

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B

GOSPEL

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Returning from the district of Tyre, Jesus went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, right through the Decapolis region. And they brought him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they asked him to lay his hand on him. He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, put his fingers into the man's ears and touched his tongue with spittle. Then looking up to heaven he sighed; and he said to him, 'Ephphatha', that is, 'Be opened.' And his ears were opened, and the ligament of his tongue was loosened and he spoke clearly. And Jesus ordered them to tell no one about it, but the more he insisted, the more widely they published it. Their admiration was unbounded. 'He has done all things well,' they said 'he makes the deaf hear and the dumb speak.'

(Mark 7: 31-37)

DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- Tyre and Sidon are cities on the Mediterranean coast in the far north of Israel, now southern Lebanon. They were the leading cities of the Phoenicians. This was not Jewish territory. Jesus has entered the realm of the Gentiles.
- The Decapolis was a federation of ten cities with a largely Greek culture. Most were in the area of the eastern side of the Jordan River to the south of the Sea of Galilee.
- *Ephphatha* is an Aramaic word. Aramaic was a commonly spoken Semitic language and probably the language spoken by Jesus.
- The gospels were written in Greek, but we sometimes encounter evidence of an earlier written Aramaic source of stories about Jesus or evidence at least of earlier oral traditions that preserve the Aramaic sayings of Jesus.
- The deaf hearing and the dumb speaking are signs of the coming of the Messiah and the advent of the kingdom of God. Jesus the Messiah is bringing the kingdom of God to fulfillment now!

EXPLORING THE WORD

The geographical indicators in this gospel are very important. Mark is at pains to tell us exactly which way Jesus travels.

- Have a map of ancient Palestine available for use in this session together. These are readily available using a quick internet search. Locate the places mentioned in this gospel.

Following the route as outlined, Jesus would not have set foot on Jewish territory. He remains in Gentile land. The healing offered by the Good News is for all people to access.

The miracle is not wrought by the use of gestures alone. Placing his fingers in the ears and his own spittle on the tongue of the man produces no magic results by itself. To these gestures are added Jesus' gaze towards heaven, a sign of his union with God, and the commanding word of Jesus. It is this combination of the actions and the words of Jesus that produces the results. This man is now open to a whole new way of living in the world, no longer dependent on others but free to take his place in the community. The prophecy of Isaiah in today's first reading has been fulfilled. When the Lord comes, the ears of the deaf will be opened and the tongues of the dumb will sing for joy. These are signs of the advent (coming) of the Messiah.

In last week's gospel, Jesus had clashed with the religious leadership of Israel and their lack of understanding of who he is. In this text, however, we see that it is the Gentiles who recognise Jesus and are open to his message and ministry.

- What message may Mark's audience have taken from this point? What message may we take from it?
- What are the things of the world today that may cause people to fail to recognise Jesus?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- 'He has done all things well.' What do you do well? What would you like to do better? What does the command of Jesus to 'be opened' mean to you at this point in your life?
- In this gospel, physical deafness could be seen as a symbol of being closed off from the world around us. Are there voices you do not hear, or do not hear well enough, in your family or workplace, or in our nation or our world? Are we always attentive enough to those who have something to say to us? Think of a time when another person opened you up to really seeing or hearing a message you had been resistant to or had simply 'not heard'. Discuss together ways of being 'opened' to hearing those voices better.
- Be attentive this week to the way gestures and touch can be used to welcome or to exclude. Open your ears to what others are really saying. Open your ears in a special way to what the gospel is saying to you.
- Recite the entrance antiphon of the liturgy this week:
You are just, O Lord, and your judgement is right;

treat your servant in accord with your merciful love.

Alternatively, recite this week's responsorial psalm each day.

SHARING THE TRADITION

A closer look at the Scripture of the day, to see how it makes more explicit God's word to us through the teachings of Jesus Christ

Jesus used both word and action to bring about this miracle. The symbolic actions are indications of a deeper reality at work. The words are another expression of that deeper reality. The Church continues to use both words and actions to convey the deeper reality of God's love and presence in our lives and our world.

- Think of the symbolic actions we use each day that express a deeper reality—for example, a hug, a handshake, a kiss. What do these actions speak of? What words could accompany these actions? What gestures are commonly used in your family? What is the deeper reality these gestures express?

The liturgy is full of symbolic actions and ritual gestures: the sign of the cross, kneeling, standing, raising the host and chalice, striking the breast, signing forehead, lips and breast with a cross before the gospel is read, bowing to the tabernacle or altar, the sign of peace.

- Explore the meaning of these ritual gestures. Discuss the attitude one should adopt in carrying out such ritual actions.

The sacraments of the Church are administered using both gesture and word, as well as material symbols like oil, water, bread, wine, a ring.

- Explore the gestures and symbols of the sacraments and discuss their significance. What is the deeper reality each sacrament expresses?

SYMBOLS AND IMAGES

Jesus could have healed this man with words alone but he chooses to use gestures as well. The actions are signs of what is taking place. Ritual gestures continue to be a rich means of communication in the Church. Just think of the number of ritual gestures or actions involved in the celebration of the liturgy each Sunday. It would be useful to spend some time this week identifying those and exploring their meaning. Ritual actions are best carried out with dignity and purpose. This strengthens their meaning and the impact they have on those present.

LIVING THE WORD

Practical ideas for group leaders to employ in connecting Scripture and daily life, with suggestions for music and environment

- How well does the community personify the deeper reality of the symbolic gestures commonly used in the liturgy? Are there ways that catechumens or the RCIA program can help enrich the community's understanding of the deeper reality they journey towards?

- You could conclude by using the signing of the senses in the *RCIA* at §56. Pray for openness to the word and action of God in your life. A suitable song could be 'Signing with the cross' (GA 158) or the 'Dismissal of the elect' (GA 167).