

Reflection by David Kennedy

Jesus returned from the region of Tyre and went by way of Sidon toward the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. <sup>32</sup> They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech, and they begged him to lay his hand on him. <sup>33</sup> He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. <sup>34</sup> Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, “Ephphatha,” that is, “Be opened.” <sup>35</sup> And his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. <sup>36</sup> Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one, but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. <sup>37</sup> They were astounded beyond measure, saying, “He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.” *Mark 7. 31-37*

There is one little reference in this Gospel reading that may have passed you by. We are told that ‘Jesus sighed’. I looked up sigh in the dictionary – to sigh is to emit a deep, audible breath, signifying sadness, weariness, longing, relief from tension, cessation of effort.

I wonder, what makes you sigh most often? Is it weariness or world-weariness, or exasperation, or irritation, or discomfort, or sometimes just feeling a bit overwhelmed, or even fed up?

The Greek word used in Mark 7 can mean ‘groan deeply’. It’s the same word that St Paul uses in Romans 8 when he says that ‘even we, who have the first-fruits of the Holy Spirit, groan inwardly, as we wait for our liberation, the redemption of our bodies’. And Paul also says in Romans 8 that the Holy Spirit within us ‘groans with longings too deep for words’. This is when we respond in our guts to something that needs God’s renewing and healing touch; the Spirit within us prays within us.

But let’s look at the context in Mark 7. Jesus is on a tour of the coast to the east of Galilee, a region called Decapolis, the Ten Towns; this was a largely Gentile area. Some people bring to him a man who was deaf and who had an impediment in his speech. We can imagine what a restricted world this poor man inhabited; two of his five senses were disabled. They begged Jesus to lay his hands on them to heal him. There was a large crowd, but Jesus desired privacy; he took the man away to a private place, put his fingers into his ears and touched the tongue of the man with saliva. This, apparently, was a common action of healers at that time. And then Mark

tells us that 'looked up to heaven, and sighed'. So, this sigh is in the context of prayer. It wasn't that Jesus was irritated, or too tired to be bothered, or exasperated. Rather, he was responding to a situation that was contrary to God's will for his beloved creation. Something was wrong here; our senses are gifts from God, but somehow two of these gifts had been taken away. The sighing is an inward, spiritual groaning at a world where things were wrong. So Jesus cries out, *Ephphatha*, 'Be opened', and we're told that immediately the man could hear again, and his tongue was freed and he could speak perfectly.

And the crows rejoiced – they said, 'He has done everything well; he makes even the deaf to hear and the mute to speak'.

What happens when God reigns on earth as in heaven? What happens when the Kingdom of God, the active rule of God, is seen on earth? Well, do you remember the words of the Prophet Isaiah?

*Then shall the eyes of the blind be opened,  
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;  
then shall the lame person leap like a hart,  
and the tongue of the mute shall sing.*

In this healing, Jesus proclaims that the Kingdom has come in his person. God is ruling through Jesus as perfectly as he rules in heaven. Jesus puts right what has gone wrong.

His sighing is his deep groaning that the long reign of sin, suffering and death must come to an end; his deep desire that God's Kingdom will come on earth as it is in heaven.

That petition of the Lord's Prayer has a sense of urgency about it. It is like a sigh, a deep groaning within, that God's day of ultimate healing might come speedily. That is the sighing that is part of our own praying. May we share the longing of Jesus until the Kingdom comes in glory and all that is wrong, and has been wrong, is put right.