

St. Ninian's Parish Church
Sunday 9th September 2018

Mark 7: 24 - 37

Almighty God, your Son our Saviour Jesus Christ is the light of the world. May your people, illuminated by your Word, shine with radiance of his glory, that his love may be known in the world as he lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit one God, now and forever. Amen.

"Open up!" That is how it should be translated, that Aramaic word *Ephphatha* that our Bibles translate as the more pedestrian, 'Be opened' when Jesus restores a man's speech and hearing in our Gospel reading this morning. "Open up!" is much better than 'Be opened.' Who speaks like that?

That the author of our Gospel reading, Mark, chose to record the exact word that Jesus would have used, *Ephphatha*, tells us that this command has some importance in the story or stories that surround it. In fact, this word *Ephphatha*, 'Open up', is the key to understanding the whole of chapter seven of Mark's Gospel.

Before he healed this man with this word, Jesus had been in another place with a woman using another word. 'Dog,' he called a Gentile (that is non-Jewish) Syrian woman who had come to him looking for healing for her daughter. He said to her,

Let the children be satisfied first; it is not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.

Traditionally, readers of Mark's Gospel have chosen to ignore this embarrassing detail of this story. Instead they point out that in this story Jesus travels to a foreign land and heals someone who is a foreigner to him - someone who is outside of the Jewish faith, outside of the land of Israel, and - being a woman - someone who is without the authority to make such a request.

By, eventually, healing this Gentile woman's daughter, despite initially making clear who the woman is in relation to him, Jesus - it is traditionally understood - opens up faith and makes the fruits of faith available to anyone, everywhere. No longer are the Chosen People of God only those who are born in to a religion. No longer are the Chosen People of God only those who follow particular dietary rules, or a purity code, or particular religious laws. Anyone - goes the traditional understanding of this story - who has faith in Jesus, can now be part of God's Kingdom. God's kingdom is *opened up* (Ephphatha) to the world.

Although it ignores the attitude of Jesus behind the word he uses, nevertheless that traditional understanding of this story is a welcome expression of broad-minded universality; you need only believe to be in.

However, you might not be surprised to learn - you *should not* be surprised to learn - that in recent years that traditional understanding has been challenged, in particular by feminist theologians who rightly believe that Jesus' initial word of insult directed at the woman needs a better explanation than it has traditionally been given.

For them, it is not the case that *Jesus* opens up God's kingdom to Gentiles such as this foreign women, but that a *foreign woman* opens up Jesus' mind and attitudes, and by changing him converts him from a typically narrow minded religious zealot in to the open-minded man of universal love that we believe in.

The feminist theologian Mary Ann Tolbert argues that in the passage immediately prior to this one Jesus had rebuked the Pharisees for their hypocrisy and narrow-minded understanding of religion, and that this woman's role is to point out Jesus' own hypocrisy and narrow-mindedness, and to change him, to convert him, to open up his mind to a different understanding of what God's kingdom should be. This woman stands in a long line of women, often nameless, who play crucial roles in the direction of biblical story.

Sharon Ringe, another feminist theologian, takes a different tack. She sees this story as one about economic injustice. She argues that the most important aspect of this story is the status of the woman as a Phoenician from Syria. This fact, she argues, suggests that the woman is particularly wealthy in relation to the poor Galilean peasant fishermen. Sharon Ringe argues that her boldness in confronting Jesus comes from a culture of privilege and power within her society. This story serves to remind those with economic privilege that they should not automatically expect a place at the table in the God's kingdom. Indeed, they will be lucky to get a place under the table.

If the rich want God's kingdom to be open to them, Sharon Ringe argues, then they have to bang very loudly at the door. If they do so the door will be opened up to them, but the rich and privileged should remember that in contrast to this world, in God's world it is the last that are first, the least that are the greatest.

Gail O'Day takes yet a different approach. She sees this as a theological story that makes a point about how we should relate to God. She argues that the boldness of the woman in confronting Jesus, his recognition of her demand, and his ability to change - to open up - is typical of the Old Testament prophets who encouraged the people of Israel to demand justice from God. When the people of Israel don't just politely ask God to save them, but demand in forceful terms justice for their plight, then God responds.

These three feminist approaches and the traditional interpretation are all different, but together they tell us something about what we should expect from faith, from the church, and what kind of people we should aspire to become. Firstly, the traditional approach tells us that this church should be a church that is opened up. It should be opened up to anyone; everyone is welcome here.

Following Sharon Ringe's interpretation we should be a church that recognises the plight of the poorest and most vulnerable people in our society first. We should be open to the wealthy and the privileged, opened up so that they are welcome, but they don't come first to the table.

Following Gail O'Day's interpretation we should be a lot more bold and demanding as a church and as people. When it comes to the injustices of this world, the tragedies that afflict people's lives, the misery people suffer then our prayers and our actions should demand change. When we pray we are not asking God, if he has the time, would he mind helping those drowning in floods in Kerala.

No, our prayers should be a demand for help. Our voices should be raised in protest against those who perpetuate injustice, misgovernment, or a changing climate. When we are hurt we should cry out to God, with force, to ease our pain; we should demand it. Give us(!) this day our daily bread! Forgive us(!) our debts as we forgive our debtors. Lead us(!) not into temptation. These prayers are not polite requests; they are impatient demands, and the theologian Gail O'Day argues that it is when God hears those demands then he responds.

And what's more, as the theologian Mary Ann Tolbert pointed out, this woman in this story changes Jesus, and if Jesus can change his attitudes then so can we change ours. If Jesus can cure the man's deafness then he can cure ours. So, for example, it was only fifty years ago that women were accepted into the ministry of the Church of Scotland. They had been banging at the door of the church demanding for over a decade that it change its attitude towards women and *open up* the door to the ministry.

Recently, the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland permitted those who are married to someone of the same-sex to be ministers in the church. They too had been banging at the door of the church demanding for over a decade that it change its attitude towards them and *open up* the door to the ministry.

Jesus' changed his prejudices towards others, we have changed ours and we might continue to ask who else is banging at the door of our church, or of our country demanding to be let in but who are kept out because we wont change our attitudes towards others?

The Syro-Phonician woman's demand changed Jesus, and Jesus immediately went and opened up a man's ears and voice. He, having been changed by her, helped others to find their voice. We too are called in this way, not just to hear the demands of those kept outside our society, culture, church or country, but more than that to help give voice to their plight, their hurt, their pain, their presence. It is not enough just to listen for the voice of others; we are called to help give them a voice.

And that starts today in the baptism of Olivia. In baptising her we hear her cry, her persistent demand that we care for her, her cry that she be given an equal place alongside us in God's kingdom, in Christ's church, in the world, as young as she is. In baptism we hear her cry and open up the church to her.

And what's more we give voice to that cry. In living alongside her we demand that she gets the most nurturing love, the best health care, the best education, that our society be opened up to her.

And then what's more, we change our attitudes towards her. Just as we would never want to live in a world governed by the values and morals and economics of our parents' and grandparents' generations (my father was born in 1936 when married woman never worked; I was born in 1967 when homosexuals still went to prison).

Just as we would never want to live in a world governed by the values and morals and economics of our parents' and grandparents' generations, so, once we have demanded the very best for Olivia's generation and have brought them up to know how much they are loved by us and by God, then we need to change our views and allow them to build their lives in the world of the future that will belong to them.

Ephphatha, open up! Demand that this world be opened up to everyone. Expect your ears to be opened up themselves and for you to be changed by that. Help others to open up their mouths so that their voices can change their world. *Ephphatha*.

Now to the one who can keep you from falling and set you in the presence of his glory, jubilant and above reproach, to the only God our saviour, be glory and majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all time, now, and for evermore. Amen.