



Twenty third Sunday Ordinary Time 2006

Isaiah 35: 4-7 James 2:1-5 Mark 7: 31-37

Our gospel reading gives us a healing story for reflection. In one of those unexplained moves the lectionary leaves out another healing story that comes between last Sunday's reading and today's.

The omitted story is of the healing of the daughter of a foreign woman. I think its important to mention this as it helps us understand the linking sentence.

"He then left Tyrian territory and returned by way of Sidon to the Sea of Galilee." On the map this doesn't make sense. It's like going from Sydney to Brisbane via Broken Hill. We could read this as the storyteller's way of saying Jesus took a long time to get back to his own territory. Read metaphorically it could mean that Jesus needed space.

In terms of the encounter with the Canaanite woman, where Jesus had been challenged to move outside his own area of ministry by curing a pagan, the journey he takes is about the need to integrate the experience. The more complex the experience the longer it takes to work through it. The Scriptures commonly use the metaphor of journey to speak of coming to terms with what is new and challenging.

Once home, some people bring to Jesus a man who is deaf and has a speech impediment. Having a double disability was a great affliction. Without hearing and speech he was isolated in the community. Jesus takes the man away from the crowd.

In an isolation that is now re-emphasised by distance he is touched by Jesus. Jesus uses gestures in the healing, he puts his fingers in the man's ears, and touches his tongue with spit. Mark makes it clear that the gestures were not what healed the man but Jesus' prayer.

The sigh or groan was often an indication of deep prayer. Its use similar to the way we might centre ourselves by attending to our breathing.

Jesus then prayed, "Be opened!"

The gestures were possibly a way of engaging the man through the senses that were available to him. Otherwise he would not have been able to follow what was happening to him.

In the sacraments we use gestures that draw us deeper into the action of God in our lives. Jesus does not seek acclamation, but the crowd ignore this, the deeds of God will speak for themselves and not be contained.

When we hear this story alongside the reading from Isaiah we hear it at another level. The heart of God's people, that has known the exile of sin, will also experience restoration by remembering the forgiveness of God.

The signs of God's faithfulness and presence with the people, Isaiah says, are when "the eyes of the blind are opened, and the ears of the deaf are cleared."

The physical signs of deafness and blindness are powerful symbols of being closed to the action of God. When we are prepared to identify and listen to the action of God all around us then we can be part of the kingdom movement.

The letter of James offers a cautionary word about right 'seeing'. It's easy to be caught up in the standards of the world and miss the friends of God who may be those with nothing to offer us. We can put a lot of energy into care for those who will honour us while the real focus of our ministry is ignored.

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