

Sermon 6<sup>th</sup> September 2015.

As preached at the 10am Parish Communion by Dr. Margaret Jones: Reader  
Mark 7: 24-37

The Clipper round the world yacht race set sail from London St Katherine's dock a couple of weeks ago. There are 12 identical 70 foot ocean racing yachts each crewed by amateur sailors under the leadership of a professional skipper. In the publicity my attention was caught by an interview with a young man by the name of Gavin Reid who is severely deaf and has been so since birth. He wears hearing aids but is reliant on lip-reading to understand speech and he has come up with an ingenious solution to allow him to understand what his fellow crew members are saying when he has to take his turn in sailing at night. The other crew members will wear fluorescent lipstick which will glow in the dark!

Deafness is a somewhat unglamorous disability; somehow it seems easier for society to accept people who are blind or have a visible physical impairment. The recent anti-discrimination legislation has encouraged a shift in public understanding and we now see deaf sign language being used at a variety of public events including some church services and also for some television programmes. Modern advances in medicine and technology can be seen as modern miracles. Very small hearing aids have been developed and are now programmable for individual needs. We have the development of cochlear implants and some surgical techniques which may cure deafness in selected cases. The use of the internet means that deaf people can easily communicate with other people on equal terms. But the biggest advance has been in increasing public awareness.

In the second half of our gospel reading, Jesus meets a man who is deaf and also has a speech problem. Jesus takes the man aside privately, separating him from the crowds and Jesus focuses his attention on this man, probably so that he can communicate directly with the man. When Jesus prays, he sighs; the verb used is that of groaning in the sense of grieving. This is the word that Paul uses when he talks about the spirit helping us as we groan inwardly as we search for God. Jesus is feeling the pain of the deaf man and sighing with him. He then heals him of his deafness.

Let us go back to the start of today's gospel reading. You may remember that in the previous passages in Mark's gospel we have heard that Jesus has been very busy. He has attracted large crowds with his teaching; we have heard

about him feeding the five thousand and indeed Mark tells us that wherever he went, people flocked to see him. He has also run into difficulties. He has learned of the imprisonment and execution of his cousin, John the Baptist. He has tried to find a space to give his disciples some rest, but it seems that wherever he goes the people follow him. In the passage that precedes today's reading he has had a confrontation with the Pharisees in which they have accused Jesus's disciples of failing to keep the Jewish laws about cleanliness and Jesus has explained that evil comes from within a person's heart and that it is evil thoughts, intentions and deeds that defile a person and make him unclean in the sight of God.

Jesus must have been very tired and exhausted. He leaves Galilee and journeys into the regions of Tyre and Sidon on the Phoenician coast (modern Lebanon). This is an area that the Jewish leaders might have labelled as an unclean, that is a Gentile area. Jesus has found a house where he had hoped to spend a little time resting and being alone with his disciples. He had hoped to escape the crowds which have followed him in Galilee and to have a little peace and quiet. Also this was an area that was part of the Syrian province of Rome and not under the control of the Jewish authorities.

But it seems that Jesus was not unknown in this region and his presence had not gone unnoticed. Desperate people can go to great lengths to find the help they need and this is especially true for parents of sick children. A Greek speaking Syro-Phoenician mother finds Jesus and begs for healing of her daughter.

What does Jesus do with this request? He responds that the children must first eat at the table before the scraps are tossed to the dogs. This sounds a bit harsh, but according to my commentary the word dog that Jesus uses is not the derogatory term that represents some kind of hostility, but rather the term which was used to describe the house dogs or domestic pets.

The woman has a quick spunky reply. It seems that Mark wants us to see this as Jesus is probing this woman's faith. Anyway, the woman is persistent because she is desperate for her daughter. She seems to be saying that she may not be one of the children, but even house dogs wander around the table searching for the crumbs which the children drop. Her response touches Jesus and her daughter is healed.

Who are the children and who are the dogs here? Most commentaries seem to take it as a Jewish-Gentile story. Jesus is beginning to show that his followers

are to include all people; not just the Jews but also the Gentiles, the ones who were seen as unclean. Certainly Jesus's disciples may well have thought that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah and therefore they could claim that they had first call on his ministry. We don't know how Jesus himself as a mortal man had thought about the matter up until this incident, but it is clear from other Gospel passages that he had other encounters with non-Jewish people and that after his death and resurrection his followers began to understand more fully that Jesus came to be the Messiah for all people.

We all know what it is like to feel tired; maybe this summer we thought that we could get away from all the problems we had and all the problems of the world, but most of us discover that it is very difficult to achieve undisturbed peace and quiet. Jesus may have been tired and wished to get a break, but somehow people still came after him. I think this story reminds us that we are called to be Christians amidst the muddle and busyness of this world and very few of us are called to live lives of total detachment from the world.

We return to the story of the Jesus healing the deaf man. What are we to make of it? In some ways it is more problematic. Certainly the people who lived in Jesus's time regarded all illness as either a punishment or a test of faith, certainly a sign of brokenness and pain.

Most people who suffer from deafness do so at an age when they have already acquired the ability to talk and understand speech and indeed the vast majority are older people who have experienced hearing loss. But there is also a group of older deaf people who have never really learnt to speak or read our language fluently and rely on sign language and for these the Christian faith is often unknown or poorly understood. We can meet people with disabilities who point out that we are all differently abled and that we should all have a right to enjoy life. They point out that physical perfection is unattainable for most people and further that society's attitude should change to accept diversity, "all sorts and conditions of men" and women (as the Prayer Book puts it). There has been a gentle shift in the thought of the Christian church over the years and a much greater wish to accept people as they are; to allow God to change them if he wishes but also to let us see that all may be valued as individual people, that all have a personal dignity and ability to make a contribution to society.

Maybe this story reminds us that we are all deaf to some messages. We hear, but we don't really listen and we certainly don't allow ourselves to take action based on what we hear.

Sometimes we jump to conclusions. It's quite easy to anticipate what we think someone is saying and not really listen. We may be too busy, we may think that what they have to say doesn't really count for much, often we have made up our minds and the lazy way is to stick to our own prejudices and not really hear the message.

We can see that the church was quite good at this when it failed to listen to the women who felt excluded. Most of us can remember a time when there were no women priests in the Church of England. We were also saddened by the length of time that it took for the General Synod to accept women bishops. As a church and as a society we have been slow to listen to the children who complained of exploitation and abuse.

It has taken many weeks for us all to listen to the desperation and sadness of those who live in war-torn countries. Our government and media had encouraged us to look at asylum seekers as scroungers, dogs, and a menace and threat to civilisation. We have failed to see these people as fellow human beings. Even the findings of 71 people found dead in a truck in Austria failed to move us greatly, or the many asylum seekers drowned as they attempted to cross the Mediterranean in unsafe boats. But in the past few days we have seen the body of a single dead Syrian refugee boy and this has touched the hearts of many and forced all the governments to rethink how they can deal with the refugee crisis in the Middle East.

As human beings and particularly as Christians we are called to recognise the face of Christ in all people. The whole population of Syria has been affected by the civil war. Indeed up to 10 million people have been displaced from their homes and it is estimated that 3 to 4 million Syrians have left their native country. The vast majority of these are living in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey. These are people who lived previously in ordinary homes just like ours but there are now many many children who have known only life in a refugee camp or some other temporary accommodation.

The vast majority of these people would prefer to return to a peaceful life in their own country. It is certainly not clear that they all wish to travel to Europe, but we do expect our governments to listen to their desperation and try to help to resolve their desperate plight. The priority of the politicians must be to work for peace. Our archbishop has pointed out that this is a hugely complex

and wicked crisis. That as Christians we must work together to respond to the human need whilst looking for a pan-European response as well as practical action.

We are called to listen to the needs of others. We are called to work for the vision that we heard of in the reading from the book of Isaiah when the eyes of the blind will be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped and there will be a highway where all will walk with gladness and joy. The miracle is to be the reversal of the brokenness of the world and a place where God will reign and there will be healing, justice, peace and righteousness