

A sermon preached by Eleanor Whalley on the Fifteenth Sunday after Trinity 2018: Isaiah 35: 4-7a; Mark 7: 24-end

May I speak and may we hear in the name of the living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Desperate measures this morning – I've brought some visual aids.

A can of corned beef and a banana.

What have a can of corned beef and a banana got in common?

They both need opening:

What's inside – what's beneath the skin – or beneath the can – needs releasing.

It needs letting out.

A cans of corned beef is something I usually find very difficult to open.

I resort to corned beef when I'm rushed off my feet -

when I've not had time to go shopping and I've got no protein in my fridge.

I'm flustered before I've started to make my tea, and then, when I try to open the can

It almost always happens that the little key thing snaps off and I find myself getting crosser and crosser.

I remember one time trying to scrape the meat through the tiniest gap I'd been able to open up –

my tin-opener had broken and – of course – I'd not had time to buy another. I was nearly going mad.

Opening things up isn't always easy.

A banana, by contrast is relatively easy to open –

at least for my non-arthritic fingers.

I remember a very elderly nun saying to me

'A banana is the most convenient fruit. It can be eaten in any position'

It's worth spending a moment thinking about that:

A banana is convenient – it's easy to open.

It's easy to open whatever position you find yourself in.

Central to today's Gospel reading is a word in Aramaic –

Because it's in Aramaic, it's likely to be a word Jesus actually used.

To make it accessible to the widest possible audience,

the New Testament was written first in Greek,

but Jesus would have spoken Aramaic.

Even if we're reading the Gospels in Greek,

Most of what Jesus is quoted as saying is in translation.

But today, Jesus says 'ephphatha': be opened.

Jesus says Ephphatha to someone who is deaf,

Someone who also – Mark tells us – an impediment in his speech.

When Jesus says 'Ephphatha', that word, that instruction produces a response –

'Immediately', Mark writes, the man's ears 'are opened'; his tongue is 'released'; he 'speaks plainly'.

Ephphatha produces a physical opening –

an opening happens at once, 'immediately'.

But the opening is more than just physical.

Along with the physical opening must come, surely, a social reintegration –

an opening of the doors of a new social world -

the opening of the possibility of greater inclusion – of wider relationship –

The man can now speak plainly to the people around him –

he can communicate more easily –

and he can hear what other people are saying to him.

There is also another kind of opening –

a mental and a spiritual opening:

Jesus orders the crowd to tell no one,

but the more he orders them, we're told,

the more 'zealously they proclaim it'.

What the people do – or what Mark has them do, so as to make a theological point -

is hark back to the prophecy of Isaiah.

The people all but quote the passage from Isaiah which Caroline read to us just now:

'Then shall the ears of the deaf be unstopped... and the tongue of the dumb shall sing' (Isaiah 35: 5-6) -

'He has done everything well', they say 'he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak...' (Mark 7: 37)

And Mark writes 'they were astounded' – their minds are opened – opened to something new.

These Gentiles – these Greeks from the Decapolis – are proclaiming the news of God's Kingdom.

With the coming of the Messiah – the coming of Jesus Christ, Mark believes -

the gates of God's kingdom is opened to the gentiles, not just to the Jews:

'The glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all peoples shall see it together' – that's Isaiah 5 chapters later

All peoples – Gentiles as well as Jews – people like you and me.

And that brings us to the first of today's healing miracles – the healing of the Syro-Phoenician woman's daughter

The Syro-phoenician woman is a Gentile –

She's another outsider.

Jesus is passing through Tyre -

he's moved to Gentile territory.

Just before this passage is the passage we heard last week –

the passage John preached on so brilliantly.

In that passage, Jesus was speaking to the Pharisees, to the religious elite of Jewish society.

Jesus was speaking about tradition – about social and religious convention.

Now, in today's passage, takes what he said there a step further.

In today's passage, religious and social convention are blown apart.

'Ephphatha' – be opened.

Jesus – a high status male Jew - has entered a house.

Into that house comes a non-Jewish woman –

Not only does she enter the house –

something according to convention – tradition – she shouldn't do -

she goes up to Jesus. She falls at Jesus feet and pleads with him.

Marks says she begs.

Jesus and the woman are at opposite ends of the social and religious spectrum –

they are diametric opposites when it comes to social status – to class.

The Gentile woman is on her knees –

her physical position mirrors her position in society;

Jesus is either sitting or standing:

His stance reflects his higher status.

On the face of it,

Jesus appears to rub salt in the wound –

He appears to rub in his higher social standing – and with it the lowliness of the woman:

'Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs'

But the woman defies convention: if she doesn't stand up literally at this point, she stands up metaphorically.

The woman answers back – she gives as good as she gets:

In saying she says, the woman assumes a higher status than the status she had initially:

She talks to Jesus man to man –

or, you might say – woman to woman; woman to man.

She talks to him as a social equal:

‘Yes Lord, yet, even the dogs under the table eat the master’s crumbs’.

And the woman calls Christ Lord.

The translation I read from says ‘Sir’ –

but the Greek says ‘Lord’: Kyrie.

The Syro-phoenician woman is - in fact - the only person to call Christ ‘Lord; in the whole of Mark’s Gospel.

‘There is a no longer Jew nor Greek, there is no longer slave nor free, there is no longer male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus’

with the coming of Christ, a new era –

an era of equality and inclusion -

has dawned.

Equality and inclusion are signs of God’s Kingdom here amongst us.

So in the flurry of this week,

Fortified by bananas and corned beef – and, I might say – by the kindness of many of you

(many of you know that my little dog, this week, joined the ranks of ‘the lame’ – it’ll be a while before she’s back leaping for joy’)

Fortified by all this, I’ve been thinking about these things.

I’ve been thinking about that one word - that word in Aramaic: ‘Ephphatha’.

It’s a word Christ spoke then, and a word, I believe, he still speaks today –

A word he speaks to all his people – including to you and to me.

I’ve had that word on my mind and in my heart

through all that has befallen me this week – and through all that I’ve heard and seen befall you.

I’ve heard Christ say to me and to us: ‘Ephphatha – be opened’ – and I’ve said that word to myself.

As I’ve said it, I’ve thought about myself, and I’ve thought about all of us here.

I’ve thought about our church community

and I’ve thought about Soham and about the wider world.

What are the things in us and around us that need opening?

What are the things that need opening physically?

What are the doors I need to open – what are the doors I need to knock on?

or what are the doors that *Christ* needs to open in and through me?

What are the things that need opening mentally –

What are the patterns in my ways of thinking

Which would benefit from being opened up –

What are the attitudes that are fixed; attitudes that would benefit from being changed?

Where do light and life need letting in?

And where in the wider world are our brothers and sisters at social or political stalemate?

Where is there intransigence?

Where does progress seem impossible?

Where is it that hope appear to have run aground?

For in those places too, surely, God's Spirit is moving –

We need to pray for the movement of God's Spirit:

there and in us – Christ speaks that word, Ephphatha –

And what Christ opens, no one can shut.

With God all things are possible.

May it be so. Amen.