

Meditation on Mark 7: 31-37

Sisters and brothers, I would like to read a text from the Gospel of Mark. As always it contains more than one story.

Mark 1: 31-37

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^[a] 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.”

The obvious story is a miracle story. Jesus cures a deaf man. If we look at it a bit more closely, it reveals a fairly accurate medical report on a completed treatment. As in every medical record, there is a life story hidden in the diagnostic findings and the description of medicines and treatment steps. Behind the diagnosis, the various steps of the therapy and the statement of the healing, various life stories appear which may have a lot to do with us today.

Let's start where the treatment begins: He was deaf and had an impediment in his speech. He spoke with a slow tongue.

A disability is not only an organic damage. It always has interpersonal relevance too. It shapes our relationships. Being deaf, not being able to hear, not being able to listen means you have a limited perception. Inevitably loneliness creeps in. Not being able to hear, and not being able to talk brings about a growing wall of silence. Togetherness becomes impossible. Your humanity fades away...

Within the whole wide world of the others, a narrow and dark little world of the deaf person begins to exist. The windows to the outside world become fewer and smaller. The capacity to speak stays unused and vanishes...

He was deaf and had an impediment in his speech...

I guess, the disability has a longer history.

Being unable to hear, unable to listen, unable to find words and a language that is understood, may have a lot to do with deeply rooted inhibitions and the fear of being hurt. I can't speak because I don't dare to open myself. Openness scares me. I don't want to make bad experiences, so I better stay quiet and alone.

What has made me quiet? How often was I silenced? Was not taken seriously? ...noticed that my words were in vain?

If I turn deaf, I do not have to speak.

If I do not pay attention, I don't have to answer.

I don't want to speak about myself, nor do I want to know what is going on in the world.

I deliberately mishear, so I don't have to reflect or change my mind.

I may hear what the other person is saying, but I do not take in what he or she really means.

After years and years of behaving like that, I lose my ability to hear.

My tongue gets slow. My heart is heavy.

I turn inward and become locked away from words of comfort and love. The language of hope no longer reaches me.

They brought him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech...

The diagnosis is followed by four steps of therapy.

The first step is Jesus' assurance. He doesn't put the deaf man on display. Maybe the circumstances were making him ill. So, Jesus offers distance, an intimate space, an opportunity for change and healing to happen quietly and without spectators.

A person so closed up as the deaf man, cannot be opened in front of a crowd. Crowds can be scary, can make us speechless, can rob us of our hopes and our faith.

He took him aside in private, away from the crowd...

The message is: first of all you have to come to terms with yourself. You need to find out for yourself who you are and what you believe.

In the second step, Jesus put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue...

The treatment becomes immensely bodily. Almost disgusting. And yet, it is hardly possible to get closer to a person than Jesus does here. Jesus' touch is a language of its own. A sign language. He uses the language that suits the disability. Before the deaf person hears, he can somehow understand: fingers in the ears, spit on the tongue... a conversation begins. Trust can grow. Wounds can heal.

Would we allow such closeness? Would we allow a finger in an open wound? ...touch where our nerves are on edge? Would we open ourselves to such closeness?

Here is something to learn from Jesus: to have a wordless conversation, to find exactly the language the wounded person can understand...

Then, looking up to heaven, Jesus sighed...

In the third step Jesus changes the perspective. Looking up and sighing. Being able to look away from the suffering, avoid being too caught up by it, is important. Only then the world of illness can be broken open. Fresh air can flow in.

What Jesus implies without words is: I need a different focus in order to see what is possible. Before I can open you, I need to open myself – see the power which lies outside me and can flow through me – from God.

I wish, we could do this too. Change our perspective and see what is possible with God, let his fresh breath breathe on us...

Then looking up to heaven, he said to him “Ephphatha!” Be opened!
The text does not clearly say to whom Jesus is speaking in this fourth step.

Be opened!

Is this spoken to heaven, to the ears, or to the whole person? Perhaps to all of them? Perhaps this cannot be separated.

When a person’s ears are opened, the whole world opens in a way.

Heaven opens, hearts open, relationships begin.

Be open! Listen! Find the right language! Walk the path of empathic nearness with the wounded person! Share your faith. Show your love.

And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly...

Everything is open now: the ears, the mouth, the person, heavens. But how can they remain open?

My guess is: the healed person needs a community. People like us. People who need each other. People who hear each other... hear the cries and needs of others and share with each other the perspective which only Jesus can give. When we see the heaven open, we and others can experience transformation and healing.

The last sentence of the text says:

He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak...

The world is now open. Life becomes wide and full. Relationships grow, and people walk towards the kingdom of God.

Everything is very good.

Tears are wiped away.

Death will be no more.

And the man can remain healed as his world opens and he is not left alone.

He is a member of the family of God. And here he finds salvation.