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Ephphatha --- 'Be opened' (Mk. 7:34)

A Reflection on the Biblical Theme for the 2007 Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

Chapter 7 of the Gospel according to Mark narrates two miracles enacted by Jesus, both in Gentile territory and on behalf of a non-Jewish man and woman who were suffering from infirmities.

In the second incident, Jesus heals "a deaf man who had a speech impediment." (Mk. 7: 31-37) Although the man stood outside the covenant, Jesus dramatically restores the man's hearing and speech: he places his finger into his ears and touches his tongue with spittle as he commands, "'Ephphatha!' (that is, 'Be Opened!')." (Mk. 7:34)

Some exegetes refer to the gestures of Jesus as "sacramental" in a broad sense of the term, that is, "effecting what they signify."

"Ephphatha" - "Be opened," the Aramaic command of Jesus, was incorporated into the rite of Baptism. The "Rite of Ephphetha or Opening of Ears and Mouth" forms one of the preparatory rites for the elect on Holy Saturday. In the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, this ceremony is a symbol of "the need for grace for anyone to be able to hear the word of God and to work for salvation." It serves to dispose the elect for receiving the Sacrament of Baptism in faith. The Rite of Baptism for Children also includes "The Ephphetha or Prayer over the Ears and Mouth" which can be performed at the discretion of the minister. (The ceremony is optional in both rituals.)

As the Gospel of Mark unfolds, chapter 8 will narrate the miracle story of the blind man of Bethsaida (Mk. 8: 22-26). Again, in a fashion similar to the earlier cure of the deaf man, Jesus will also take the blind man apart from the crowd and heal him by applying touch and spittle to restore his sight. (Mk. 8: 22-30)

In biblical imagery, deafness stands as a symbol of a refusal to hear the word of God; blindness is a metaphor for living in spiritual darkness. These two miracles are

messianic signs of the inbreaking of the reign of God in the person of Jesus, in his words and in his actions.

Both physical healings in Mark's theological artistry become stark contrasts to the spiritual blindness and deafness of Jesus' own disciples --- "Do you not yet perceive or understand? Having eyes do you not see, and having ears, do you not hear." (Mk. 8:17-20)

Witnessing the cure of the deaf man with a speech impediment, the astonished crowd declares, "He has done all things well. He makes the deaf hear and (the) mute speak." This declaration on the part of the bystanders (Mk. 7:37) alludes to an oracle about the promised Messiah articulated in the 35th chapter of the prophet Isaiah --- "Then will the eyes of the blind be opened, the ears of the deaf be cleared." (Isa. 35:5-6)

Several biblical commentaries spell out the interrelationship between chapters 7 and 8 of Mark's Gospel more explicitly.

In *Mark: Good News for Hard Times*, George Montague, S.M., identifies the context of the miracle story in Mk. 7: 31-37. He writes: "This confession-proclamation not only ends the story of the deaf-mute but also concludes the whole section which began with a feeding of the crowds in 6: 30-44. Mark leads his reader through other signs and a discussion of the Pharisees' teaching to this climactic healing and confession of praise."

A similar pattern to that of chapter 7 will be discovered in the next chapter: "a feeding of crowds (8:1-10), a discussion with the Pharisees and the disciples about signs (8: 11-21), and a cure of a blind man (8: 22-26) leading up to Peter's confession of Jesus as the Messiah (8:27-30). The proclamation of the crowd in Mk. 7:37 serves as a preparation the readers of Mark "to hear Peter say explicitly, 'You are the Messiah.'" (Mk. 8:29)

In his exegesis of the Gospel of Mark in *The Collegeville Bible Commentary*, Philip Van Linden, C.M., notes:

The Catholic Conference of Kentucky (CCK) is an agency of the Catholic Bishops of Kentucky, established in 1968. It speaks for the Church in matters of public policy, serves as liaison to government and the legislature, and coordinates communications and activities between the church and secular agencies. There are 406,000 Catholics in the Commonwealth. The Bishops of the four dioceses of KY constitute CCK's Board of Directors.

"Jesus, for Mark, was the perfect fulfillment of all Isaiah's prophecies. He was the promised Messiah who healed the deaf, the mute, and the blind. He was the innocent one who suffered on behalf of his people. For Mark and his readers, Jesus is the one who says: 'Follow me on my way. Care for my people, until there are no longer sick or hurting people on this earth. But know that in the healing of others you will experience the same pain that I experienced in making you whole. Stay with me. I will provide the nourishment you need.' (see 8:1-10)."

Thus, in a way parallel to the "Bread in the Wilderness" miracle in Mk. 6: 30-44, a second miraculous feeding of the hungry crowds by Jesus takes place in Mk. 8: 1-10. In this setting, this account not only foreshadows the Eucharist (Mk. 14: 22-26) but also reflects an assurance that "the Gentile members of his [Mark's] community know that they are welcomed to the Eucharist from the beginning."

In this pericope, Father Montague speculates that in some sense "[t]he real miracle is not the multiplication of food as such, but the fact that the meal makes of a crowd a community, of Jew and Gentile, a brotherhood." In the same vein, Father Van Linden suggests a challenging contemporary application: "Are the readers of Mark's Gospel today in need of the same message, as the people of the various Christian churches struggle to become one again in worship as well as mission?. Perhaps Mark wants his readers to hear Jesus say: 'Today my heart is moved with pity for you. You hunger for unity. I want you to 'become one body, one spirit in me' (Eucharistic Prayer III)."

The scriptural theme for the 2007 Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is a passage from Mark 7:37 --- "He even makes the deaf to hear and the

mute to speak."

The Week of Prayer resources are jointly prepared by the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Christian Unity and the Commission on Faith and Order of the World Council of Churches.

The biblical text --- Mark 7:31-37 --- correlates two themes pertinent to this year's annual observance of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity (January 18-25). Churches and Christian people are invited "to pray and strive together for Christian unity and to join together in responding to human suffering."

In interpreting the healing of the deaf man who could not speak properly, the background materials explain the significance of this passage for the mission of restoring Christian unity. The analogy drawn for the present ecumenical situation stresses that "[l]ike the man healed by Jesus, all who have been baptized have had their ears open to the gospel."

The prayer of Jesus for unity in John 17 summons his disciples, hearers of the Word, to be "one, united with one another in a unity grounded in his communion with the Father and the Holy Spirit." The Body of Christ has received a call to be one, "the community which has seen the marvels which God has done and has been sent forth to proclaim them to the ends of the earth."

The theme for the 2007 Week of Prayer for Christian Unity focuses on these two interrelated strands of the Church's life and mission, namely, "the essential connection between efforts to pray for and seek unity among Christians and initiatives to respond to human need and suffering."

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