**23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time**

**5th September 2021**

**A reading from the prophet Isaiah 35:4-7a**

In 538 B.C. the Persian conqueror, Cyrus the Great, gave Babylon’s enslaved Jews permission to return to Jerusalem. For a couple of years the slaves had seen successive cities fall to his armies as he swept down the Euphrates valley and they anticipated their liberation. The triumphant poem of Isaiah 35 describes, in idyllic terms, Israel's expected return to their own homes and land. It is shot through with the joy of restoration, of good fortune, felt by one who was absolutely certain that, in the end, God would not sell his people short.

Our reading bids those who were nervous to take courage. For God will come to vindicate and save his people. And his coming will reverse their seventy years of suffering and oppression.

Mark, in his account of the cure of a man who *'had an impediment in his speech'* (Gospel reading) had this Isaiah passage in mind. He uses a very rare word *rnogilalos* ('stammerer') - taken, from the phrase ‘*tongues of the dumb*’ in our reading. Similarly, Mark has also used the same Isaiah passage with the opening of the eyes of the blind man in his miracle story at 8:22-26.

**Responsorial Psalm: 146:6c-10**

This is a psalm of praise for the healing power of Yahweh, especially for his opening of the eyes of the blind. It does not mention the opening of the ears of the deaf and the releasing of the tongues of the dumb, but that may be taken as implied.

**Second Reading from The Letter of James 2:1-5**

The passage 2:1-5 is concerned with class distinction: it deplores a favouring of the rich and a slighting of the poor. In Judaism, also, wealth was a sign of God’s favour and so to be poor was the result of sin. It is understandable that a Priest may favour his contacts among the wealthy and powerful because they can do so much to support him. But, paradoxically, the Bible also emphasises God's concern for the poor.

But he does not love them simply because they are poor, as if poverty itself were a virtue. Here, as elsewhere, the background is that of the law-court in which justice was perverted and the poor were abused by the wealthy (v.6). It is really injustice and not poverty that God deplores. The different treatment meted out to rich and poor is especially reprehensible in liturgical assemblies (see 1 Corinthians 11).

This is the only passage in James (apart from 1:1) in which Jesus is mentioned and his title here is stilted: *'Our glorified Lord'* (v. 1). It is a formal confession of Christian faith based on the early liturgical acclamation: *'Jesus Christ is Lord*!' It proclaims the Christian belief that the crucified Jesus of Nazareth is the promised Messiah (Christ) and has been glorified by resurrection from the dead. It is more wooden than a relative would have used. The work probably dates from the turn of the century.

**Gospel Mark 7:31-37**

Mark has set the healing of a deaf-mute in the region of Decapolis. (See footnote) As in the previous episode of the healing of a Gentile woman's daughter 7:24-30, he is concerned to demonstrate that Jesus had a favourable attitude to the Gentiles.

In that story, the exorcising of the unclean spirit which possessed the Gentile girl shows Jesus listening to the Gentiles and setting them free. This time the spirit (see 9:17) not only leaves the man who also recovers his faculties of hearing and speech.

Mark gives fresh meaning to the story by placing it at this point in the narrative. It symbolizes what is happening to the disciples (see Mark 8:22-26). They also have been deaf to Jesus' word (7:18a) and have been so far unable to make any confession of faith in him. Eventually, however, at Caesarea Philippi, it will begin to dawn on them who Jesus really is, and Peter will make his confession of faith on their behalf. Thus, the symbolic ears of the disciples will be opened, their tongues will be released, and they will speak plainly, declaring through their spokesman Peter, "*You are the Messiah*"

The healing also has the symbolic intent of showing that the Gentiles, who were once insensitive towards God, are now capable of hearing him and paying him homage. They, too, have become heirs of the eschatological promise to Israel: *'The ears of the deaf will be unsealed ... and the tongues of the dumb sing for joy*' (Isaiah 35:5-6).

Jesus' actions of putting his fingers into the man's ears and touching his tongue with spittle are common to the technique of Greek and Jewish healers. Here the gestures have a certain 'sacramental' nature (see 8:23). The actions are not actually necessary for success but make clear to the onlookers what is happening. *'Looking up to heaven*,' as also in 6:41, implies Jesus' intimacy with God. '*Sigh*' expresses his deep feeling for the sufferer (see 1:41). Characteristically, Mark gives us the Aramaic word *Ephphatha* providing a translation in Greek but the original word continued to be used in the Baptismal liturgy.

It is interesting that in Ezekiel 24:27 the same word appears in the Greek translation of the Old Testament. *'Your mouth will be opened and you shall speak and no longer be silent’*

The description of this cure (v. 35) is given a solemn tone. As usual, Mark includes Jesus’ command to keep silence although that is clearly impossible. Nevertheless he strongly emphasises the fact that it is disobeyed. (v. 36)

As in 1:45 the deed is 'proclaimed' The deeds of Jesus cannot but speak the good news. *Their admiration was unbounded* is the strongest statement of astonishment in Mark. The miracle has exceptional significance. *'He has done everything well'* recalls Genesis 1:31. Jesus is doing the same work as his Father. We may also see in the last sentence of the reading the response of the Christian community who see in the works of Jesus the beginning of the end-time.

**Footnote on the Decapolis**.

Decapolis means ‘Ten Towns’ and was a mostly Gentile Greek speaking district south-east of Lake Galilee. Original locations are sometimes unreliable particularly in the Synoptics and the opening sentence in the Gospel reading is physically impossible.

Sidon is 29 miles north of Tyre on the coast and Galilee is 32 miles to the South-east and by the shortest route would be reached before the Decapolis. It is like saying that one travelled from Birmingham to London via South Shields and Kent.

It is not known how the confusion arose which may be due to a copyist who did not know the area. It is also interesting to note that John is often more accurate than the Synoptics despite being later in date.