

Lyn Valley Mission Community

Trinity 14

Isa 35:4-7a

James 2:1-17

Mark 7:24-37

In speaking and listening, may God be known, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

As we enter into the season of Creation-tide I am going to start with the imagery that we find the Old Testament reading today.

The passage from Isaiah was written during the Exile to Babylon, when the people of God were under Babylonian rule and separated from their land and Temple. As with much of the writing in the early chapters of Isaiah, the prophet speaks of God's encouragement and promise to a broken people that his mending is to come.

Like much of this prophet's message there is a deep connection between the repair of the society and the flourishing of the natural world. God action is talked of in terms of healing people: those who are blind, those who are deaf, those who are lame and those who have no voice will find sight, hearing, strength of limb and joyful words as a mark of God's presence and restoration of God's people.

And, the desert places will flow with water – the essential life source returning fertility and flourishing to barren land.

The writers of the gospels tell stories of Jesus' healing miracles, not just as illustrations of his power or compassion, but also because they see in his acts the fulfilment of those promises made in through the prophets. In Jesus, God is present among the people bringing about the restoration and mending that are the markers of God's Kingdom. The healing of a deaf man who had no power of speech, so that he can hear and talk in today's gospel is a good example of the literal fulfilment of the passage we have been given from Isaiah.

But in today's gospel there is also a miracle that it is more challenging to interpret because of the accompanying story: the healing of the daughter of the Syro-Phoenician woman.

In this story we see a woman, and a foreigner, seeking help for her child, a young girl. In the culture of the time a woman's voice would not generally have been a voice that was listened to, the status of children was far lower than the place they take in our culture, and within certain religious circles there was a sense of distancing from those of other nations. Jesus' initial reaction in the story – to appear to reject (in quite derogatory language) the woman's desperate plea for help for her daughter - might not, therefore, have been surprising to those around him at the time. And, before we are too judgemental of them – similar sentiments, that we should focus on taking care of our own before others get help- might currently be found in plenty of our popular papers and pervade our own culture too.

The woman, however, is not to be dismissed. She finds her voice to continue her plea: “even the dogs eat the children's crumbs”

Her words seem to get through to Jesus, he truly hears her need and he then is able to meet it, and to offer his healing even at a distance from the tormented child.

He listens to an often silenced voice, and hearing, changes his response.

This miracle becomes one of many indications in the gospel that Jesus' message and ministry was to reach beyond those of Jewish faith. Whilst it is not an easy story for us to interpret, because of Jesus' initial rejection of the woman, I suspect for the early church it was a really important story to return when they were trying to listen to God's call to take Jesus' mission out in what we would now call a fully inclusive way.

The miracle is not just a sign of Jesus' power over the forces of evil which can hold us in thrall – but also a sign that such power is to be shared without discrimination. It is a sign that God's kingdom is universal.

That Mark follows it with a miracle that brings about hearing and the return of speech might also be significant. At the heart of Jesus' healing of a man who cannot hear or speak is the word “Ephphatha” which means “be opened”

Again, this is demonstration of Jesus' power and identity as God's Son, and as we have already seen, it builds the picture of Jesus as the fulfiller of God's promises, the one who will bring about the coming Kingdom of God.

It is also a demonstration of the power of his ministry in enabling a person to hear anew, to hear truly, to listen and respond "Be opened" is a call to the whole person, senses, heart and mind: to be open to what it is necessary to hear. And the power of his ministry to release voices that were previously silenced or unheard (the kind of voice he has heard in his previous miracle)

Jesus has shown that he himself can discover a renewed openness to the unheard in the world and be released in that openness to bring about recovery and restoration where there is brokenness and distress.

He then shows that his ministry is about offering that openness and transformation where voices have been silenced and words go unheard.

I wonder how we might receive such ministry?

Which voices in our world do we need to be listening for so that we can be open to the change that is necessary for the signs of God's kingdom to be visible?

What do we need to find our voices to speak out about so that others can hear the need for action that furthers God's good will on earth?

Where do we need Jesus to speak his word: Ephphatha "be opened" in our lives so that we can open ourselves to the changes that we need to make too?

To return to the interconnection we noticed that Isaiah makes between the healing of human suffering and the flourishing of all creation, this creation-tide we might do well to focus these questions in the area of our life within creation, and our response to what we know of the human responsibility for the reverse of the picture in Isaiah – the fruitful places becoming barren – with its parallel impact on the wellbeing of so many of our silenced sisters and brothers in the more vulnerable parts of the world and our society.

Let's pray for our own part in the mending and restoring which are the signs of God's kingdom that Jesus calls all to be open to, in these well known words:

God be in my head,
And in my understanding;
God be in mine eyes,
And in my looking;
God be in my mouth,
And in my speaking;
God be in my heart,
And in my thinking;
God be at mine end,
And at my departing.

Amen