



THE NEW SHOFAR

God is most certainly a God of surprises!

Isaiah 35:1-10 - Mark 7:31-37

Trinity 15

Jesus continues in the land of the “unclean”

Having only just cast a demon for the Syrophenician woman, Jesus head off on what is a tour of the Gentile regions. This is where he should not be. This is where he runs the risk of being contaminated, made unacceptable to God his Father by coming into contact with these heathen foreigners. And yet – there he is. Taking demons head on and fulfilling the promises made by the prophets about what happens when God’s Messiah is among the people.

The yuk-factor of spittle

In an age of complicated and exotic medical procedures, this idea of spitting on a deaf person may seem like quackery at its worst. However, in ancient times it was thought to have curative powers and was used regularly by professional practitioners. The spittle from a famous or charismatic person was even more highly prized. Many ancient cultures understood all bodily secretions as having the ability to transmit spiritual powers – for good or for evil. Scholars think the life-giving qualities are because of its similarity to semen, while the death bringing characteristics come from a similarity to urine. Who would have thought!

For Mark and his readers, however, Jesus was filled with the Holy Spirit, and his spittle would be understood as being a sign (perhaps even the means) by which the healing Spirit of God passes out of Jesus and into this deaf man. The demoniac responsible for making the man mute is unable to resist this influx of heavenly power and is cast out.

This idea is affirmed by having Jesus *groan* as he heals the man. Groaning, like spitting, was a standard part of the magical processes. Magicians rely on a power outside of themselves and this groaning was a sign they were gathering in this power and passing it on. The point is, there is nothing odd about this narrative. The key focus is on the one healing – Jesus and these traditional actions can all be understood in this light. Spit does not heal. Jesus heals.

The battle against Satan continues – as does Jesus’ dominance

Once again we find Mark using the language and imagery of exorcism. In his presentation of this ministry, the evangelist illustrates the way Jesus goes about imposing himself on creation, much the same way as God his Heavenly Father imposed himself on the darkness and the waters of the deep (chaos) in order to bring about the first creation. For new life to take hold, the demonic darkness of sin and its consequences need to be pushed back and placed under control. This is what these ongoing exorcisms-healings reinforce. This is why, in verse 37, the people will observe how this Jesus *does all things well*. When God had finished the work of creation, the divine observation was how *all things* he had *done* were *good*. The language Mark uses reflects the Greek of the Hebrew creation narrative.

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And immediately...

How many times have we prayed for something and found only a deathly silence in return? A vacuum, an absence of a divine response? This is probably more likely to be the case than our experiencing of an immediate “healing” from heaven. Imagine how that might have been playing out in Mark’s community. They were under direct persecution and had seen many of their fellow disciples imprisoned, cast out of the synagogues, beaten and martyred. Hence the question: “If God now reigns, when are we going to begin to the blessings of living in the Kingdom”?

One part of Mark’s response to this challenge to faith is his use of the word *immediately*. When Jesus speaks and acts, something transformative happens. The man’s deafness is not cured because of the spittle and the thrusting of the Lord’s fingers into his ears! Jesus command *Be opened!* and the man heard *immediately*. It is the voice of the Son of God that heals.

This is so clearly a parallel with the works of God in creation: *God said let there be... and so it was...* Here we find Jesus doing the same thing. At the word of his command something happens. In our case, and in the harsh world in which those early Christian communities were seeking to live and to proclaim the Good News, the “something happening” as a consequence of God’s command may not always be apparent. But a transformation is unfolding. Our challenge is to seek to discern what God has done and what God continues to be doing in us, for us and through us. It may not always be in the way we expect, want or even demand, but it is there.

Is this not what the prophet Isaiah was celebrating?

In our reading we find the prophesy of Isaiah, the actions of the Jesus and the liturgy of the early Church coming together. The prophet spoke of the wonderful events of the time of the coming of the Messiah ...*Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; ⁶ then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.* And here this is all happening in the words of Jesus. *He said and so it was.*

The Rabbis understood this gift of hearing spoken of by Isaiah to be the ability to hear the words of the prophet and so listen to the voice of God. This is why the ancient Church baptismal liturgy made use of this miracle story. The Bishop would place his spittle on the candidate’s nose and ears and say *Be opened!* This would be accompanied by the words...*flee demon, for the judgment of God has come near.* Some scholars would go so far as to see in the language of Mark an outline of the baptismal rite – the Bishop would *thrust his fingers into the man’s ears* and then *having spat* he would *touch the man’s tongue*, look up to heaven and *sigh*, “*be opened*”.

What this means for believers today is Mark is inviting us to celebrate this gift of the ability to *hear* God speaking to us, not only in the words of Scripture but in the events of life itself. God is answering our prayers, our hopes, our aspirations but sometimes the cacophony of the voices of the world in which we live drowns out this heavenly voice. Baptism is a rite of passage into the life of God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit and the more we live according to God’s will (as proclaimed and witnessed to by Jesus) the more we will hear that heavenly voice offering us all we need to be fully alive in this transformed creation.

One thing today’s Gospel does illustrate is the way God speaks in unusual and unexpected places, people and situations – for example, here in the land of the unclean Gentiles. So often we can miss hearing God’s voice because it comes to us in the most surprising of ways.

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