



Swaffham Churches Together United Service
21st January 2007

He even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak

Mark 7: 31-37

Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, 'Ephphatha,' that is, 'Be opened.' And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. They were astounded beyond measure, saying, 'He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.'

New Revised Standard Version

He has done everything well; he makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.

He was helpless. He lived in a world where people could not really communicate with him and where he could not really communicate with them - his speech was impeded. He was dependent upon those who would take pity on him - his family and others who made sure he was fed and clothed.

We live in a world where people find themselves in helpless or extremely difficult situations. We heard very brief stories this evening. But they are examples of the thousands - millions - who find themselves in situations where they can do little or nothing to extract themselves. They are trapped; helpless.

Perhaps we've been there ourselves. Without money, caught in a trap, stuck in a rut; at the mercy of others. It's funny how people often rationalise the situation of others isn't it. In the time of Jesus, people looked at those who were trapped and helpless in disability, or poverty, or poor health and said "*why does God put them in that position. I know why. They must have sinned. And if they hadn't then maybe their parents had. It's just bad blood. Perhaps it's their own fault they're in this mess. Well, that's how it is - the rich man in his castle, the poor man in his cave - that's how God has made them*" And usually these helpless people were despised and begged for alms.

BUT as we look in the Scriptures, we do not find a God who has made a curse of the poor, the trapped and the helpless, but a God who has a bias towards them.

These are words that are familiar in my church at the moment and if you follow the Common Lectionary, you might have well come across these words today. They are words from Isaiah 61 and Luke 4. They are words that apply to Jesus: ***61:1 The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, 2 to proclaim the year of the LORD's favour***

Here we find a Messiah whose anointing was for the benefit of those who had limited or no ability to help themselves - and God's favour was on them. And Jesus proved at as He ministered to people that not even the most optimistic thought could be helped - those who were deaf, those who were mute, or for that matter, people born blind, people lame and even the dead!. Isn't Jesus wonderful! ***He makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.*** In our observation of Isaiah 61 this morning we saw how Jesus spoke with authority and acted in power.

But how did the deaf man in the story actually get to meet Jesus? After all, how did he hear about Him? He could hardly run after Jesus, shouting for help - he couldn't speak properly. Let's read it:

they brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. He didn't have to speak, he didn't have to plead because there were people who had taken compassion on him, taken him to Jesus and who spoke for him.

And Jesus showed compassion too. He took him aside and healed him. Bearing in mind we know from other places in scripture that only the word of Jesus was needed to heal, why did Jesus put His fingers in the man's ears and spit on his tongue? In one sense it was practical. What did the man think Jesus was doing? He was deaf! By doing some actions, the situation would have been clear. It was appropriate to the situation. The cry of Ephphatha would have been the words first heard and understood. It was a miracle. He was out of his prison of deafness and could even now speak plainly. That's a miracle in itself. People who regain deafness after years of silence often need lots of therapy, but this guy heard and spoke clearly.

Compassion isn't just about words. It is about actions. God so loved the world that He didn't send us a postcard saying "I love you". His love and compassion wasn't cheap sentiment. For God so loved the world that He sent His only Son. Love was action.

And Jesus showed that action in His ministry so that *he made the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.* The ultimate manifestation of that was that Jesus died on the cross to rescue the human race which was helpless and unable to connect with God. And through our personal faith, He has made us part of His church. The deepest need of the human race, to find forgiveness of our sin before God and to have that eternal security that only faith in Christ brings was met because God so loved the world that he sent His only Son.

And He has made us, His people, His body, His church; to be His voice, His hands and His feet as he shows compassion and seeks to meet the deepest needs of the helpless - whether that be materially helpless, bodily helpless, or eternally helpless - and bring them to the foot of the cross just as the people brought the deaf man.

And that's where the message of the Christians in Umlazi, and for that matter the Bible leads us to. God is never a God of words alone. He's not one for sentimentalities. He doesn't turn a blind eye to those that cry out. He meets felt needs and He meets people's deepest spiritual needs. But in that great work He gives His people, His Church, the privilege and the honour of being part of that work. That's us.

He listens to their cries.

He shows compassion.

He brings about change.

His word speaks for the poor.

He acts.

He spoke with authority.

He acted with the power of the Holy Spirit.

We listen to their cries.

We show compassion.

He equips us to bring about change.

We speak for the poor.

We act.

We speak in His name with His authority.

So can we.

And you say. "*What me*" Yes you. And we all know we can play our small part in helping the poor, releasing the captives, helping people - and sharing our faith. But can we do much? Individually no, collectively - we can make a huge difference. And there's no time better than in our present age I can think of to re-affirm that fact. After all, there's nothing new in anything I'm saying today and none of it is rocket science.

For example, we can make a huge difference collectively in prayer. Let's never forget that God is a God of miracles. Things change when God's people pray in unity. One of the most exciting things that has happened over the last decade or so in this country is that Christians up and down the country have got together to pray - not just once a year but more regular than that. One group of people in my church are involved in is First Friday which has a group in mid-Norfolk that meets on the first Friday of every month. It started small - it's growing. The next one is a combined one with the Wymondham Group on Friday 2nd February at Wicklewood Village Hall.

Small seeds can lead to bigger things. Pray Haringey started in 1995 when five Pastors got together in a Chinese restaurant to share their vision for a prayer group in that part of London. Things were grim in the Borough at that time and Christianity was marginalised. By 1999, there were few churches that did not have an input into Prayer Haringey. There has been a huge growth in the church - or churches - there in the last decade. Things are a lot less grim there now. Even the local council has asked them to form an umbrella group to advise them and pray for them. Inconceivable 15 years ago! But that's Christians coming together in unity. The spiritual climate changes. It works. Why? Because it's about acting together in the name of Jesus and remembering the power

He has to change things.

Where Christians work together in unity, a difference can be made. Look at the church in South Africa. At the time of apartheid, the vast majority of Christians opposed the regime. One of the most vociferous opponents of it was Archbishop Desmond Tutu. His life was always in danger. Other Christians were harassed, jailed, murdered. But change came and Christians are a much more respected part of society than the church is here. Why? Because their love was action and they took risks to speak what was right.

We can make a difference practically. Just because there is a welfare state doesn't mean that the people of God have abdicated that responsibility. If you look at the way we do health and social care in the UK, we will see at its root Christians and the Christian church but we have kind of left that stuff to the government. And our state is becoming more secularised. Take the opportunity to act. There are an increasing number of laws that the government is trying to pass that could seriously limit our ability to freedom to worship and freedom to propagate our faith. What are we going to do about it? Collectively we can make a difference. It may not be apartheid we are opposing, but it is protecting rights of freedom of religion that Christians fought for in generations past.

There's just a few examples for you Brian Stoffregen "Being 'spiritual' does not mean escaping the world, but a radical engagement with the poor and oppressed of the world." In the OT, the nation of Israel were called to be those who show mercy and love justice. The same was true of Jesus - the same should be true of us. He spoke out against the Jewish leaders of His time. He showed mercy and acted with power. And when we show mercy and love justice in the name of Jesus and in unity as His people we'll see His power too.

He makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.

Amen



*Preached by Mark Reid
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Swaffham Baptist Church
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