

Be Opened and feel summoned...

... to enter and stand in God's Light

A sermon given on the Fifteenth Sunday after Trinity, 8th September 2024, by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster.

Isaiah 35.4-7a; Mark 7.24-end

I'm staying put at the lectern to preach this morning. We had a big memorial service on Thursday, at which these enormous flower displays appeared which are wonderful and it's lovely to have them over the weekend. But if I use the pulpit I'll be speaking out of the midst of the bush, so I thought it would be best to stay where at least some of you can see me.

Now every now and then I find myself locked out of the clergy vestry. I've come out of the house without a key, or I've left it in a jacket pocket and it's got locked inside, and there's a moment of panic, 'Help, I can't get in' and I have to go in search of some kind virger. And it's with an enormous sense of relief that I finally get access - the door has to be open before the space can be used and I can get at my robes and get ready for the service. And most things need to be open before they can be properly used: a book needs to be opened before you can read it; we talk about having to 'get in' to a smartphone or a computer before we can use it; a fridge has to be opened before you can use the milk; a bottle has to be opened before you can drink the contents; a packet of biscuits is just a source of frustration if you can't open the packet. At the climax of this morning's gospel reading is a single word, 'Ephphatha' - an Aramaic word given to us in its original form in the language that Jesus himself spoke without translation. It means simply 'be opened.' So this word that Jesus spoke clearly struck people. It stuck in their minds, and it's found its way embedded in the text of the gospel, even when the rest of it was translated into Greek.

This is part of a rich gospel theme, this theme of 'being opened' - it runs throughout the Bible. In the Genesis story, Adam and Eve are banished from paradise for trying to manage without God and they find the way back blocked and guarded by an angel with a flaming sword. So at the beginning of the scriptures the story of salvation is set up as a story about getting the gates of paradise reopened. When Peter declares Jesus to be the Messiah, Jesus says that Peter will be given the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven that the locks may be opened and the chains loosed and people may find their way into the Kingdom. The Psalms speak of God the King coming to take possession of what is rightfully his, so Psalm 24 says, *'Lift up your heads, O ye gates, and be ye lifted up ye everlasting doors. And the King of Glory shall come in.'* Or think of Jesus's teaching on prayer where he says, *"Ask and it will be given you. Seek and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened."* And at the end of the Bible, Jesus says, *"Behold, I stand at the door and knock, and if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to you and eat with you and you with me."* So this theme of closed doors being opened is the theme of salvation; it's the theme of liberation; of captives being set free; of forgiveness and mercy. And it's the theme of new worlds being opened up, of heaven throwing open its doors that the exiles may finally come home.

So when in this story this morning, Jesus says to the deaf and dumb man, *'Ephphatha, be opened'* - it's a rich gospel moment when God is seen to be at work. It's a moment of redemption and new beginning. And it was anticipated in prophecy in the passage we heard read as our first reading this morning, when the reign of the Messiah was expected to be a time when the eyes of the blind

would be opened, the ears of the deaf unstopped, the lame would leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless would sing for joy. And when this deaf and dumb man hears Jesus's command, deep down there is a movement: cogs turn; tectonic plates shift; connections are made; and the word of God breaks through to transform silence into hearing and speech.

But Jesus not only declares the need for what is closed to be opened, he also models it. The gospel reading contains two stories this morning and apart from the fact that they're side by side, the only thing linking these two stories seems to be that they take place on Gentile (that is, on foreign) territory. Jesus is away from home among people who do not know Israel's God, people whom conscientious Jews would have regarded as unclean and therefore needing to be avoided and shunned, lest they contaminate the holiness of the people of the one God. So when Jesus is approached by this Syrophenician woman, this woman of Tyre, his first reaction is therefore to brush her off - to be approached by an unknown woman at any time was shocking, but a pagan woman in a domestic setting was doubly so. When she asks for help for her demon possessed child Jesus actually insults her saying, "*It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.*" - so he's calling her and her people dogs. But the woman persists, and Jesus then relents and eventually heals the child - he seems to move from an anxious concern to defend and protect himself to a more open and accepting stance - it's the only example I can think of of Jesus losing a debate. As a result, he seems to grow in his sense that his ministry is not just to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, but to other races, other peoples, other parts of the world as well. It's as though before he can declare, 'Be opened' to the deaf and dumb man, he first of all has to learn how to be open himself, open to the Father who in this situation speaks by the Holy Spirit through the words and needs of a pagan woman from Tyre.

I wonder, when are you tempted to remain closed and deaf and dumb? Where in your life do you refuse to listen and you shut out the cries of those in distress and those who are excluded. Or where do you fail to speak up when you need to defend those who have no voice? Where might challenging voices from outside the church actually be inviting you and me to be more open and to grow in our faith? We sometimes talk of turning a blind eye or a deaf ear to speak of those moments when we choose not to listen or to see - and often that's because we're afraid, afraid of the demands being made of us, fearful that our own sense of helplessness will be exposed somehow. And so we turn away and we stop our ears and we say 'no.'

But when Jesus says, "*Ephphatha, be opened*", it's a command not to be afraid and not to turn away. It's an invitation to trust, to say, 'Yes, I believe.' It's a declaration of the gospel, a word to set you free, a flinging open of the gates leading to communion with God and with our neighbour.

And so hear the word again - '*Ephphatha, be opened.*' - feel the stone rolled away from the mouth of the tomb, and know yourself summoned to come forth and to enter and stand in God's light.

Reading Texts

Isaiah 35:4-7a

Say to those who are of a fearful heart,

'Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God.

He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense.

He will come and save you.' ⁵ *Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,*

and the ears of the deaf unstopped; ⁶ *then the lame shall leap like a deer,*

and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,

and streams in the desert; ⁷ *the burning sand shall become a pool,*

and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp,

the grass shall become reeds and rushes.

Mark 7.24-end

²⁴ *From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice,* ²⁵ *but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet.* ²⁶ *Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter.* ²⁷ *He said to her, 'Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.'* ²⁸ *But she answered him, 'Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.'* ²⁹ *Then he said to her, 'For saying that, you may go-the demon has left your daughter.'* ³⁰ *So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.*

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.'*