



23rd Sunday Ordinary Time Biv
Excerpts From Isaiah 35, James 2 & Mark 7

Ephphatha

Jesus' healing of the deaf man is a sign of the great healing to come
Fr David King – 5th September 2021

Please look at the Gospel before reading this (Mark 7.31-37)

1. Mary

The whole area of physical healing is a very complex and difficult one. I certainly believe that God heals today, just as he always has done. And yet...not everyone experiences this physical healing, which can be very difficult to accept and difficult to understand. And I have my own experience of this...

- In 2011, just a few months after I got ordained, a good friend of mine had a huge accident on her bicycle in London. I don't really want to spell out the details, but suffice it to say that it involved a lorry and was just about as bad as you could imagine. She was airlifted to hospital as quickly as possible, and put in an induced coma, and miraculously she survived.
- But Mary incurred tremendous injury to the brain in her accident. And to cut a very long story short, ten years on, she is now in a specialised brain injury care-unit in Essex. She is conscious, and she is able to breathe independently, but her brain was so injured that it is functioning at a minimum level, she cannot speak, and there is no voluntary movement there, and hence there is no communication at all. And Mary will need 24-hour specialised care for the rest of her life.
- I remember those early days of her accident very well. She was on an Intensive Care Unit in London and Mary was a Christian and had lots of Christian friends, so there was an army of people praying for her and praying for her healing. And in some sense I guess those prayers worked, Mary survived and she is still with us, which is a blessing. But in another sense, the healing that her friends and family were praying for, never really came.
- And I remember not quite knowing what I should be praying for myself. I wanted to see her healed, of course I did, I wanted the Mary I knew and loved to be back here, and yet I could see that there had been this terrible accident, I could see her injuries, they were there in front of my eyes, and nothing was going to undo those injuries, and something in me knew that nothing could turn back time, this had *happened*, and we had to slowly and bravely walk forward.
 - And I remember part of me feeling vaguely guilty that I suddenly found within me this reservation in God's ability to heal. But part of me felt like this was the more authentic path, to embrace the reality of this awful accident and what happened. It was very complex.
- And I still kind of live somewhere in that tension. I believe that God heals, I believe that the miraculous does happen, and I have met people who have experience miraculous healing their lives. And yet I also believe in reality, which is difficult, and often doesn't come with a fairy-tale ending.

2. Jesus

- This encounter that Jesus has with the deaf man is a beautiful one. One lovely detail is that Jesus ‘sighs’, though that English word certainly does not do the Greek justice. The Greek word is ‘*estenaxen*’ meaning ‘to *groan deep within*’. It’s as if Jesus is expressing his anguish and pain at seeing this man so ravaged by nature and rejected by society.
- And as ever, there are so many different layers to what’s going on here. It, first of all, and perhaps most importantly, was genuinely healing to the man, it cured him, he could suddenly hear and speak clearly, it was a life changing moment for him. And we should never forget that that’s what it was first of all. A demonstrable sign of God’s love. But it was also a huge statement by Jesus. Jesus was taking someone who was an outcast (don’t forget that this man was deaf but *also* a gentile which meant he was doubly excluded from the worshipping community), and it was placing him firmly at the heart of his kingdom movement (this is a common theme in the Gospel, you see Jesus doing this time and time again - those who society rejects, Jesus places at the heart of the kingdom).
- But it also works on another level. As we spoke about a few weeks ago, Isaiah was the greatest of all the prophets, because he knew that God had promised to come himself in person, after the disaster and tragedy of the exile, and with him he would bring his justice and saving help and he would begin the work of putting everything right – *that* was God’s promise. And in our first reading Isaiah speaks about what this is going to look like, the eyes of the blind would be opened, the ears of the deaf unsealed. He is looking forward to this time when God would come and begin the work of putting everything right.
- So Jesus healing the man is also working on this level too! He’s tapping into Isaiah and saying that the time *has* come, and God is now delivering on his promise to come and rescue his people! It’s a sign of God’s love finally breaking through into this beautiful but broken world. And of course, most importantly, it was, and is, a pointer to the great healing to come, that will occur when Jesus brings the kingdom in its fullness, and completes the work of putting everything right.

3. Today

- So, where does that leave us today, concretely? Well (and you may not be surprised to hear me say this, as I seem to say it every week), it leaves us in a fairly nuanced place, which maybe is no wonder, I certainly don’t have all the answers. In some ways we are developing a very healthy and admirable relationship with disability in our society. You only have to watch the Paralympics happening at the moment in Tokyo, to see how far we have come embracing those with disabilities. It’s astonishing and truly humbling to watch the Paralympics.
- And yet, we still have a long way to go. One study I read recently found that 73% of people with learning disabilities in the UK have experienced hate crimes – that is, have been subjected to physical attacks, sexual assault, or emotional manipulation because of their disability. 73%! And this to say nothing of attitudes elsewhere around the world, where it’s not uncommon to see those with disabilities treated in a truly appalling manner, and I’ve witnessed that with my own eyes. All of this is *so* important as the Gospel today points to God’s love for *all* his children, something we must reflect in our lives.
- And as for healing, well yes, we should pray for it, and expect it. If we don’t, it won’t happen. If we do, it may happen. But most importantly we should allow this Gospel to breathe fresh hope into our lives for the great healing to come, for *that* is what it points forward to, and that is what we hope and believe in as Christians, that Jesus will return to finish what he so beautifully started.

Jesus, send your healing upon those who need it, but most of all, give me faith in the great healing to come.