

Sermon on Sunday 5 September 2021

by Rev. Alan Stewart

Readings: Isaiah 35. 4-7a; Mark 7. 31-37

Ephphatha

Ephphatha: Doesn't exactly trip off the tongue, does it?

It's one of the very few words or phrases in the New Testament that's recorded in Aramaic, the language Jesus spoke.

Ephphatha - 'Be opened'

The word appears only once in what I think is unhelpfully sometimes referred to as one of the 'healing miracles' of Jesus. I say 'unhelpful' because, as you'll have heard me say many times, healing and cure are not necessarily the same thing. Healing can happen without cure; within our memories, our hauntings, within our shame, our self esteem, and it is entirely possible in fact to die healed.

In this particular story even the word 'cure' is difficult for some. Recently I've begun working on a collaboration with a charity that encourages mixed ability worship and friendship, to help create a image of the Last Supper which includes disciples who reflect a mix of abilities. And we've made the perhaps controversial decision to have a blind Christ. For some within the hearing and visually impaired communities these particular miracles of cure are difficult. These stories of gained or regained hearing or sight assume these to be disabilities to be fixed or cured, rather than integral parts of a person's identity to be accepted and embraced.

Life was, of course, very different in the time of Jesus, and in that culture the blind and the deaf were considered cursed. They had

no place, no means of support except to beg. And as always with the miracles of cure and healing, Jesus is responding to (and healing) so much more than just the physical. He is restoring each one to community.

So, a more complex story than perhaps it first appears, made more complex of course by that age-old question; if then, why not now?

As a child hearing stories like this, I was more intrigued to be honest, and delightfully disgusted of course, by the whole 'spit' thing. Why Jesus chose here and elsewhere to use saliva is anyone's guess. Some folk-medicine of the day did apparently believe in the health benefits of spittle, so maybe Jesus was just using a visual aid that the crowd would relate to. If he was doing it today of course, in this Covid world, I imagine he would choose something very different.

Ephphatha – be opened. The more I've meditated on that word this week, the more I've come to feel it holds within it the key to so much.

Is not the secret of life a continual openness to what is? Is not the lifeblood of faith a dedication to opening ourselves as channels to the divine energy and love, that holds all that is?

So, this morning, I'd like to use this ancient word to help us reflect a little on how we might open ourselves to Life; to becoming better channels of its flow.

Ephphatha – be opened

Ironically, I'd like to first ask you to close your eyes. Sometimes, when we deny one sense, we rely more on another.

Ephphatha - Open our ears Lord to this moment; to this here and now; to listen for a second to our own heart beating; to each

breath, in and out; and with each in-breath we welcome You Holy Spirit, living Breath of the living God.

And with each outbreath we release to you all that is unsolved and unnecessary.

Open our ears to the kind voice that would bless and reassure and speak mercy to our falling and our failing.

Open our ears to hear our own name read tenderly from the palm of Your own hand.

Open our ears to the prompts and cries of You, Holy Spirit, coaxing and guiding, challenging, encouraging us with the words and the strength we need for this moment, for this day.

Open our ears to listen to what others are saying... and not saying.

Open our ears to those whose voices speak truth, however unwelcome, however inconvenient.

Open our ears, Lord, to hear your holy Word spoken through holy scripture; through the Christ, your Word made flesh. Open our ears to your Word found within silence, within the words and stories and wisdom of others.

Ephphatha – be opened

I ask you now to open your eyes.

Open our eyes Lord to beauty; to grace, everywhere, and in every moment, and in every person.

Open our eyes to see ourselves and others as you see us; uniquely imperfect and perfectly lovable.

Open our eyes to those we need to release and forgive, beginning with ourselves.

Open our eyes to what we hold too tightly to, and to what holds us too tightly.

Open our eyes to all we need to surrender; to let go and let be.

Open our eyes to the poor, in pocket and in spirit.

Open our eyes to the ways our lifestyle scars your planet and steals its future.

Open our eyes Lord, to recognise the Christ beside us, and within us, and on our left and on our right, and in each person we meet.

Open our eyes to know that you have never been elsewhere; that always and forever you have been here, now, always and forever our centre.

Ephphatha – be opened

Lastly, I invite you to join me in speaking the prayer of the Celtic Saint Caedmon, and as I/we do perhaps you'd like to, for a second, touch your lips with your finger.

Open our mouths, Lord, and with Saint Caedmon we pray:

'I cannot speak, unless You loose my tongue; I only stammer, and I speak uncertainly; but if You touch my mouth, my Lord, then I will sing the story of Your wonders!'

Ephphatha – be opened

So, may we be open to the God found in miracle and in the ordinary; in the expected and unexpected, in the planned and the interruption.

Open to the hard questions that will lead us deeper, make us humbler, more compassionate seekers of truth.

Open and expectant to the flow of God's spirit within us and through us; channeling love where there is hatred, pardon where there is injury; hope where there is despair.

Open to the blessing we are, have always been and always will be, today and forever.

Amen

