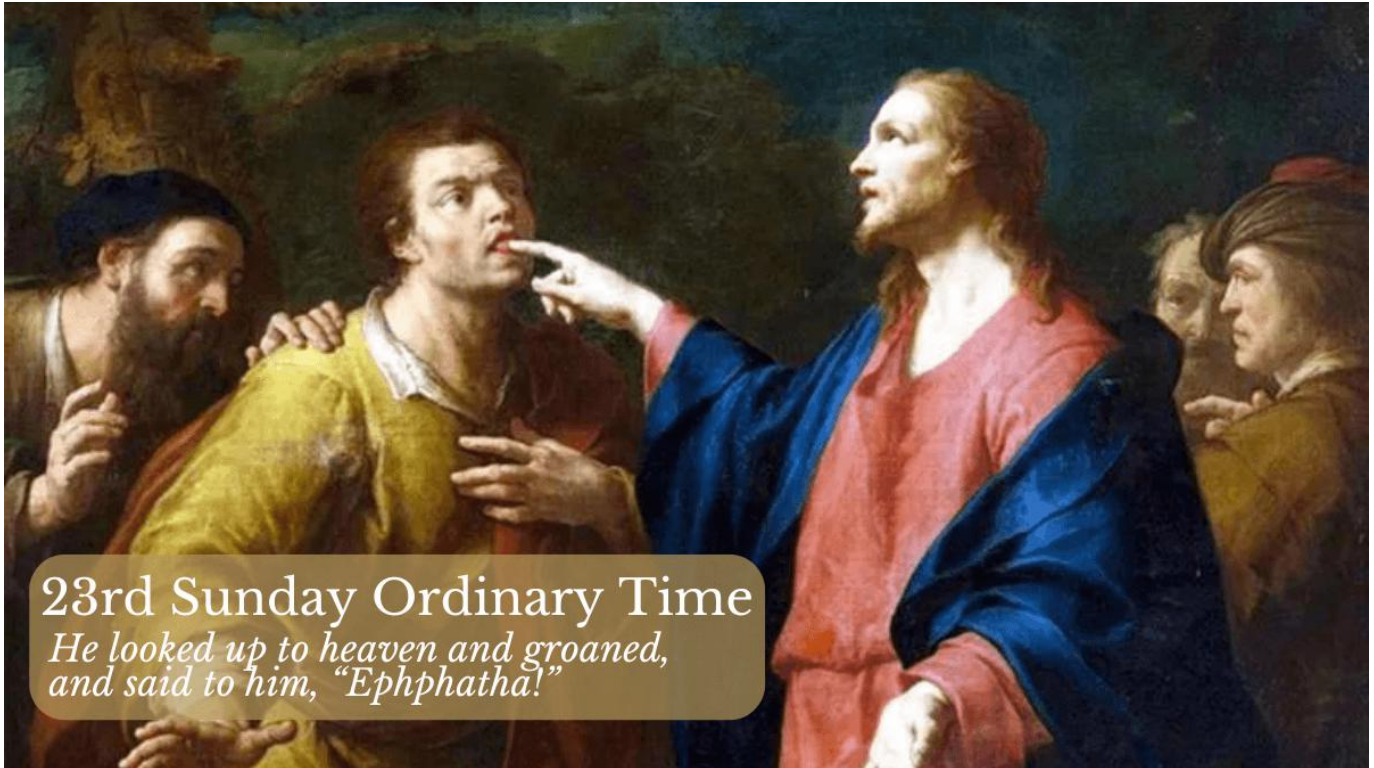


## Hearing and Speech

<sup>31</sup> Again he left the district of Tyre and went by way of Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, into the district of the Decapolis. <sup>32</sup> And people brought to him a deaf man who had a speech impediment and begged him to lay his hand on him. <sup>33</sup> He took him off by himself away from the crowd. He put his finger into the man's ears and, spitting, touched his tongue; <sup>34</sup> then he looked up to heaven and groaned, and said to him, "Ephphatha!" (that is, "Be opened!") <sup>35</sup> And (immediately) the man's ears were opened, his speech impediment was removed, and he spoke plainly. <sup>36</sup> He ordered them not to tell anyone. But the more he ordered them not to, the more they proclaimed it. <sup>37</sup> They were exceedingly astonished and they said, "He has done all things well. He makes the deaf hear and (the) mute speak." (Mark 7:31-37)



23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday Ordinary Time

*He looked up to heaven and groaned,  
and said to him, "Ephphatha!"*

*Domenico Maggiotto (1713-1794), "Christ Healing a Deaf and Mute Man" (Public Domain)*

## Boundaries and Transitions

After several weeks during which we took our Gospel readings from the Bread of Life Discourse in John, last week we returned to the Gospel of Mark. When we picked up again in the Gospel of Mark, we bypassed accounts of the death of John the Baptist, Jesus walking on the water, and the healing of the crowds in Gennesaret. Last week we picked up the story with Mark's account of the conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees and Jerusalem scribes. Given the conflict at the end of the Bread of Life Discourse, that was probably a good segue.

The flow of the Markan gospel comes to the story of Jesus' casting out of the demon from the Syrophenician woman's daughter - but that is not part of any Sunday gospel this year. Next is the cure of the deaf-mute which is our Sunday reading. This is followed by a second account of miraculous feeding of the crowds.

This is brought to your attention to make a note that sometimes there is a difference between what forms boundaries/transitions in the gospel narratives. There are the traditional and accepted chapters and numbering of verses that were introduced by a Parisian printer in the mid-16th century. There are also the

later boundaries that seem to reveal themselves when the whole of the Gospel is seen with a literary viewpoint.

This section of the Gospel of Mark, described above, seems to be “bookended” by two stories of a miraculous feeding of the crowds (6:34-44 and 8:1-10). Was there an intent to use these bookends to frame all that happens in between? Do geographical references indicate boundary or transition points? Jesus and the Apostles move from Nazareth (6:1), to Bethsaida (6:45), to Gensarette (6:53), to Tyre (7:24) and then “*left the district of Tyre and went by way of Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, into the district of the Decapolis.*” (6:31). Perhaps they are nothing more than details of the story, but sometimes there is more to discern.

The withdrawal of Jesus to the district of Tyre may have been for a rest (Mark 7:24), but he soon moved onward to Sidon and, by way of the Sea of Galilee, to the Decapolis. Jesus has moved from Jewish territory to the land of the Gentiles. This movement follows immediately upon the conflict with the Pharisees in which Jesus declared all foods are “clean” and do not defile – and now Jesus moves into contact with the Gentile people, who under some interpretations, are themselves unclean. Thus, to have contact with them renders one unclean.

If in the preceding passage Jesus “declared all foods clean” (7:19), then the thrust of the stories of Mark 7 seems to be that Jesus is declaring all persons clean, whether a Gentile woman in a pagan city or a man of indeterminate race in the unclean territory of the Decapolis. The stories are two examples of the sample principle: both advance Jesus' repudiation of taboos and misinformed “tradition of the elders.”

Although not part of the Sunday gospels in Year B, Mark's encounter of Jesus and the Syrophenician woman (which precedes our periscope) is worth noting as regards traditions that are being overturned. Joachim Jeremias in *Jerusalem in the time of Christ* [360] describes the taboos associated with the interaction between men and women: “... a woman was expected to remain unobserved in public. There is a recorded saying of one of the oldest scribes we know, Jose b. Johanan of Jerusalem (c. 150 BC): 'Talk not much with womankind', to which was added, 'They said this of a man's own wife: how much more of his fellow's wife!' rules of propriety forbade a man to be alone with a woman, to look at a married woman, or even to give her a greeting. It was disgraceful for a scholar to speak with a woman in the street. A woman who conversed with everyone in the street could, ... be divorced without the payment prescribed in the marriage settlement.” An encounter between this woman and a scribe or Pharisee would be hard to imagine in the “tradition of the elders.”

The woman's request of Jesus is that he drive an unclean spirit out of his daughter (7:25). As Stoffregen notes, while Jesus has just declared all foods clean (v.19), that does not mean that everything is clean. There are still unclean and evil powers in the world – but this Gentile woman is not among them. What is unclean is the demon that is driven out – “*what comes out.*” Perhaps this narrative is also meant to linguistically point back to Jesus' declaration, “*But what comes out of a person, that is what defiles.*” (v.20) even as “what comes out” from Jesus is the healing power of the divine.

When one considers the miracle of the healing of the deaf-mute, one should also note that the healing of the man changed “what came out” of his mouth from “*speech impediment*” (v.32) to “*speaking plainly.*” (v.35). In the Greek the change is from *mogilalos* (lit. “difficult speaking”) to *elalei orthos* (lit. “was speaking correctly”). In both the healing of the man and the woman, Jesus changes what comes out of a person.

A nod to geography also seems in order. The Phoenician republic of Sidon was located on the coast some twenty miles north of Tyre. Jesus seems to have journeyed northward to the district of Sidon and then turned southeastward through Philip's territory toward a point on the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee within the region of the Decapolis. While the way is not specific there are no natural topological reasons

why for a journey using this route, but it may have been designed to preclude the necessity of entering Galilee. Jesus remained in territory with strong Gentile associations. Yet Decapolis had sizable colonies of Jews in nearly all of the cities. It is difficult from the text to determine whether the crowd that approached Jesus was Jewish or Gentile or a mix.

### The Thread that Connects

This section of Mark has three stories that are often treated separately, not always proclaimed as Sunday gospels, and as such the thread that connects these stories can be lost.

The stories are the healing of the Syro-Phoenician woman's child, the healing of the deaf/mute person and the restoration of sight to a blind person.

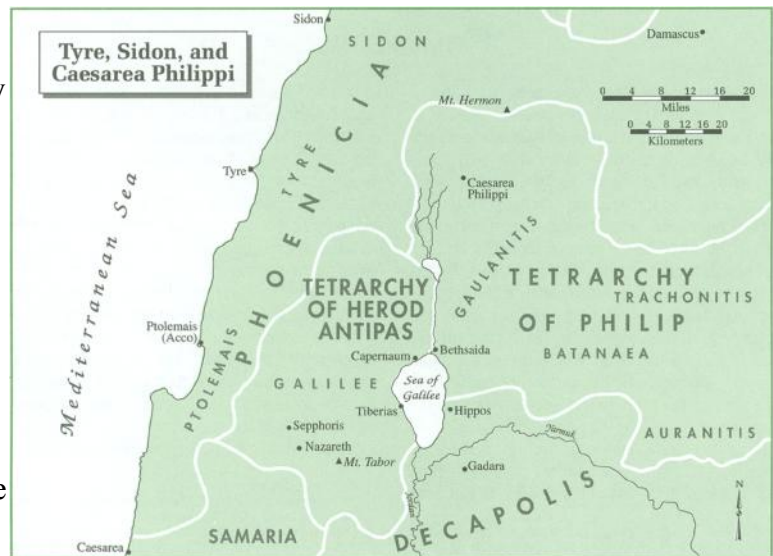
Van Linden [918] offers a succinct description of the thread and how these stories are meant to form discipleship:

The Syro-Phoenician woman who asked Jesus to heal her possessed daughter would seem to have had two counts against her from the start. Being a woman and a non-Jew, it is no wonder that she crouched at the feet of this male Jewish preacher, begging him for help (vv. 25–26)! The first-century readers of Mark's Gospel would not be overly surprised at Jesus' harsh-sounding refusal to give to Gentiles (the dogs) what rightfully belonged to the Jews (the children of the household). They would be surprised, though, that Jesus would allow a Gentile woman to persist in her pleading and even play off his own words to get what she wanted: "Lord, even the dogs under the table eat the children's scraps!" (vv. 27–28). Her persistence forces Jesus to make an exception to the rule (i.e., take care of your own people first, then go to others, v. 27). He cures her possessed daughter by a word as a reward for her mother's staying power and faith in him (v. 29).

Mark's readers would hear in this passage several invitations to action: first, to imitate the persistence of the woman, even when things seem hopeless; second, to imitate Jesus' "breaking the rules" on behalf of an "outsider"; and third, to examine their openness to those of other faiths, especially the Jews, the first "sons and daughters of the household."

The story of the deaf-mute is like a gate swinging back and forth. It swings back to the story of the Syro-Phoenician woman, because the deaf-mute also comes from a non-Jewish part of Palestine (v. 31). It swings forward to the next chapter, to the story of the blind man (8:22–26), which closely parallels this cure. Both the deaf-mute and the blind man are brought to Jesus by others (v. 32; 8:22). Both times Jesus takes the men away from the crowd (v. 33; 8:23) and touches them, using spittle to heal them (vv. 33–35 and 8:23, 25).

These obvious parallels make it clear that Mark wants the two cures to be read side by side. In this way, Mark's readers will hardly be able to miss that Jesus is the Messiah promised by Isaiah long before when he said: "Then will the eyes of the blind be opened, the ears of the deaf be cleared" (Isa 35:5–6; see Mark 7:37). However, with the final parallel element in the two stories (Jesus' request for secrecy in 7:37 and 8:26), Mark asks his readers to remember



another Isaian passage that Jesus has fulfilled by his life and life-giving death: “Who would believe what we have heard? ... He was spurned and avoided by all, a man of suffering, accustomed to infirmity. ... pierced for our offenses, crushed for our sins. Upon him was the chastisement that makes us whole, by his stripes we were healed” (Isa 53:1–5).

Jesus, for Mark, was the perfect fulfillment of all Isaiah’s prophecies.

## Commentary

<sup>31</sup> Again he left the district of Tyre and went by way of Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, into the district of the Decapolis. <sup>32</sup> And people brought to him a deaf man who had a speech impediment and begged him to lay his hand on him. <sup>33</sup> He took him off by himself away from the crowd. He put his finger into the man’s ears and, spitting, touched his tongue; <sup>34</sup> then he looked up to heaven and groaned, and said to him, “Ephphatha!” (that is, “Be opened!”) <sup>35</sup> And (immediately) the man’s ears were opened, his speech impediment was removed, and he spoke plainly. <sup>36</sup> He ordered them not to tell anyone. But the more he ordered them not to, the more they proclaimed it. <sup>37</sup> They were exceedingly astonished and they said, “He has done all things well. He makes the deaf hear and (the) mute speak.”

As noted previously, Jesus’ arrival in the “*district of the Decapolis*,” while technically Gentile territory, even in Jesus’ time was the home to many Jewish communities. The Decapolis (literally, “Ten Towns”) figures quite prominently in the ministry of Jesus (Mark 5:20, Matt 4:25, Luke 8:26). While many of the cities’ names would be foreign to our modern English ear (Gadara, Abila, etc.), one of the city names would be quite familiar: Philadelphia.

This narrative of the deaf man with a speech impediment appears only in the Gospel of Mark, although Matt 15:29–31 contains a summary of Jesus’ activity along the Sea of Galilee that includes healing of those who are unable to speak. As in the story of the paralyzed man lowered into the room through the roof (Mk 2:3–5), friends bring the deaf man to Jesus. Unlike the friends of the paralyzed man, these friends begged Jesus to heal him. Like the story of Jairus’ daughter (5:42), Jesus takes the person away from the crowd to perform the healing. And like so many Markan accounts, Jesus commands the person to remain silent about the miracle (5:43) – and as in the other accounts, to no avail. But one should note that ignoring Jesus’ command for silence on the matter seems counter intuitive since only way for the deaf man to show that he is healed is to talk to others

The man suffers with defective hearing and speech. The man was not born deaf else he would not have been likely to learn speech. Thus, it is most likely that injury or illness robbed him of his ability to hear. Mark uses a rare word to describe the man’s “*speech impediment*” (v.32; Greek *mogilalos* literally “difficult speaking”.) Many scholars find an allusion to Isa. 35:5 and following which celebrates God as the one who comes in order to clear the ears of the deaf and to provide song for the man of inarticulate speech.

**What is Asked.** *And people brought to him a deaf man who had a speech impediment and begged him to lay his hand on him.*

The request for Jesus to lay hands upon the person is not absolutely clear in what is intended. In the encounter with Jairus the intention is clear, as the request is specific: “*My daughter is at the point of death. Please, come lay your hands on her that she may get well and live.*” (5:35). So too when Jesus is rejected in Nazareth (6:5), “*So he was not able to perform any mighty deed there, apart from curing a few sick people by laying his hands on them.*” There is every warrant for assuming that healing is also being requested for the deaf man if one assumes that the crowd, friends, and the man are Jewish – but then they are in the district of the Decapolis, predominantly Gentile territory. In other traditions, the laying on of

hands is primarily a blessing action. Is this important? Perhaps. Looking ahead to v.37 we read “*They were exceedingly astonished...*” If “they” refers to the crowds then astonishment seems appropriate. But if “they” refers to the friends, then astonishment only makes sense if they were (a) asking for a blessing and received a miracle, or (b) really did not think a miracle was possible but “no harm in asking.”

**Personal.** In Mark’s narration there is a common element to Jesus’ encounter with Jairus, the deaf man, and others – he often takes the people aside, away from the crowds. Lane [266-67] comments on this: “He [Jesus] regarded the personal relationship between himself and the sick to be of supreme importance, and in this instance all of his actions are intelligible in the light of the necessity of communicating with a person who had learned to be passive in life. Through touch and the use of spittle Jesus entered into the mental world of the man and gained his confidence.”

The actions described lend themselves to the intimacy of the encounter: “*He put his finger into the man’s ears and, spitting, touched his tongue.*” These are actions that can only be done in a very personal one-to-one encounter. All the actions of vv.33-34 were mirroring the man’s present need, the process of healing, and the source from which such healing alone could come, in a way which even a deaf mute could understand. Jesus’ gestures are “sacramental” in that they effect what they symbolize, the opening of the man’s ears and the loosening of his tongue. This is all very personal.

There is even the suggestion of intimacy in the other of Jesus’ actions: “*then he looked up to heaven and groaned, and said to him, “Ephphatha!” (that is, “Be opened!”).*” The gesture of “looking up to heaven” is less one of prayer than a sign of Jesus’ intimacy with God (cf. 6:41; Jn 11:41; 17:1). Similarly, Jesus’ ‘sighing’; it might simply be a sign of his deep emotion over the man’s condition. But then as some scholars hold, it may be a sign of Jesus’ transcendence, which is constrained by human limits foreign to it. In other words, the sighing might reflect a deeper longing for a return to the Father where Jesus too can experience the fullness of existence.

Mark has retained the Aramaic *ephphatha*. Its Greek equivalent, *dianoigō*, relatively rare in the NT, occurs 33 times in the LXX, most notably in Ez 24:27: “*Your mouth shall be opened, and you shall speak and shall no longer be dumb.*” The act of healing itself was accomplished with the word of liberation addressed not to the defective auditory organs but to the man as a whole person. The results of Jesus’ actions are simply described: the ears were opened, the tongue was loosened, and the man began to speak clearly.

**The Reaction of the People.** *They were exceedingly astonished and they said, “He has done all things well. He makes the deaf hear and (the) mute speak.”* This allusion to Is 35:5-6 brings out the theological lesson of the cure: the age of Messianic salvation, announced by Isaiah, has arrived with Jesus. While the Isaian reference seems clear and is largely agreed upon, there is some interesting speculation about “*He has done all things well.*”

What could be the extent of “*All things*”? Given the scale and distance of Jesus’ movement since the beginning of Chapter 6, it is not likely that, apart from the disciples, the crowd present in Nazareth would be present in the region of the Decapolis. But that doesn’t mean the stories haven’t followed Jesus despite the continual theme of “don’t tell anyone” in Mark. There are some commentaries that wonder if this is a reference to divine comment/summary of Creation: “*God looked at everything he had made, and found it very good.*” (Gen 1:31) This seems to me a bit of a stretch especially since there are no linguistic “hooks.” But then again, that doesn’t mean there wasn’t recognition that Jesus’ actions were revelatory of the Divine.

### Final Thoughts

The language and the story support the conclusion that at one time the man was hearing-enabled and used a working vocabulary. Had he been deaf from the beginning there would not have been a post-healing

note: “*he spoke plainly.*” Which perhaps makes his situation even more poignant, one which calls out to our compassion. We can each imagine having hearing and communication taken away from us, severing the social fabric of our lives. We all know some people that are gifted and have “a way with words.” PHEME PERKINS [613] shares some final thoughts on hearing and speech.

Hearing and speech have a symbolic role to play in Mark’s narrative. The Syro-Phoenician woman was so skilled in speech that Jesus healed her daughter. Jesus’ disciples, on the other hand, have shown increasing difficulty in understanding what Jesus is telling them. They clearly need some form of healing that will enable them to truly hear—that is, to understand.

Understanding, on the other hand, can be expressed to others only if we speak. Young children learn how the world around them works, whether that is the physical world or the world of human interactions, by repeating everything they hear. Schoolteachers once required that pupils recite their lessons. Now that such training has become rare, college and graduate students often fail to understand what they read, and trying to explain it without using the words of the source material creates havoc. It is fair to say that unless people can tell others what they know, they do not really know it. Believers need to recognize the need to speak about their experience of salvation. They speak to others in testimony and to God in thanksgiving and praise.

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## NOTES

**Mark 7:31 *district of Tyre*:** an ancient town on Phoenician coast. Tyre is located about 40km south of Sidon. Before the time of Alexander the Great, Tyre was an island but only 600–750 meters offshore. But since the time of Alexander the Great the island has been linked with the mainland by a causeway, which has broadened over the centuries so that now the location is a peninsula. [ABD, 686] ***Decapolis*:** a group of Hellenistic cities located east of the Jordan and Lake Tiberias.

**Mark 7:32 *speech impediment*:** Greek *mogilalos* literally meaning “difficult speaking”

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