

## Hearing and Speaking

*Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23; Mark 7:24-37*

It is very clear that the Keats', '*season of mist and mellow fruitfulness*' has arrived. Or Robert Burns', '*Come Autumn sae pensive in yellow and grey.*'

For some the fog, or mist, or Haar is an image of mystery and romance. It strikes me it is also an image for the distancing and shrouding that some who live with blindness, deafness and the inability to speak live with every day of their lives.

One of the glories of the modern paralympic movement that we are seeing on Channel Four from Paris is how talented, determined and brave people from all over the world approach and overcome what many see as life-limiting disability and do things that most able-bodied people could never do. It is heart-warming and emotionally overwhelming to see these athletes, whether they win medals or not, to raise themselves beyond real or perceived limitation, and do something extraordinary.

Yet we know that some of the most gifted and determined still face monumental struggles. The experience of 11-time Paralympic champion Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson while on her journey to Paris underscored the investment needed beyond sport to improve the lives of those with disabilities. The Welsh wheelchair racer used a series of social media posts to reveal there was no passenger assistance to greet her as the LNER train from Leeds got into London. The train arrived at King's Cross just after 10pm, and after waiting for about 16 minutes, Lady Grey-Thompson said she, "decided to crawl off."

Others, not in the public eye, also complain about being invisible at times. Being blind, being deaf, struggling with speech impediments, or mobility issues can feel like being engulfed in a haar of public uncertainty about what to do, or how to respond.

It has always been thus, which is what makes the ministry of Jesus in the C1st AD so astonishing and wonderful. Rather than passing by on the other side or wringing His hands and saying there was nothing He could do and walking away, Jesus addresses each person, *each person*, directly. Doing something to help. Making a difference. Healing miracles make modern-day people uneasy, even though we are surrounded by the modern days miracles of medical science every day. I have no more idea how skilled surgeons and caring nurses effect their miracles, just as I have no idea how Jesus did what He did. It's not simply the method, it's the result that matters. It's the fact that He stopped, and looked, and listened, and understood, and included, and transformed. That's what mattered. He saw. He heard. He spoke. He touched.

In the healing story of the deaf and dumb man, brought by his friends to Jesus, the way Jesus deals with the man is worth looking at closely. He took the man away from everyone else, to extract him from the company. Is that significant? It would be if the man was very deaf. People with hearing difficulties find it hard to communicate in a crowd. Jesus observed the man's real situation and responded appropriately to his needs. He took him away from the babble of the crowd to give him a chance to concentrate and hear.

Jesus touched the man's ears, and He prayed, and He sighed, and He said, Eph-phatha, which is Aramaic (Jesus' mother tongue) for 'Be opened'. It's difficulty in pronunciation makes the word a gift for lip reading. 'Be opened' doesn't offer much, but 'E-ph-pha-tha' is just perfect. The pronunciation is all lips, tongue and teeth.<sup>i</sup>

The diversity of Jesus' approach to healing, and to relating to each individual as an individual is what matters here. He takes each person's situation on its merits. Imaginatively, carefully, pastorally. He addresses the reality in which the deaf man lived. By touch and sign, and, perhaps ironically, by hearing and speaking Jesus demonstrated His intention. The haar of isolation lifted, and the deaf and dumb man is brought back fully into the world of his friends, and Jesus.

Beyond this individual story of a deaf man healed, I think we might be bold to read in a further meaning. So much of Jesus' teaching has to do with breaking down barriers and also helping or making people understand. Might it be the case that when there is something wrong with our hearing, and I don't mean physical hearing, we cannot speak clearly? The words the child absorbs at home, the music in our ears with iPods and headphones, the media outlets that claim our attention can sometimes block up our ears, and that affects our speech, and our actions. Last week I made a few bus journeys and had to sit at the back of the bus as the bus was full; and of course wearing a dog collar cleared a seat for me just in case the holy man wanted to engage other passengers in conversation about Jesus!

As I looked around the full bus, something like 90% of the people had earbuds in or headphones on, and everyone those mornings was looking down and reading from smart-phone screens. Deaf to the world around them. Shut off in their own little worlds; listening only to the things they wanted to hear; reading only the things that they wanted to read. Those little bubbles of humanity. Those little echo chambers created where people only hear the things they want to hear, and shut out everything else. Stopping up ears. Closing eyes. Barricading minds. Isolating hearts. It's maybe not quite so dramatic as that but you get the picture. They, we choose to filter out. But what is the criteria we choose?

Things unpleasant? Things too difficult? Things we don't like? Does that extend to political views; or views on human sexuality or personal morality; or talk about religion? Might it be the case, sometimes, that by choosing not to hear, and not to listen, we are filtering out people? Never mind on social media where we can unfriend people and block people at the tap of a keyboard, but people in the real world, who we find difficult, awkward, offensive? None of this is easy, but are we in danger of making it too easy, not to listen, not to hear, and then not to speak out, and not to act, and not to care?

Is this why Jesus might want to put His hands upon us today? Pull us aside, touch our ears, our tongues, our eyes, look up to heaven, and sigh over us, and speak in some ancient language that word Ep-phatha – doing whatever He needs to do to open up the passageway to our ears, our mouths, our minds, our hearts. Removing the blockages so we who have grown deaf can hear again.

With the Grenfell Tower report last week, did you hear the played back messages from those trapped calling the Emergency Services? Did you hear now, six years later, the voices of the survivors still not being heard as they wait, and wait for justice? Or the voices of the postmasters and postmistresses and their families, only in this year being not just heard but listened to in one of the massive miscarriages of justice in our time? Or the voices of asylum seekers trafficked into this and other countries, fleeing poverty and violence and persecution we can't imagine in Eritrea, Sudan, Syria, Afghanistan and other lands, drowning in the English Channel. Or the voices of those forced into using foodbanks like the one we'll be supporting at Harvest, because it's the only way to survive?

Nobody blames us for being overwhelmed by the sound of suffering humanity, and it *is* overwhelming, and we often feel powerless. But not hearing it, and not speaking out about it,

perpetuates it. Might it be that in our weakness in powerlessness, we find ourselves having our ears opened and hear not just the pain and the injustice, but also the voice of Jesus whispering quietly into our ears the ideas, opportunities, guidance, wisdom, courage that we need for ourselves, and need to see how we might help others.<sup>ii</sup> "There is something you can do." Not fixing it all, but some of it, even a little bit.

When Jesus rummages around in the ears of humanity, we may hear all the pain, but we might also hear some of the healing words that we might bring, on His behalf, to a hurting world. Sometimes in life we stumble across times when we don't hear God and then find we can't speak or act with God. Perhaps we too need friends like the deaf man's, who brought him to Jesus. That our ears might be touched, and Jesus can say to us, 'Ep-phatha'- 'Be opened'. Our ears, our eyes, our minds, our mouths, our hearts. Then action.

**In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit**

**Amen**

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<sup>i</sup> Leith Fisher, *Will you follow Me?*, p199

<sup>ii</sup> Karen Pidcock-Lester, *Feasting on the Gospels, Mark*, p214