

The Deaf Hear and the Mute Speak – What does it all mean?

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There is little doubt, even in the minds of agnostic historians, that Jesus really worked miracles. After all, the disturbance caused by some of his mighty works was in part responsible for his execution. He healed on the Sabbath, breaking a rabbinical regulation against medical “work” on the day of rest. He caused a sensation by raising Lazarus on the outskirts of Jerusalem—too close for comfort as far as the Chief Priests were concerned.

But the question is, why did he work miracles? Did he really care about the individuals he fed, healed, and delivered from evil? Or was he just trying to make a statement?

This Sunday’s gospel helps us answer this question – it reveals that his miracles were truly miracles of mercy. Jesus encounters a deaf-mute in his travels. He does not make a spectacle of himself. No grandstanding, no fanfare. In fact, Jesus takes him away from the crowd, off by himself. And once the deaf-mute is healed, Jesus commands him not to tell anyone about it. Of course, the man is too ecstatic to keep the good news to himself. But the situation makes clear Jesus’ primary and unwavering commitment to relieve suffering wherever he finds it, out of sincere compassion for the afflicted.

But human beings often have multiple motivations for the very same action. Why should it be any different for the Holy Spirit? Jesus’ miracles reveal not only his compassion, but his hidden identity. You and I may meet a deaf mute and feel pity in the face of his suffering. But the power to bestow speech and hearing is a bit beyond us. It is, however, not beyond Jesus. The Holy Spirit who inspired the words of the Old Testament led the Son of God to this particular man in part

because his healing would fulfill the words of Isaiah . . . that God himself would come to save his people, opening the ears of the deaf and causing the mute to speak. Jesus' miracles are called "signs" in John's Gospel because they point beyond themselves to the bigger picture, the plan of salvation stretching from Genesis to Revelation and to the Savior who is the focal point of the whole drama.

There is something else in the story that it would be easy to miss. Jesus begins his journey in the region of Sidon and comes to the Decapolis, on the eastern shore of the Jordan, where he meets the deaf-mute. These regions have something in common: they are both pagan territories. Yes, Jesus comes first and foremost for the lost children of Israel. But his compassion knows no bounds. His miraculous love transforms the lives of the pious and the outcasts as well –tax collectors, Samaritans, gentiles, even the hated Romans!

So James calls us to do no more than follow the example of Jesus. The prejudice which causes us to give preferential treatment to the beautiful people – the popular, wealthy, good-looking and "nice" – may seem to come "naturally" to us who are wounded by original sin. But it needs to be renounced by those who have accepted the healing gift of grace through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. In the body of Christ, if there is any preferential treatment to be given, it is to those in greatest need, even if they happen to speak another language and come from a different country. In fact, the unity and brotherhood of different ethnic groups, personality types, and socioeconomic groups in one Church is a sign that this is no man-made sect, depending on merely human forces to hold it together. No, this is a community whose unity is due to divine power, the power of the Spirit. And it is no spiritual club for those who look alike and dress alike. It is instead comprised by people from every tribe, tongue, people, language, occupation, and lifestyle. It is the universal family of God, the Church Catholic.