

Just over a month ago, Premier Christianity, Britain's most influential Christian media on radio and TV, and in print, ran an article by Gavin Ashenden titled, "**The Church of England will die unless we start reading the Bible again**"<sup>1</sup>. 35 years ago, the author was smuggling Bibles into the former Soviet Union. Referring to the way Tim Farron and Jacob Rees-Mogg were treated by the media says, "*The cultural and political screws are slowly tightening against those who do read the Bible and keep faith with it, in the public space.*"

His observation came on the heels of a survey<sup>2</sup> commissioned by the Church of England which revealed, "*Most people who call themselves Church of England Christians never read the Bible. ... Figures show that 60 per cent of self-declared followers of the Church admit they never read the Bible. Meanwhile, 36 per cent say they never attend church and one in three says they never pray.*"

The Bible is the foundation of what we know is the Christian faith. From cover to cover, it is the story of God, who loved all humankind so very much, that He came as His Son to submit Himself to death by dying, only to defeat its presumed hold on us, but through His resurrection, opened the door for us to enter back into eternal life.

Gavin Ashenden reiterates, "*A church cannot survive if its people are not formed by the Bible, and conformed to the radical new paradigm of humanity the Spirit in the Bible forges*". This radical new model in the Bible challenges our perception and understanding of God, introducing Him to us as **Our Father**, inviting us into a personal, father-son/daughter relationship with Him. The God in our Bible knows the challenges we face, and He is eager to equip us to take on these problems and provocations.

This was Jesus's message: *Allow me to teach you, show you and demonstrate to you, how you can enjoy this personal father-son/daughter relationship with **Our Father**.*

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.premierchristianity.com/Blog/The-Church-of-England-will-die-unless-we-start-reading-the-Bible-again>

<sup>2</sup> by ComRes

Last week we started with the first of Jesus' prayers, having spent 5 weeks studying Jesus' teachings on prayer. We noted how Jesus, in the midst of the greatest pressure He faced during His life here, praised God, the Lord of Heaven and earth, thanking Him for revealing His Wisdom to the innocent and those labelled ignorant, and shielding it from those who value their own knowledge and wisdom more than God's wisdom. We also noted, it is important to have confidence in the person of God, but it is more significant to enjoy confidence in our **relationship** with God. This relationship is expressed in our life of prayer. This confidence in our relationship with God, also gives us voice to praise Him, and He gives us a heart to listen to His voice, He tells us where to go, whom to serve, and He blesses us, to bless those around us. God has confidence in each of us; it should, therefore, be natural for us to reciprocate and have confidence in Him, and confidence in our relationship with Him.

It is in the confidence of His relationship with the Father, Jesus believed that prayer absolutely works, and He teaches this truth to His disciples and to us. At the start of Jesus' last 24 hours on earth, He said to His disciples, ***On the day of My resurrection, you will not ask me to explain anything, because you will understand everything. I tell you very honestly, anything you ask the Father in my name, He will give you. Until now you have asked for nothing in my name. Ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be complete.***<sup>3</sup>

Our text today is a demonstration of this absolute belief, that prayer works.

Jesus has been travelling in southern Lebanon, north towards the cities of Tyre and Sidon, then turning east and then south, He returns to the region north of the sea of Galilee. While there, Mark tells us, *they brought to Him a man who was deaf, and could not utter a sound, a person who could neither hear nor speak.*<sup>4</sup>

The first thing we note is that a person who can neither hear nor speak, would have been deaf from birth. We know a family whose son picked up an ear

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<sup>3</sup> John 16:23-24

<sup>4</sup> Mark 7:31-37

infection whilst a baby, which went undetected for a few years. When at the age of two/three, he was unable to speak, medical investigations revealed perforated eardrums, the result of the ear infection at infancy. He could not hear, therefore could not speak.

Here is adult man who can neither hear nor speak; you can imagine the frustration trying to communicate with him, and he with people around him! For a person who has never heard words, the world is a very different place. Amidst the silence, there is no way of understanding life; there is no way of expressing emotions; there is no way of letting people know your needs, or even knowing good from bad, safe from unsafe, trust from distrust.

I imagine the man felt boxed in a prison of silence. I imagine he had been taken to many faith healers and doctors. I imagine he felt trapped in his own silent world unable to hear, unable to speak, and unable to communicate. I also imagine he had very little hope of his situation ever changing, trapped forever in his silent world, only able to see, touch and smell.

A human being without emotions cannot live the life God intended for them. Mark makes the plight very clear: First he says, this man was **brought** to Jesus. It is unlikely that the man would have known about Jesus and why he was brought before Him. To convince the man to follow others who will take him to a place, would have been a major exercise. The second thing Mark tells us, those who brought the man, **begged, pleaded** and **implored** Jesus to lay hands on him, to heal him.

The man does not know why he is there, and those who brought him to Jesus, plead with Him to heal by the laying on of hands.

More often than not, we ask God to do something, because **we** think it is the right thing to do. Like the people who brought the person who could neither hear nor utter a sound, in our innocence we might pray, *Lord, touch me and heal me*, or *Lord, use this medicine to heal me*, or we might pray *untie and release me from the bondage of a habit*, or *remove from me the overwhelming oppression of a situation*, almost telling God what to do to heal me. God might have other ways of healing or delivering us. If we have confidence in our

relationship with God, it is best to leave Him to do what He considers appropriate.

Remember Jesus' first miracle recorded in the the Gospel of John, when at a wedding, he turned water into wine? Mary informs Jesus of the problem that the host had run out of wine. On her way out, she tells the household help, *Do what He tells you!* This is a demonstration of absolute confidence in their relationship: *I have told Him of the problem and He will do what is best; only I must make sure the household help do not place obstructions or create obstacles to what Jesus was about to do.*

In our passage today, the people who brought the man said to Jesus, *Lay your healing hands on him.* Jesus did not want it to be a public show. So He takes the man aside into a private room.

Please remember, **how** Jesus does **what** He does, is not important, because miracles by their very nature, cannot be explained. Jesus and the Father have a special relationship and Jesus knows we need to be restored into the full-functioning person, God made us to be.

Having closed the man's ears with His fingers and touched his tongue with His saliva (some-thing we may find repugnant), Jesus looks up to Heaven (to the Father who is the author of life and His strength) and **prays one word: Ephphata** "Be open", or in todays language, **open up!**

Jesus does not use a long eloquent prayer. He does not use magical potions, incantations or incense. He uses touch, saliva and one word, **Open up!**

I love the original text which tells us what happened next, **his ears were blown open and the cords which held back his tongue were cut loose, and he spoke as any normal person would speak!** This man's prison has been blown open, and he is forever free. Jesus the Messiah, is fulfilling the prophecy of the prophet Isaiah, *Blind eyes will be opened, deaf ears unstopped, lame men and women will leap like deer, and the voiceless tongue of the mute will break into song for joy.*<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Isaiah 35

In an split second, the man born deaf, unable to utter a word, spoke like a normal person!

We can revel in the miracle; after all He is the Son of God - nothing is impossible for Him. We can delight in what Jesus did and celebrate the man's new life, all of which we must; but if this is our focus, we miss the point in the narrative: it is in the confidence of the relationship Jesus enjoys with the Father, that no more than one word needs to be spoken, **open up!**, for the Father to act and bring complete healing and total restoration.

One word in prayer might for someone, mean a physical or emotional healing. One word in prayer might for someone, bring spiritual renewal. One word in prayer might restore an important relationship for someone. One word in prayer can result in being made whole and complete.

If we are truly honest with ourselves, all of us are, in some way, like this deaf man who couldn't speak. Each of us has some part of ourselves that is trapped and boxed in. We might have times when the world around us feels like it is closing in. We might have moments when we feel inadequate and inferior. We have those moments when we lose hope and we despair. We might have those moments when we feel helpless and weak. It is in these moments one word in prayer releases us from our prison, releases us from our fear, and make us whole.

Let me leave you with a secret which needs to be in the open. For the man who was deaf and unable to speak, the one word which released and restored him was **Open up!** There is another word which is just as powerful, if not more powerful and that word, when God hears it said in a spirit of penitential prayer, is **Please....** God knows exactly what what you want to say, and He will answer!

***Whatever you ask in my name, said Jesus, I will do it so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it.***<sup>6</sup>

**AMEN**

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<sup>6</sup> John 14:13-14