

Mark

Chapter 7 - 8

We ought to pay a swift visit to the story on the end of chapter 7, where Jesus heals a deaf-mute. The act of imposing spittle seems to imply that Jesus needs to perform an action, because the man's condition prevents his being reached by words. The preservation of the Aramaic word, *Ephphatha*, "*Be opened*," reminds us that there is here a great symbolic value. Despite the slightly mystical quality of a foreign word floating amid a Greek text, we note that it is an absolutely natural word in our Lord's own language: there is nothing here to suggest the magical abracadabra of an esoteric wonder-worker.

Hearing is not just a physical reality; when we hear with our bodily apparatus, something simultaneously enters our spiritual experience. In this sense a word is incarnational, giving physical reality to something that is spiritual. *To hear the word of Jesus* is essential to our receiving his Gospel, a concept which carries great weight in Mark. The fact that this man is also dumb gives us a further theme in the register of the Gospel we are reading. Several times we have seen Jesus telling people he has helped *not to tell* what he has done to others. He *silences* the demon in 1:26, and will not allow other demons to speak in 1:34 *because they know who he is*. The healed leper in 1:43 finds himself sent immediately away, and sternly ordered to say nothing to anyone - a stern order he immediately disobeys, so that Jesus can't enter the towns, but lives like a leper in the wilderness, where multitudes seek him out. Again he silences demons, forbidding them to *make him known* in 3:12. Speaking about his habit of teaching in parables, he mysteriously says that he tells his disciples - those who are *believers* - the "secret of the kingdom of God" when they are alone - so that they are receivers of esoteric, privileged knowledge; to the *outsiders*, everything comes in parables so that they may see and see again, but not perceive, may hear and hear again, but not understand, otherwise they might be converted and forgiven. He will not allow the Gerasene demoniac to remain with him, although he begs to be allowed to; he sends him out, back to his own (Gentile) people, to "tell them all that the Lord in his mercy has done for you". In 5:43 he orders Jairus strictly not to let anyone know about the raising of his daughter - surely a vain command; and in the present story he will tell the crowd that has witnessed the loosening of the tongue of a deaf-mute to "tell no-one about it". Nowhere is the injunction so odd. The loosening of the man's tongue is symbolic of his being made able to speak, and to praise God; and the telling of his story is his way of proclaiming the Gospel with the authority of one who has heard it (through, incidentally, miraculously-opened ears). To forbid the telling of the story is like telling the man born blind to keep his eyes shut and carry on feeling his way.

Matthew and Luke both decide to omit this story, probably because of the quasi-magical details of the healing, but also because they do not share or even appear to understand the Marcan stress on the secret of Jesus the Messiah. It will be in the next chapter, and with the theme of the Cross, that we shall begin to understand the resolution of this riddle.

Chapter 8

The feeding of the Four Thousand is so close in form to the feeding of the Five that we are almost forced to say that it is simply a second telling of the same story which Mark understood to have referred to a different event. Even the sequels follow a kind of parallelism:

5,000	(water/cures)	dispute with Pharisees	Syro-Phoenician	deaf-mute
4,000	(dispute with Pharisees - crosses sea)	yeast of Pharisees		Blind man

The blindness of the disciples is going to be stressed in the second telling. There is a theory that the two stories are voiced to express the giving of the Gospel, first to the Jews (5,000 given five loaves for the five books of Moses, twelve baskets for the twelve tribes, and the choice of an allegedly Jewish word for basket) and then to the Gentiles (4,000 given seven loaves for the seven deacons of Acts 6, the mission of the seventy in Lk 10, the seventy traditional sections of the Gentile world, the seventy scholars who translated the Scriptures into the Gentile tongue (Greek), and possibly the seven spirits of God mentioned in Revelation. It seems hard to distinguish such a separate intention; easier to think that Mark wanted a dual witness to the insensitivity of the disciples and the reality of the need for the Gospel among Jews and Gentiles alike.

Even in the context of this hugely miraculous atmosphere the Pharisees suddenly appear (in territory that is not only not Judaeen, but not even Jewish!) and demand to see a sign. In this they are typifying the faithlessness of the world in which Jesus - and the disciples - will have to operate. They are refused, and no doubt we are being told that faith in Jesus is not to rest on the evidence of stunts, but on a metaphysical act of faith. But the lack of faith of the disciples will also come under the hammer at any moment; both those who are outside the circle of Jesus and those who are inside need purification of their faith.

When Jesus hears the disciples discussing their having brought no bread, he makes a deep spiritual point to them: but their minds are closed to the spiritual and run only on the superficial level. At this moment he is warning them against two sorts of display: the Pharisees' love of external acts of legal obedience, and the Herodians' arrogant exercise of earthly authority. The disciples are muttering about not providing bread; and Jesus now delivers the worst rebuke anyone has suffered so far in the Gospel (but see later on in this same chapter). Jesus asks angrily whether they have any trace of perception left in them at all: his own miracles have been a kind of metaphorical language which ought to have spoken to them. Instead of this, they remind dull, blinded individuals who have not learnt what it is they are caught up in. The questions about the feedings reproduce the exact vocabulary of the original tellings, even the different words for *basket*: this shows evidence of the hand of the compiler, rather than an accurate memory of the words of Jesus himself. When he says "Do you *not yet* understand?" we are hearing the preparation for a sea-change in their understanding which will arrive very soon - in v 31ff.

The opening of eyes in v 22 displays Mark's apparent ignorance of the Holy Land: Bethsaida is a large, bustling city, and the story told here demands that it be a small village. Once again the story sharpens our knowledge of the power of Jesus - he can give sight - and alongside that the developing obsession with secrecy: the miracle is very great, but it does not in itself embody the

Gospel, which will be to do with what is coming next - the mystery of discipleship lived through sacrificial obedience to God. Accordingly, Jesus works the miracle, but it is not to be proclaimed as if it were of the substance of the Gospel. The miracle is worked in two stages, either to emphasise its difficulty and thus the power of the one who achieves it, or because of a theological point: just as the disciples are being led slowly forward to understanding, so the man is led into the light in stages. Some think that Mark is making a model of Christian initiation: baptism is to be followed by a further dimension of enlightenment: we do not cease to learn or to follow or to accept from Christ, it is not all accomplished in one fell swoop.

Peter's Profession of Faith What now follows is so important that it can be called the turning-point of the whole Gospel. A brief survey of the book so far reveals a pretty consistent record of astonishing healings, authoritative teachings, and a response towards Jesus of fascinated interest, excitement, and acceptance. Only the uneasy response of his own people at Nazareth, coupled with the radical opposition of Jesus towards the Pharisees, introduces a sense of foreboding, an advance warning of the end of the story. It is this theme which now explodes into the narrative, and it does so in a way that will alert us to the themes of testing - and failure under testing - of the disciples. Thus far they have accepted and followed, although with quite unsatisfactory levels of understanding. Does Mark want us to despise the disciples as ludicrously unfit followers of Christ? Clearly not; their testimony still grounds our faith, and we are obliged to respect them in that quality. Rather, their inadequacy at this point is meant to display the completely new, unpredictable, divine reality of salvation. No-one but God could foresee how the story would develop. Human understanding reels and even rebels at the law of the Cross; and this is a warning for us, not to rely on human understanding to lead us into the knowledge of Christ. All the Gospels say this in different ways; here Mark shows us a Jesus who is alone amidst his disciples in understanding how the Cross is the will of God for his Christ; he alone will know how to carry it. The disciples are apprentices, and Peter here, and the sons of Zebedee at 10:35, will be given hard lessons about themselves on the way of the Cross.

The disciples have shown no particular signs of improvement on the way here. In fact, at the beginning of this chapter they got a broadside from Jesus that is quite unprecedented, followed by a miracle which says clearly that *only God can open blind eyes*. So we shouldn't think of a set of disciples who have advanced into faith steadily and progressively, reaching a natural crescendo of understanding in what Peter says. There is not only no evidence in the Gospel for such a progress, but quite the reverse is true. So we shouldn't think that this theological turning-point in the Gospel is truly biographical, that Peter did come to this wonderful awareness of the truth about Jesus at Caesaria Philippi, and that from now on the relationship is transformed between them. The sequel to Peter's confession is enough to explode that notion. What the incident does is to show us that belief in Jesus as the Christ - the whole aim of the Gospel - implies the acceptance of the unacceptable on the part of the disciples. This will result in the Prince of the Apostles being called "Satan" - an event so utterly alien to the spirit of respect in which the real Peter was held, that *it can only have been exactly what Jesus did to him*. Who in the early Church would have invented so unholy a designation?

Let us examine, therefore, the details of the dialogue, and see how likely it is that they are in their original form. If the rebuke to Peter is original and historical, as we have just said, it also seems certain that Peter acknowledged him as the Christ. When he does this, Mark forbids all of them to use this term of him. Could it have been that Peter was originally rebuked precisely for calling Jesus "Christ"? Jesus didn't like titles and grandiloquent claims, and spoke constantly of taking the humble path. Maybe he did originally refuse the title of Christ as too royal, to

authoritative, to illuminate the humility of his mission. In our Gospel he simply responds with the beginning of new teaching - about the inevitability of suffering obediently for both Master and disciple. This is the part that Peter cannot and will not hear. What did Jesus originally say to him?

We find it likely that Jesus knew that disaster was waiting for him, as it did for all the ancient prophets; he himself has identified with them in their approach, he has trodden in the footsteps of John the Baptist, a prophetic figure, who was beheaded in prison two chapters before. But we find it unlikely that Jesus predicted his passion, death, and resurrection so perfectly: principally because, if he did, the disciples' devastation and scattering when these things took place, and their great slowness to apprehend the Resurrection, are difficult to understand. It seems much more probable that Jesus sensed his own danger, and its inevitability if his mission was to be accomplished; and that this sort of language was unacceptable to the disciples. We know that the injunction to secrecy is probably inserted by Mark, because it represents the way he has been talking about Jesus all along. Now that we have entered upon the teaching of the Cross, the truth is going to be voiced; and it is a truth to which something in the disciples is firmly *opposed*. It seems certain that such opposition was clearly recognisable in Mark's church, and had to be nailed in the context of the authoritative voice of the Lord.

In the Gospel of Matthew this whole incident takes on added force, with the response of Jesus exceedingly positive; but this only serves to point more sharply to the sequel, where Jesus finds Peter wanting to save him from the Cross. Jesus is no longer the Saviour, but someone who is in need of human help from Peter, who is no longer the saved, but one who can bestow salvation in his own right. No wonder, says Matthew, the Lord's response is so powerful; and he directly opposes the divine and human qualities in the two dialogues: *Blessed are you...for it was not human flesh that revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven*; then, after his attempt to dissuade Jesus from the Cross, *Get behind me Satan...the way you are thinking is not God's way, but man's*. The real point of the story is the establishment of the true path of discipleship, which is a discourse given "to all the people" - that is, not a special discipline for the inner circle, but a general call to all who would be Christian. We have the usual question to ask about the words "take up his Cross"; did Jesus really know so accurately the future way he would die? Perhaps it would be safer to conclude that these words were amplified by the Church as the details of the Passion became charged with religious meaning. We can say for certain that "for my sake *and the sake of the Gospel*" must come from St Mark; he is here affirming that the obedience of people to Christ and the obedience demanded of them by this Gospel are one and the same.