

“He who has ears...”

Rev Gregor Henderson, Wesley Uniting Church, Canberra

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James 2:1-10,14-17 Mark 7:24-37

Imagine what it would be like if you lived in a world of silence - deep unending silence. Many of us would love it for a few hours of blessed peace, but then the silence and the isolation would get to us. Life would be very restricted – no ease of communication, no simple way of reaching out to another and getting to know them, no hearing the wind blowing through the trees or the birds singing, the swish of gentle rain or a steak sizzling, no enjoyment of conversation or music. Life would be considerably poorer.

In today's passage from Mark two people are miraculously healed. What's in common with these two is that both the demon-possessed daughter and the deaf and mute man are Gentiles. Jesus has been seeking a break from the crowds of people constantly at him, wanting miraculous signs, so he went north away from his own people in Galilee, but even there, in Gentile territory, he is found and imposed upon. He “could not escape notice” – a mother comes pleading for her daughter, friends bring the deaf man. And Jesus heals them.

Jesus brings new life to these people. The girl can grow up normally, freed from an unclean spirit. The deaf man suddenly discovers he can hear, and speak, and his life opens up. Imagine how he reacts to his first hearing of birds carolling, hearing a choir in the synagogue, a harp playing or a trumpet sounding. Life is suddenly far more interesting, far richer.

These two stories play two important roles in the central chapters of Mark's gospel. They emphasise that the good news of Jesus Christ is for all – male and female, Jew and Gentile. That's revolutionary religion for the time. But the healing of the deaf man has another purpose too – half a chapter later in Mark's narrative Jesus points to spiritual deafness and blindness, challenging them to understand about God and God's love for all. “Do you have eyes and fail to see?” he asks. “Do you have ears and fail to hear?” “Are your hearts hardened, do you not yet understand?”

All of us are challenged by Jesus to see and hear and understand. The message he brought was revolutionary, it was not just about occasional miracles, it was about God's unconditional, non-discriminatory love, offering to everyone an experience and an understanding of God's love that would bring them a richness of life as people gifted with abundance, people able to live with the security, peace and wisdom that comes from knowing God's love deep inside us, and able therefore to enjoy a richness of life with our families and in the community of Christ. Knowing God loves you can transform your life, can take it from a struggling effort to play Chopsticks half decently, to a full-blown symphony of love and joy. That's the good news of Jesus Christ.

A brief aside here:

Music has always featured in the life of people of faith. Horns, bells and trumpets have been used to call people to worship for centuries, millennia. The chanting of scripture, especially the psalms, has long been part of worship. The temple in Jerusalem had a specially selected choir, accompanied by professional musicians. The cathedrals and churches of Europe fostered good music as feeding the soul, and the Protestant Reformation insisted on congregations singing the faith, with the composition of thousands of new hymns by gifted hymn-writers like Isaac Watts and Charles Wesley. Here at Wesley we are pleased to continue in that fine tradition, with the Music Centre very much part of our church's outreach and service into the Canberra community.

In our reading today from the letter of James there is great emphasis on living out our faith. We believe in a gospel of non-discrimination, writes James, so don't welcome a well-dressed rich person into your congregation any more than you welcome someone dressed shabbily and in need of a bath. Faith needs to be lived out in good deeds of service to others.

Did you notice how the deaf man and his friends were ordered by Jesus not to tell anyone of his miraculous healing? Jesus did not want people to follow him just because they wanted to witness miracles. Rather, he wanted everyone to see and hear that God is for them too, reaching out with his love and forgiveness, Jesus wanted people to live with spiritual sight and hearing more than just physical wholeness. But the healed deaf man and his friends cannot keep quiet about what has happened, they cannot help themselves from telling the wonderful news of the healing of their deaf friend.

Friends, we may not have seen a deaf man healed or an evil spirit exorcised from a young girl. But we can receive spiritual sight and hearing, we can all tune into God's presence among us, we can sense God's love reaching out to embrace us. That sense of God's love for us may come as we pray, as we receive the love of others, as we read and ponder the Scriptures, as we enjoy the wonder of God's creation, or it may come as we experience beautiful music, one of God's gifts to his creation. The quote about the purpose of music which always resonates most with me is from Johann Sebastian Bach, who wrote that "the aim and final end of all music should be none other than the glory of God and the refreshment of the soul".

Our senses, our ability to perceive and interact with each other and with the world through sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell, are amazing gifts God has given each one of us. And none is more important than the gift of hearing. But even more important is our spiritual hearing, our encounter and interaction with God as we see God in action in the world, as we listen for God's word to us, as we feel God's touch of love upon us.

To the glory of God. Amen.