

James 2:1-10,14-18

Mark 7:24-37

Introduction

It isn't unusual to hear accounts of Jesus healing people in the Gospels, in fact his healing power was well demonstrated throughout his ministry, but in our reading this morning we hear about what is not so much a healing as a political incident. This is a very odd story and it has all the trappings of a dangerous incident for Jesus. He has come north out of Galilee for a bit of peace and quiet. We heard last week of his encounter with the Pharisees and teachers of the law, where they had a strong disagreement about the nature of cleanliness. Jesus spoke in very clear terms that challenged their understanding of what it meant to be clean. He had challenged their authority and came out of Israel to a Gentile territory to try and lie low.

Mark tells us, 'he took up residence in a house, he didn't want anyone to know, but it wasn't possible for him to remain hidden. His fame had gone ahead of him. Everyone wanted to meet him, to hear him speak and most of all for him to deal with their illness and pain. And so a Greek woman from Syrophenicia came to him to ask him to heal her daughter, whom we are told had an unclean spirit.

This is a strange exchange. The tone throughout though urgent, and on the woman's part desperate is that of teasing banter. The incident has caused much head scratching and discussion among theologians because it seems at first sight that Jesus is not only turning the woman away brusquely but also being very rude to her. Some with a feminist agenda in mind have upheld that the woman put Jesus right and worsted him in the exchange. But this doesn't seem to be the spirit behind Mark's words. After all she accepted the apparent insult (Jews often spoke of Gentiles as 'dogs' and Gentiles were just as rude about the Jews) and turned it to her advantage.

The point at issue here is that Jesus was conscious during his ministry, and this was understood by the early church, that his personal vocation was not to spread the Gospel to the Gentile world, but to tell the Jewish people themselves that their long awaited deliverance was at hand; and, in fact, to bring it about by his death and resurrection. He knew that when the Jewish people were redeemed that would be the time for the rest of the world to be brought under the saving and judging rule of Israel's God, the world's creator.

There was time enough for the Gentiles to be brought into the kingdom, for the moment it was vital that Jesus shouldn't be distracted from his primary task. He had come north, out of Jewish territories, not to preach and heal but to lie low for a while after doing and saying some quite risky

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things. His undermining of the Pharisees and his challenge to their teaching that we thought about last week had stirred things up and he needed to get away for a time for things to calm down a little.

So what Jesus is saying here is not that the Gentiles had no claim on God's love and mercy. He is being careful not to be distracted away from his primary and difficult task of establish God's rule amongst the Jews. Publicity in Tyre, some distance up the coast from Galilee would have given all the wrong signals. Jesus' work was not that of an itinerant medical missionary he was here to bring salvation to mankind and to establish God's kingdom on earth.

So this story reminds us that Jesus wasn't called to simply go around being helpful to everyone. He had a very clear and burning sense of purpose. He had specific and controversial things to do and a limited time in which to achieve them.

Despite this what Jesus did in response to the woman's plea for help was seen by the disciples and described by Mark as a sign that he meant what he said about cleanness and uncleanness. The old barriers were being swept away. The dogs under the table were already sharing the children's bread and pretty soon they would cease to be dogs and become children as well. This restriction was temporary, after Jesus death and resurrection the Kingdom would be available to all mankind.

In politics today it is very difficult to keep anything secret or behind closed doors until it is ready to be revealed to the public. There is always someone ready to leak information. Jesus, in his ministry, wanted to keep some things secret until the right moment which is why when he healed people he often told them not to say anything about it. But the news about Jesus didn't just leak out – it poured out. People just couldn't stop talking about what they'd seen him do. So why would Jesus do these things if he didn't want people talking about them?

When we start to think about secrets – people keeping silent or speaking out – we realise that there is a lot of this going on in the second encounter in our reading. The man himself is deaf, and can hardly speak (When Jesus healed him Mark uses a graphic phrase to describe it that suggests that his tongue had been tied up in knots and was now suddenly untied – but then he speaks plainly; From silence to speech in one quick move. Jesus takes him off privately but it can't remain hidden. Jesus tells the people around him not to talk about it but they cannot remain silent.

Knowing human beings as he did why did Jesus do this? Perhaps Jesus was hoping for a bit more time before things came to a head. Perhaps he

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was intending to travel around for some while yet teaching and giving people the opportunity to turn their ideas round. But things were difficult. Throughout his Gospel Mark tells us of times when Jesus went away to be quiet and escape the crowds only to find that they were there waiting for him wherever he went. Now he must have been aware that only a few more remarkable cures would bring such notoriety that the authorities would be after him to stop his ministry. He couldn't stop his kingdom bringing work – that was his whole purpose to establish God's Kingdom – but he couldn't stop people talking about it either.

In the story of these healings we have reached the mid-point, in fact the turning point in Mark's Gospel. It is after this that Jesus begins to tell his followers of what his true mission is and how it will be accomplished by his suffering and death. He is about to enter a new phase of his ministry but we also see the importance of these healings in proclaiming his mission and ministry.

The people are recorded as saying, "He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak" which echoes Isaiah's prophecy of the redemption of Israel – for when God comes

*Then will the eyes of the blind be opened
and the ears of the deaf unstopped.*

⁶ *Then will the lame leap like a deer,
and the mute tongue shout for joy.*

*Water will gush forth in the wilderness
and streams in the desert.*

This was a prophecy of the renewal of Israel after the long sad years of exile. God's people would be rescued from Pagan oppression and creation itself would celebrate. Healing then, as healing now – though perhaps we don't realise it can never be a matter of correcting a few faults in the human body. It always was and supremely so in Jesus' actions a sign of God's love breaking into the painful and death laden world we live in. It is a taste, a pointer to the great healing that will come when Jesus is fully revealed in his power and his glory and when everyone will be aware of the secret.

Jesus purpose is to bring forgiveness and healing to all mankind but the signs that show he is bringing in God's kingdom are the healing of girls with unclean spirits, the opening of deaf ears and bringing speech to mute lips. Those who encountered Jesus in his compassion and love felt the touch of his hand on their lives and were unable to remain quiet. Jesus continues today to free us from those things that bind and hold us, though we will none of us be fully whole in this life but the question is, "Is

Readings

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Meeting the marginalised

Thriplow/Fowlmere

our response to meeting with Jesus to keep the secret? Or are we compelled to proclaim his love and power to others?

Mention healing services