

Opening what is closed

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 14 June 2015

Preacher: Philip Wells

[0 : 00] Let's look in Mark chapter 7, 31 to 37, which is what we read. So what we'll do, we'll look at this together, talk about it if we want to.

We've got another song to sing, and then before we go home, we'll do what we've been used to doing, is to have little groups, break up into little groups, and to pray over what we've been thinking about, and to pray forward into the week.

And that's usually a good way to end the day. I think it's a good way to end the day. So here's a question for this passage. What sort of things does Jesus do?

You might think that's a very... Let's pray. Let's pray. Lord, help us as we come to your word. We've asked that you would open our hearts. We've asked that you would show us Christ, and we want to make that prayer explicit and say, we're depending on you, we're looking to you, and ask you to show us wonderful things out of your word.

Amen. So in Hindu teaching, for example, a Hindu holy man would be shown by his power, but not by his ethics.

[1 : 23] So I'm told, in Hinduism, ethics is of a fairly low priority. So it's not a silly question.

What sort of things does Jesus do? What acts are in his saving vocabulary? So Jesus, subject of a sentence, verb.

Jesus, what does he do? What sort of things? So here's some suggestions. He kicks out Satan. So right at the beginning of Mark's gospel, we found Jesus doing that, didn't we?

People were amazed. He goes into the synagogue. He kicks out demons. He gives orders to the evil spirits, and they obey him. So that's one of his things.

He kicks out Satan. The leper, you remember earlier in Mark's gospel, what does he do with the leper? He cleanses the leper. Although it might say heal in the translations, the actual word is to cleanse.

[2 : 28] So if kicking out Satan is at least a demonstration of power, cleansing is a demonstration of a sort of redemption, isn't it?

To take something that's dirty and to clean it up. I'm not quite sure what you would say that was. It's sort of a redeeming act, isn't it? And in Mark chapter 2, people are amazed because Jesus forgives sins with a word.

So that makes it perfectly clear. What does he do? He's someone who can forgive sins. You don't often meet people who can do that. In fact, the Pharisees think you don't meet anybody who can do that apart from God himself, which of course raises lots of questions, doesn't it?

He calls sinners, which is a rather remarkable thing. You could imagine a holy God rejecting sinners and telling them to go away as far as possible.

But Jesus calls sinners to himself. He says he's a bit like a doctor who's interested in people who are ill and he being a saviour is interested in people who need their sins dealt with.

[3 : 43] He calls sinners. He heals sicknesses. Plenty of evidence for that. He, in Mark chapter 4, stills the storm.

He quietens the storm. Do you remember that? The storm is up and the disciples say, obviously you don't care about us, Lord. You're letting us drown.

And he gets up and says to the wind and the waves, quiet, be still. And there's a great calm. So part of Jesus' vocabulary is to say, be quiet.

quiet. And people are, well, in this case, it's the storm that's quiet. He also says to the woman, do you remember, who had been subject to bleeding for 12 years?

He said, be free from your plague. She felt in her body that she was freed from her suffering. Well, Jesus actually didn't say anything, did he? Because she sneaked up behind him and touched the

hem of his garment.

[4 : 44] But what he, what in effect he was saying is be free from this really long-term, chronic condition. Jesus is able to do that. And amazingly, he raises the dead.

And he says to the little girl in chapter 5, Talitha, come, little girl, get up. And that's a very big get up, isn't it? Get up, not just from lying down on the bed, but from being dead, get up.

So that's quite a vocabulary. Quite a vocabulary. He feeds the 5,000. But here's the question. Now we've got into Mark chapter 7.

If you take care to look, we're between the feeding of the 5,000 in chapter 6 and the feeding of the 4,000 in chapter 8. Jesus is going to say, enact these two highly significant events once, twice. And the question that is up for grabs in this intervening chapter is do people get the point? Do people see?

[5 : 55] Or are they like the people of whom Isaiah spoke, chapter 7, verse 6, whose, they honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.

They worship me in vain. Their teachings are just rules taught by men. And it says that these people have become hardened and calloused.

They have sclerosis. It does hardening, isn't it? Osteosclerosis? What's that? What sclerosis do you have? Something sclerosis? I'm looking for something medical to...

Arterial. Arterial sclerosis. Hardening of the arteries. Yes. Well, that's the word here to have sclerosis of the heart. Hardening of the heart.

What can Jesus do with hard hearts? That's the question. What can he do with dull minds?

Because he's going to say that to his disciples.

[6 : 55] Are you so dull? Are you so calloused of mind? So hard of mind? What can he do with closed minds?

Well, that's the question that this begins to answer. Jesus has done these decisive signs. He's faced misunderstanding from his family who wanted him sort of certified.

He's faced opposition from the Pharisees. I've just referred to those people who were distant from the Lord. Dull of heart.

Hard of heart. He's had a good reception from the Gentiles. He's just... You remember this Syrophenician woman that we looked at last week who got the point straight away.

Even when Jesus sort of seemed to push her back, push her away, she pushed back because she had this insight into who Jesus was. And the question...

[8 : 00] Well, one of the questions is what about the disciples? And what about other people? What about his opponents? Well, let's see. So in...

We're going to look at the place that was the context. Place in the person. Verse 31. Jesus left the vicinity of Tyre, went through Sidon down to the Sea of Decapolis. So at the Sea of Galilee and into the region of the Decapolis.

So this is all in the northern area. And it would be an exaggeration to say they're all Gentiles, but it is a significantly Gentile area. And they bring to him some people brought to him.

So Jesus didn't go seeking this. And the man himself doesn't seem to be the initiative, taking the initiative, but other people bring to Jesus.

A man who is deaf and can hardly talk. So the word for that is a sort of bad talking or hardly talking.

[9 : 03] So it doesn't sound as though he can make no speech at all, but that his speech is unintelligible, or he probably makes noises that sound like speech, but you can't tell what he's saying.

So this is the man that they bring to him. And of course, if you think about the way deafness and speech work, the way you learn speech is by listening, isn't it?

So a baby like baby Charlie, who is incidentally the cutest baby that ever was, is just now beginning to make little cooing noises, so if you go, I'm told, I haven't done this myself, go coo coo to him, he will go coo coo coo back to you.

And that's how you learn speech, isn't it? That you hear something, you mimic it, and that's how you gradually build up your vocabulary of sounds. So if you can't hear, then it is, is it actually impossible, or virtually impossible?

I would just say, I can't see how somebody who could not hear would be able to learn how to speak. Does that make sense? And this man is deaf, and can hardly speak, so perhaps the deafness has come on him later, perhaps something has happened to him since he was a baby, because he can

speaking a bit, but generally there is a close connection if you're deaf, it is almost impossible for you to be able to speak properly.

[10:39] and I don't think he would be pushing it too far to say that that's a physical situation which has a spiritual comparison to it, because if people can't hear God, then they can't speak God, can they?

If people don't hear from God, they can't speak for God, they can't, they've got nothing to say if they can't hear from him, and that's a terrible condition to be in.

If you can't hear what God is saying, how do you know what the words are to say? I suppose some people do have this one-sided relationship with God, where they're always making noises to him, but they never listen to what he says, and that's not really a relationship, is it?

If you're always speaking but never listening, and I suppose the thing about the Christian church is that we are told to speak for God, and how important that we listen to God in order to speak for God, yeah?

So the listening and the speaking is not just a sort of physical medical thing, but there's a spiritual aspect to that as well. And Mark, as I said, uses this unusual word for being mute.

[12:12] He can hardly speak, and interestingly, the commentators are correct, the only other place that it would be used in the Bible would be in the Greek translation of Isaiah 35, which we read right at the beginning.

You might like just to turn to that. And if that is, you know, somebody who was reading Mark, Jewish reader, who knew his Old Testament, and had read it in the Greek version, I think would immediately say, ah, that's very interesting.

Because what is he picking up on? He's picking up on Isaiah 35, where it says redemption will come. The day will come when God puts everything that's wrong right.

He'll bring his people home. He will come. Isaiah 35, verse 4, he will come with divine retribution. He will come to save you.

Then will the eyes of the blind be opened, the ears of the deaf unstopped, the lame will leap like a deer, the mute tongue will shout for joy.

[13:28] There's lots of other things in that chapter. Water gushing forth in the wilderness. You say, well, I don't see any water gushing forth in Mark's gospel.

But I think he's triggering that thought, isn't he? Who is this that's coming in the ten towns? Who is this man who's walking amongst us?

What is he bringing? What sort of thing comes along with him? And Mark is flagging up for us. What comes along with Jesus is the redemption that has been expected all the way through the Old Testament.

He doesn't bring it all at once. He doesn't do everything all at once. But when he comes, you have the foretaste, the beginning, the dawning of this day when the redeemed of the Lord will return and come with singing to Zion and everlasting joy will be on their heads and sorrow and sighing will flee away.

That's who he is. That's what's happening when he comes to this and meets this man who is unable to hear and unable to speak.

[14:51] So what do they do? They ask him to put his hand on them. Sorry. They ask him to put his hand on the man. Now Jesus has done that.

I could only find a couple of times he done that so far. He put his hand on the leper, I think, 141. A man with leprosy, filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man.

And 541, I think, he takes the little girl by the hand. So although the commentary said Jesus often did this, I could only find two references of him doing this so far.

Anyway, putting a hand on somebody. But he doesn't do that anyway. He deals with this man in a different way. He takes him aside in private away from the crowd.

Now he's done things in private before, on these three occasions. 434, when he was alone in private with his disciples, he explained everything.

[16:00] 631, they, is that right? Come with me to a quiet place and get some rest. A private place.

632, so they went off to a solitary place. It's a private place. So Jesus is not, you know, that's not a totally unprecedented thing, but why does he take this chap aside?

So there's all the crowd, and they're actually quite an enthusiastic bunch, but he says, no, you wait there, and I'll take this man to one side. I'm just thinking why he does that.

He's sort of dealing with this man, not for show, he doesn't want everybody to watch and see. Some things Jesus wanted people to see, but he didn't want people to see this.

And he just deals very personally with this man. Quite interesting, isn't it? They say, clap your hands on him, put your hands on him, that's the way to do it.

[17 : 01] And he actually does something different. He puts his fingers in the man's ear, and then spits and puts the saliva on the man's tongue. Now, I don't know why he particularly does that, but I know that for the man, it must have been unmistakably reassuring, wasn't it?

Now, the man could see, but he couldn't hear what was happening, and he couldn't respond to it, couldn't say, what are you doing? So, to have Jesus, you know, oh, right, he's put his fingers in my ears, so that must be something to do with ears, and saliva was often thought to have healing power, that was what people thought, and Jesus is perhaps picking up on that, oh, oh, so he's targeting my ears and my tongue.

So I think it must have been reassured, I think it's something to help the man, I don't know, what do you think? The man knows, ah, yeah, I'm the target of this, Jesus' personal attention is on me, and on the places where I need his touch.

So that's what he does, but the bit that interests me, fingers and ears, spat and touch the tongue, reassurance for the man, the bit that makes me think about it is this in verse 34, so there's the man, there's Jesus, and Jesus looks up to heaven, and he sighs deeply, be open, it's quite a moment, isn't it, Jesus looking up to heaven, heaven, God in heaven, look at this man, he can't hear, he can't speak, he's closed, this needs the power of heaven, and this sigh, oh, oh, this man, this situation, oh, and to say, be opened, and he's opened, his ears were opened, oh, oh, and his tongue is loose, I can speak, you know, the people in Isaiah 35, when they can hear and speak, they jump for joy, and they, doesn't it say they sing God's praises, what does it say, Isaiah 35, the mute tongue shall shout for joy, so now he can do that, he couldn't do that before, he just, but now he can do that, you see, that's what people were made for, isn't it, to be able to hear the great deeds of God, and to shout for joy, give God praise, and it is via this look to heaven, the word Ephatha, the fact that it's there in Aramaic, that's the language that's there in the translation, almost makes you think that the writer had heard it, I shall always remember that time when we, just a few of us went on one side with Jesus, you remember up in the Decapolis, and he took that man, you remember he put his fingers in his ears, we always wondered why he did that, and he spat on, put some saliva on his tongue, but I shall never forget, he said,

[20 : 41] Ephatha, the way he said it, always burned in my, maybe that's why it's, maybe that's why it's quoted like this, he said, be opened, and I think it is probably not pushing things too far to refer across into the next chapter, where the Pharisees come to Jesus, and they begin to question him, chapter 8, verse 11, seen the feeding of the 5,000 and the feeding of the 4,000, at least in principle, they've seen these, have access to this, to test him, they ask him for a sign from heaven, could you do us a sign at all?

Just fed the 5,000, just fed the 4,000, what would really be really helpful, if you could do a sign actually, what's that, that's closed, didn't you see, didn't you hear, where have you been?

And Jesus' response is that he sighs deeply, oh, these people, look at them, closed, why does this sign, this generation ask for a miraculous sign, get one, he's already had it, I think the sigh is the same, I don't think it's exactly the same word, but I think the feeling of it is the same, it's a Jesus faced with this situation, people who've heard and seen, and yet they don't seem to have heard and seen, they seem as though they're blind, they seem as though they're deaf, and they certainly don't speak right, do they?

What are you going on about? Give us a sign from heaven. What sort of words are those? things?

And I find it quite moving that Jesus' response is not to lose his temper, and not to say you are, you know, to denounce them, though he, I mean he's not terribly sympathetic, is he?

but he, well, let's be honest, why does this generation ask for a miraculous sign? I tell you the truth, no sign will be given to it. They've had, he continues to be patient with them, but I think of this sigh, oh, and I think that sigh is something that we could learn from, because we live in a generation that, historically speaking, has had hundreds of years, years, of being told things, and has had things to see, things to listen to, probably a large proportion of people in our country still, somewhere at home have got a Bible, might be one of those white presentation Bibles from WH Smith, that you give to people at certain times in their life, and they probably never open them, because all the beautiful gold on the outside is still intact, you know, the pages have not been opened, but they

have a

[24 : 18] Bible, and I suppose we could get very impatient, and we could denounce them, and we could give up on them, and we could be angry with them, them, but what about sighing, because I think that's what Jesus does, he's, the sigh, Jesus commanded them not to tell anyone, but the more he did so the more they kept talking about it.

That's like what happened in the early chapters of Mark isn't it? Jesus really did not want the encumbrance of loads of people pressing around him in a rather ignorant way just based on healings instead of wanting to listen to what he said.

Remember that was the situation at the beginning of Mark. And it looks as though the same sort of thing is developing here. But we do notice verse 37, the people were overwhelmed with amazement.

I can't remember the Greek for that but it must be big, mustn't it? They were overwhelmed with amazement. Absolutely gobsmacked.

And they say this, it sums it up so well doesn't it? He has done everything well. You can't fault him on anything.

[25 : 54] It's a beautiful expression of assessment of Jesus. He does everything well. And they say this in the plural. He even makes deaf people hear and mute people speak.

Which is interesting because there's only one of them. There's one that's recorded. Maybe there were others. I wonder whether they've sort of exaggerated or no, perhaps not quite the word exaggerated.

They've hyped it up perhaps. He does everything well. Everything well. Well actually he hasn't been here very long. You've only seen him open this deaf man, a mute man.

Oh no, he's fantastic. He's fantastic. He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak. Well, that's a great sentiment. Perhaps I'm unduly pessimistic.

I still think there's an issue. Because they can say all this stuff. We're absolutely on board for Jesus. Absolutely. He's brilliant.

[27 : 06] Well, hold on a minute. Have you really got the point? Have you really got the point which we're going to have to face up to in chapter 8?

That this Messiah who does everything well, as you correctly say, is a Messiah who takes up a cross. And says, if you want to follow me, you're going to have to carry a cross.

And my way to glory is through the cross. So have you got that? I don't know. I think the issue still remains. Are people open or closed?

And we learn that Jesus has the power to change that situation. To open people up. And the question hangs, well, will he do it?

It's a big mystery, isn't it? It's a mystery of God's sovereignty. Those Pharisees are definitely closed.

Now, what will happen? Will God do a fantastic miracle so that they all are open to him?

[28 : 12] Or will there be a hardening? Or what? That's still, as it were, still to play for. But we do learn, and we do add to Jesus' saving vocabulary.

He can do this too. He can open people up. Let's stop there. Let's stop there.