

Twenty-Third Sunday of Ordinary Time
Gospel Reading **9th September 2018**

Mark 7: 31-37

Jesus restores a man's hearing and speech.

Background on the Gospel Reading

Today we continue to hear the Gospel of Mark proclaimed. In today's reading, Jesus heals a man who was deaf and had a speech impediment. This is a story about Jesus' healing power, and in it we find clues about our understanding of sacrament. We are struck by the physical means used to heal the man, the use of spittle and touch.

The Church continues to celebrate the sacraments using physical means. In the Sacrament of Baptism, water and oil are used to show the power of the Holy Spirit. In the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick, we are anointed with holy oil on the forehead and the hands. In the Eucharist, bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Christ. We are a sacramental people who believe that God's grace is given to us through these physical signs.

Some, however, see in this Gospel an image of the proclamation of the good news of Jesus to the Gentiles. The geographic references tell us that Jesus is journeying through Gentile territory. Jesus had previously visited this region and healed a person possessed by a demon. Jesus was already famous there, which explains why people brought the deaf man to him. The story that precedes this reading in Mark's Gospel sets the stage.

Jesus encounters a Gentile, a Syrophenician woman who asks him to heal her demon-possessed daughter. Jesus engages her in a dialogue about not feeding to dogs the food intended for children. Jesus is struck by the woman's great faith when she replies that even dogs eat the food that falls from the table

he heals her daughter immediately. The faith of this Greek woman compels Jesus to respond to her plea.

Mark shows that Jesus' own mission affirms the early Church's mission to the Gentiles. This was a significant issue to the early Christian community, which found that the good news of Jesus took root and spread quickly among the Gentiles.

Yet there is an irony in the story of healing that Mark tells. Jesus gives the man the gift of speech, but then tells him not to use it. Jesus asks that the news of his healing power, which is evidence of his identity as the Messiah, not be spread. This is a recurring motif in Mark's Gospel and is sometimes called the "messianic secret."

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