclub than a parish church. And it was embarrassing to hear the scornful stage whispers of the regular churchgoers about her unseemly it was to have half-dressed young women cavorting around church. Actually, they'd made an effort, but they were

culturally marginal to the church, and the painful truth is they weren't made welcome.

The Priory's parish is in the 10% most deprived parishes in the country. Yet I reckon – and of course this can only be a personal impression – our congregation is not representative of the 10% poorest people in the country. We are pretty middle class, and people who are not 'like us' don't always find it easy to fit in. We need the touch of Jesus to for us to opened, opened to his Spirit, and to be open to everybody.

Amen.