

**Trinity Baptist Church**  
**Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> June 2021 – Andy Banks**  
**Mark 7:31 – 8:21 - Jesus the opener of deaf ears**

We're going to look at the next section in Mark's Gospel in today's service, and we'll do so in two parts. You'll see there are two types of deafness in these passages that Jesus deals with – physical deafness and spiritual deafness. So, we read first from Mark 7:31-37.

**[Pray]**

**[Read Mark 7:31-37]**

*7:31 Jesus then left the neighbourhood of Tyre and went on through Sidon to Lake Galilee, going by way of the territory of the Ten Towns. 32 Some people brought him a man who was deaf and could hardly speak, and they begged Jesus to place his hands on him. 33 So Jesus took him off alone, away from the crowd, put his fingers in the man's ears, spat, and touched the man's tongue. 34 Then Jesus looked up to heaven, gave a deep groan, and said to the man, "Ephphatha," which means, "Open up!"*

*35 At once the man was able to hear, his speech impediment was removed, and he began to talk without any trouble. 36 Then Jesus ordered the people not to speak of it to anyone; but the more he ordered them not to, the more they told it. 37 And all who heard were completely amazed. "How well he does everything!" they exclaimed. "He even causes the deaf to hear and the dumb to speak!"*

Challenge: Guess the song title from British Sign Language:

- 1) **My** [fist to chest] **God** [point up] **is so** [shrug with palms turned up] **big** [hands move from level with sides out]
- 2) **Lord** [L's pointing up] **I** [point at self] **lift** [2 fingers l. hand on 2 fingers r. hand then raise] **your** [fist raised fingers to person, slightly pushed out] **name** [2 fingers on r. forehead and move away] **on** [hand flat up brought down onto other hand flat up] **high** [hand face downwards moved up high]
- 3) **Shine** [jazz hands] **from** [flat hand facing up, turn over in rounded way] **the inside** [hands out facing each other; r. hand towards and away from l. hand twice] **out** [r. hand flopped over, flick fingers away from body]
- 4) **I** [point at self] **can** [forefinger near top of nose, bring down nose and join to thumb] **wriggle** [fists on top of each other and twist in opposite directions] **like** [forefingers pointing out bounce together twice] **a worm** [forefinger pointing up from fist, bring half down to thumb and move hand forwards]
- 5) **Wonderful** [hands flat either side of chin with thumbs in, move away and out from face] **Lord** [L's pointing up] **Wonderful** [hands flat either side of chin with thumbs in, move away and out from face] **God** [point up].

*Sermonette 1: Jesus the opener of deaf ears (physical)*

Signing isn't easy, is it? When I was in secondary school, we were once asked which of our senses we would find hardest to lose. Almost everyone said their sight, but my answer was hearing. Have you ever imagined what it must be like to hear nothing? Just crossing the road would be much more hazardous. You could only know what was happening on TV by reading the subtitles. For me, one of the hardest things would be not being able to hear music. And even more so, conversation. You could only know that someone wanted to talk to you if they were facing you. And then you'd only be able to "hear" them either if they were using sign language, or if you were able to lip read effectively. And, in Jesus' day there wasn't even any official sign language. So for this man, who was both deaf and nearly mute, his life must have been terribly hard!

Fortunately, he had some friends who cared about him enough to bring him to Jesus. And Jesus healed him. There are some interesting details in this healing. First Jesus took him off on his own, away from the crowds. That might have been because Jesus didn't really want this widely known for some reason – perhaps because he there were increasing numbers of people who wanted to use him as the figurehead for starting a revolt against the Romans, and that wasn't what he came to do. But maybe Jesus simply wanted to give this man some privacy or to make it easier for him to take in what Jesus was doing.

But then he did something very unusual. He stuck his fingers in the man's ears and either spat on the man's tongue, or spat on his hand and touched his tongue with the spit. That sounds pretty disgusting, don't you think? How many of you would like a stranger to stick their fingers in your ears? Or for them to spit on your tongue? I wonder, can anyone guess at why Jesus might have done that?

We don't actually know why. One idea is that it involved the *man* in the act of healing. He couldn't demonstrate any faith in Jesus by speaking. And he may well not have understood what Jesus was saying. But, by putting his fingers in his ears the man would know Jesus wanted to heal his deafness, by spitting on his tongue he would know he wanted to enable him to speak, and the physical act of sighing and looking to heaven would signal to him to join in praying to God. So, when Jesus pronounced the Aramaic word "Ephphatha," meaning "be opened," the man would have understood what was happening. Of course, the word "Ephphatha" is itself quite an expressive word to lip read, too.

But the main thing we should never lose sight of is that Jesus healed this man. Completely. He wasn't left partially deaf, or needing a hearing aid, or able to speak but with difficulty. He was completely healed by the Jesus' authority. This is yet more evidence that Jesus is God himself in human flesh. And it should give us confidence when we pray for people who have great needs – God is able to heal anything. We have to try to discern or sense what he *wishes* to do in each given situation, but we are called to believe that Jesus is able to heal all difficulties and to trust that, whether he heals or not, he does so out of deep, deep love.

God can and does do powerful things when we pray, and he particularly loves it when children pray. Once when Erin was a baby, and Fiona was driving her and Joel back to our house from Winchester, Erin was screaming for the best part of an hour all the way to the M25. And Joel, who must have been about 3, said to Fiona, shall we pray for her to stop. Fiona thought to herself, "What do you think I've been doing?" but said something like, "That's a good idea." Joel prayed, and within 5 minutes, Erin was asleep. Now, that wasn't something as dramatic as a healing, but it shows that God loves to listen to the prayers of both children and adults. We're going to sing again, and then we're going to do some praying ourselves.

**[Read Mark 8:1-21]**

*8:1Not long afterward another large crowd came together. When the people had nothing left to eat, Jesus called the disciples to him and said, 2"I feel sorry for these people, because they have been with me for three days and now have nothing to eat. 3If I send them home without feeding them, they will faint as they go, because some of them have come a long way."*

*4His disciples asked him, "Where in this desert can anyone find enough food to feed all these people?"*

*5"How much bread do you have?" Jesus asked.*

*"Seven loaves," they answered.*

*6He ordered the crowd to sit down on the ground. Then he took the seven loaves, gave thanks to God, broke them, and gave them to his disciples to distribute to the crowd; and the disciples did so. 7They also had a few small fish. Jesus gave thanks for these and told the disciples to distribute them too. 8-9Everybody ate and had enough – there were about four thousand people. Then the disciples took up seven baskets full of pieces left over. Jesus sent the people away 10and at once got into a boat with his disciples and went to the district of Dalmanutha.*

*11Some Pharisees came to Jesus and started to argue with him. They wanted to trap him, so they asked him to perform a miracle to show that God approved of him. 12But Jesus gave a deep groan and said, "Why do the people of this day ask for a miracle? No, I tell you! No such proof will be given to these people!"*

*13He left them, got back into the boat, and started across to the other side of the lake.*

*14The disciples had forgotten to bring enough bread and had only one loaf with them in the boat.*

*15"Take care," Jesus warned them, "and be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and the yeast of Herod."*

16 They started discussing among themselves: "He says this because we don't have any bread."

17 Jesus knew what they were saying, so he asked them, "Why are you discussing about not having any bread? Don't you know or understand yet? Are your minds so dull? 18 You have eyes – can't you see? You have ears – can't you hear? Don't you remember 19 when I broke the five loaves for the five thousand people? How many baskets full of leftover pieces did you take up?"

"Twelve," they answered.

20 "And when I broke the seven loaves for the four thousand people," asked Jesus, "how many baskets full of leftover pieces did you take up?"

"Seven," they answered.

21 "And you still don't understand?" he asked them.

*Communication Game: communicating phrases without words*

*Sermonette 2: Jesus the opener of deaf ears (spiritual)*

I wonder, do you ever choose to close *your* ears to what someone is saying to you? We once stayed in a guest house in Oxwich in South Wales, and the little son of the guest house owners didn't like being told to get dressed ready for bed. So he ignored the instruction and carried on playing. And, when his mum told him again, he replied, "I'm not hearing you." ... I reckon we've all tried to stop our ears to someone at some time in our lives. That can be a *good* thing if someone is saying something untrue or unkind about us – we don't have to listen to that or believe what they say. But it can be a *bad* thing, if we don't listen when someone is trying to *help* us or if we choose to ignore what our parents or teachers are telling us to do. We discovered when we played the game just now that it's really frustrating trying to get a message across to someone who either can't or won't understand what you are saying.

And, in effect, Jesus accused his disciples of stopping their ears to the lessons he was trying to teach them. vv.17-18: "Don't you know or understand yet? *Are your minds so dull?* You have eyes – can't you see? *You have ears – can't you hear?*" At this moment, they were spiritually deaf. They'd seen countless miracles, including when Jesus fed 5,000+ people with just 5 loaves and 2 fish! Yet, when he suggested feeding a crowd of 4,000+ people, they went through the same conversation they had then. "We don't have enough bread." "How are we going to pay for it all?" It's so easy to stop our ears to Jesus' call to live by *faith* whenever the next challenge comes along, even if we've been through something similar before. But once again, Jesus miraculously multiplied the bread they had, such that everyone had enough to eat. And again there was more left over than they started with.

Not long afterwards, for some reason, they got into a boat without taking more than one loaf of bread between the 13 of them. Jesus had just had another dispute with the Pharisees, when they came and asked him to prove his claims to be the Messiah – the promised Saviour – by performing a miracle. Jesus refused, because he'd already performed plenty enough miracles for them to believe in him. But they had stopped their ears to what he said about himself. Jesus knew that no matter how many miracles he might perform, their hearts were hard, and they would not believe in him. Another miracle would be a waste of time.

So, having just had this argument, Jesus sought to warn his disciples against being sucked in by the faithless teachings and behaviour of the Pharisees – and he added into the mix Herod, the faithless Roman-appointed ruler. "Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and the yeast of Herod." Now yeast was often used in the Old Testament as a symbol for evil, and every year every Jew had to get rid of all the yeast from their houses during the Passover Festival to symbolise sweeping all the evil out of their lives. So, it was a picture they *should* have understood.

But, they missed the point entirely, and they started worrying about having too little bread with them! It's as if they'd totally forgotten the lessons about Jesus' ability to provide that they'd learnt when he fed first 5,000, then 4,000 men! They were behaving exactly like the unbelieving Pharisees and Herod! In the Good News translation, Jesus words are simplified to read, "Are your minds so dull?" What he says in the original Greek is "Have your hearts become stubborn (or hardened?)" Isn't that a bit strong for people who have just missed the point a bit. But there is a danger that failing to trust Jesus, or failing to listen to him, even in the seemingly small things, can become a habit of unbelief. And that hurts Jesus because he wants us to trust him.

We sung earlier, "nothing's too big, big, big, for his power; nothing's too little, little for his care." It's fun to sing, and it's easy to believe that in our heads. But what about when things are worrying us? What about if we're not getting on so well with our friends anymore? Or, if someone is picking on us? Or we're struggling with a subject at school? Or what about the even bigger things? What about if one of our family is really not well? Or if we keep hearing things about Covid that scare us? Or, for adults, if we're worried about money or stress at work or our health?

It's a good idea to talk to people about our worries – that can help, not least because other people can often have a better perspective on things, especially our parents or teachers or people with more experience of life than us. But equally important, if it is true that nothing is too big for God's power, or too little for his care (which *is* true), then we can also talk to God about our worries. But once we've talked to him, we're not meant to just take back the worries again. We're meant to tell ourselves, "God is big enough to sort this out, even if I don't know how he's going to do that." We may have to keep praying about things, because our brains can keep bringing thoughts back to our minds again, but each time we find ourselves worrying, we can go back to God and remind ourselves that nothing is impossible for him. It can be good to speak out loud something like, "Jesus, I can't sort this out, but I trust you to sort it out." Time and again, I have found that God sorts out problems when I pray about them, or at least gives me the strength to cope with difficult situations. But I have to keep reminding myself of all the times he's helped me in the past, each time I find myself worrying about something new. That's what helps me to choose faith in Jesus instead of fear.

It's also easy to get taken in by other people's beliefs and teachings, especially if everyone around us seems to think differently from us. We can easily start to believe that they could be right, even if what they say contradicts what the Bible tells us is true. That's the other danger that Jesus warned about. It's good to learn about what other people believe and to respect their beliefs, but it's important to recognise when those beliefs are opposed to Christian faith.

Do you know how bank cashiers are trained to recognise forged notes? You might think they spend ages looking at forgeries. But they don't. They're trained to be so familiar with the *real* thing that they instantly recognise when something doesn't look right. That's what we should do with God's word – we should get to know it so well that we can quickly see when something we hear doesn't fit with what God says. There are many things that we are told today that we have to believe, that don't match what God says is true, even occasionally things that your teachers might tell you in school. So, if you hear things that make you think, "That sounds different from what I think the Bible says," it's really good to talk to your parents or your Godzone leaders about it – or another trusted Christian for us adults – to help you think through what you really believe.

Of course, once we've done that, the harder job is to have the courage to live by what we believe, even if that means standing out from people around us. But Jesus says that those who live for him will be rewarded by God in heaven. That's far more important than what other people think of us here, don't you think? So, let's shine in this world for Jesus, with the light that comes from his light within us.