

Be Opened! Be Christ-Like ...

... St John of Beverley remembered

A sermon given on the Last Sunday After Trinity, 24th October 2021, by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster

Mark 7:31-end

Well, 1300 years is a long time. When you think about it, it's quite remarkable that 1300 years after his death we should still be making a point each year of remembering John of Beverley: especially as he had no children; no blood descendants; no family or tribe to keep his memory alive. The only family he had was the Church. But even in Church we don't remember every Bishop and every leader. So what was it about John that has stayed in people's minds and hearts across 13 centuries?

I think the clue lies in the juxtaposition of the two readings in this morning service. We wouldn't normally use a reading from outside the Bible at a service like this, but the passage from Bede shows certain similarities with some of the stories of Jesus healing people in the Gospels and especially this account in Mark's Gospel of Jesus healing a man who was born both deaf and mute. Although in Bede's account the boy was mute but not deaf, there are a number of close similarities in these stories. In both cases, the person in need was a social outcast: in Mark's Gospel, that was because the man's disability meant he was forbidden to take part in worship in the temple; in Bede, the boy's skin disease had made him destitute - presumably nobody wanted in anywhere near them. In both cases, the person in need is brought before the Holy Man by others. In both stories, the Holy man touches the tongue of the other and prays for him. And in both cases, as a result of the healing, the patient is able to take his proper place as a fully functioning member of the community. In Jesus's case, healing the man who is deaf and mute identified him as the Messiah, the reason that passage ends with people exclaiming that Jesus has done everything well, he even makes the deaf to hear, and the mute to speak. Because according to Old Testament prophecies, healing the deaf and the mute was what the Messiah was expected to do, God's anointed representative. So Jesus's action fits the job description of the Messiah. And John of Beverley's action looks very much as though it is modelled on the action of Jesus. We even have a stained glass window

in the Minster juxtaposing these - the Ephphatha window above the level access entrance shows both this episode from the Gospels alongside the story of John healing the mute boy.

So maybe this is why John is still remembered, because his actions were recognised as being essentially Christ-like. And so his example inspired others who were seeking Christ, and maybe those who are desiring themselves to become more Christ-like. Certainly all those thousands of pilgrims who over the centuries came to pray at the shrine of St. John of Beverley, did so because they thought that by praying in the presence of the physical remains of John, they were in some way closer to Christ. But the point is that John is still remembered today because his actions and way of life remind us of Jesus.

I wonder, will you or I still be remembered in 1300 years time? Might we even be remembered in 100 years time or 50? Any more bids?

In our recently launched vision strategy for Beverley, Minster, we say that our first ambition is about becoming more like Christ. You might think that the last thing the world needs is more people who think they can act like God, but becoming more like Christ has no ring of arrogance in it. Every Church community seeks to become more like Christ, in the sense that Jesus enjoyed a close relationship with God, the Father and a deep faith. Christ showed the way of self-giving love. He offers a model of humble trust. His intimate relationship with God the Father was sustained by prayer, which allowed him to fulfil his calling as God's Son. And so in all these ways, he can help us to grow into our calling as human beings, to live as children of God.

So that's easily said, we want to become more like Christ. But how does one go about that? What do we do to make that real?

Well, I think this morning's gospel reading offers a way: Jesus says to the deaf and blind man "*Ephphatha*", meaning 'be opened'. And immediately, we're told his ears were opened and his tongue was released and he spoke plainly.

Being 'opened' is the opposite of being 'closed.'

The reason this man's story is included at a key moment in Mark's gospel, is because it isn't just about an individual with a rare disability. It speaks to everyone whose ears may be closed: closed to others; closed to God; closed, perhaps even to

their own better self. It speaks to everyone whose tongue is tied up; who never reaches out to speak to strangers, or to those who are different; who never praises God; or who never asks questions but remains locked up in the status quo, unable to change anything. We may be closed because of fear of others or because we feel we have no value and nothing to offer. And so we retreat and put up the shutters and close ourselves off.

But becoming more like Christ requires us as individuals and as a community to hear that command ourselves, "*Ephphatha!* Be Opened!" We want to be a community more open to God; more ready to listen; more open to Scripture; open to God in prayer and worship. We want to listen carefully, to discover a renewed calling. We want to be more open to the world; wanting to engage more deeply with our town; with its people; with its needs; with its leaders. 'Be open'. 'Learn how to listen.' And also we want to find our voice, to explore our faith, and question it, to interrogate it; not to be afraid to ask the big questions about life and what we're doing here and how to live well; to speak up on behalf of those who are excluded or disadvantaged; to announce as Jesus did good news and liberty to captives and recovery of sight to those who can't see what's in front of them.

So if we want to become more like Christ, we could do a lot worse than allow ourselves to listen more carefully and deeply, and to speak more confidently and truthfully. In so doing, we won't just be benefiting ourselves, we shall be helping others to be more open, helping others to listen to grow in compassion and empathy, to be more welcoming and hospitable. And we shall be helping others to speak out, to challenge the injustices which cause such despair in our world today, to question why things have to be the way they are and to name the name that is above every name.

If we allow ourselves to be opened, we shall become a little more like Jesus, and that will make us more worthy of our founder, John of Beverley, who is remembered because of his Christ-likeness. And who knows, it might mean that in 1300 years time, people still want to remember the people of Beverley Minster, because of our Christ-likeness.

Reading Text

Mark 7:31-end

³¹ Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. ³² They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. ³³ He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. ³⁴ Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." ³⁵ And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. ³⁶ Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. ³⁷ They were astounded beyond measure, saying, "He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak."