

Notes

Please note that this document contains 3 different versions of the "Exploring the Word" worksheet. Each version contains the same Gospel texts, Reflection and questions, but with a different configuration of "alternative views". The suggested activities are applicable to a variety of age ranges. Some activities may not be suitable in all circumstances.

Activities

- Use a biblical atlas (print or online) to locate the towns of Tyre and Sidon and the region of The Decapolis. Identify where these places lie in relation to other areas in which Jesus travelled. Compare the biblical atlas with a modern day atlas. What are these regions known as today? What events are occurring in these areas today or have occurred in recent years?
(An excellent online biblical atlas can be found at www.anova.org/sev/atlas)
- Conduct an online investigation into the 'Messianic expectation' – the Jewish anticipation of the coming of a Messiah. Identify the origins of this expectation in books of the Old Testament and trace its development through to the time of Jesus and its continuation through until today.

Gospel Journal

What message emerges from the gospel passage for you?

Why did the gospel writer make reference to the passage from Isaiah in the words of the crowd?

What might have happened next in the life of the man who was healed?

Why was Jesus so keen to keep his actions quiet?



Gospel Mk 7:31-37

Returning from the district of Tyre, Jesus went by way of Sidon towards the sea of Galilee, right through the Decapolis region. And they brought him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they asked him to lay his hand on him. He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, put his fingers into the man's ears and touched his tongue with spittle. Then looking up to heaven he sighed; and he said to him, 'Ephphatha,' that is, 'Be opened.' And his ears were opened, and the ligament of his tongue was loosened and he spoke clearly. And Jesus ordered them to tell no one about it, but the more he insisted, the more widely they published it. Their admiration was unbounded. 'He has done all things well,' they said 'he makes the deaf hear and the dumb speak.'

Reflection

Strangely, this week's gospel about the healing of a man who was deaf and dumb is less about healing than it is about Jesus being the Messiah. The theme is set up in the first reading when the prophet, Isaiah, describes the signs by which the coming of the Messiah will be recognised: the blind will see; the deaf will hear; the lame will leap; and the dumb will speak. When Jesus healed the man in the gospel story the crowd were admiring of what he had done. They even exclaimed, 'he makes the deaf hear and the dumb speak.' These words are a direct echo of the Isaiah text – they were recognising Jesus as fulfilling the prophecies of the promised Messiah.

However, the passage also demonstrates to us that Jesus was trying to show the people that he was not exactly the Messiah that many of them were anticipating. This healing story takes place in the region of The Decapolis – south-east of the Galilee region and populated mostly by Gentiles. By travelling in this area and working miraculous healings, Jesus is making the point that his mission is to all people, not just 'the Chosen People' of Israel. He commands the crowd who witnessed the healing to tell no one about it but, filled with the idea that Jesus was the Messiah they had been waiting for, they broadcast the news. Jesus wanted their silence because he knew that they did not fully understand the sort of Messiah that he was. Only when they understood that this Messiah must suffer and die would he have allowed them to speak of his deeds.

Scriptural Context

Isaiah's Prophecy

All three synoptic gospel writers were at pains to demonstrate that Jesus was the fulfilment of the prophecies of the scriptures. This reference to Isaiah's prophecy appears in all three synoptic gospels. It is perhaps most familiar in the context of the Gospel of Luke, where the gospel writer actually combines it with a different passage from Isaiah and portrays Jesus as reading it in the synagogue as an announcement of his mission (Lk 4: 16-21). It is good to have the Isaiah text as the first reading this week and then see the way it is referred to in the gospel of the day.

Living the Gospel

Open to compassion

When Isaiah described the signs by which the Messiah would be recognised, he identified those people who were isolated from society by their physical afflictions. He portrayed a Messiah who released them from those afflictions and allowed them to re-enter society. That is what Jesus did time and time again. In the healing of the deaf and dumb man, Jesus called on all those around him to also be opened – that their hearts may be opened to compassion. Jesus calls to us through today's gospel to also be open to compassion and open to the needs of those around us.

- Q. *What message emerges from the gospel passage for you?*
- Q. *Why did the gospel writer make reference to the passage from Isaiah in the words of the crowd?*
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Gospel Focus

Ephphatha

The healing that Jesus works in this passage is perhaps one of the most 'physical' of his healing actions. He puts his fingers in the man's ears and places spittle on his tongue. It is an incredibly intimate contact with a complete stranger and someone regarded as outcast and unclean because of his disabilities. When Jesus speaks the word of healing, Ephphatha ('Be opened'), he appears to be speaking not only to the man but to all those listening. Be open to the possibility of embracing those you have cast out; be open to a different understanding of Messiah.

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