

## XXIII ORDINARY TIME– 5th September 2021

### HE EVEN MAKES THE DEAF HEAR AND THE MUTE SPEAK - Biblical Commentary by Father Alberto Maggi OSM

#### Mark 7,31-37

*Then Jesus went out again from the region of Tyre and came through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee in the region of the Decapolis. They brought to him a deaf man who had difficulty speaking, and they asked him to place his hands on him. After Jesus took him aside privately, away from the crowd, he put his fingers in the man's ears, and after spitting, he touched his tongue. Then he looked up to heaven and said with a sigh, "Ephphatha" (that is, "Be opened"). And immediately the man's ears were opened, his tongue loosened, and he spoke plainly. Jesus ordered them not to tell anyone. But as much as he ordered them not to do this, they proclaimed it all the more. People were completely astounded and said, "He has done everything well. He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak."*

The difficulty and resistance on the part of disciples and the gentiles, to accept that the good news, Jesus' message is narrated only by the evangelist Mark in chapter 7, 31-37, let's read "*Jesus went out again from the region of Tyre and came through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee in the region of the Decapolis.*" Just look at any map to see that it is an itinerary absurd and very unlikely, because Jesus leaves from Tyre, he had already gone to the gentile land, he goes up to the north, as we can see in the map, to Sidon, then he goes down to go to the sea of Galilee, but he does a whole wide tour passing through the Decapolis, that is, the cities of the gentiles. Why this? The evangelist does not want to indicate a topographical itinerary, but a theological one: the works of Jesus, the one with the good news, embraces the whole gentile world and it is here that he meets the resistance. In this episode the evangelist, through the figure of the deaf and dumb man, represents the resistance of the disciples; they are deaf, they do not accept Jesus' message and for this reason they cannot expose it.

"*They brought to him a deaf man...*" he is not dumb "*...who had difficulty speaking..*", the reference is to the prophet Isaiah in chapter 35, where he speaks of the exodus, of the liberation, "*... and they asked him to place his hands on him.*" Well, Jesus does not impose his hand, the situation is much more serious and Jesus almost seems to act with violence. "*Jesus took him aside privately..*" this expression, "*aside privately*", of the seven times it appears in Mark's Gospel it concerns the disciples six times; then under the figure of this deaf man stammering, the evangelist intends to represent the resistance on the part of his disciples. "*..away from the crowd, he put his fingers in the man's ears,..*" Here the evangelist uses the Greek term "*ota*" (phonetic), which indicates precisely the physical organ," *.. and after spitting,..*" the saliva was believed to be condensed breath and it was an image of the Spirit, "*.. he touched his tongue. Then he looked up to heaven..*" representing the divine sphere "*..and said with a sigh,..*" It is only here in the New Testament that Jesus sighs; it is the resistance, the effort that Jesus makes to understand that the kingdom of God does not recognize borders, does not build walls, but opens doors to everyone.

*“..said with a sigh, “Ephphatha”.* When words are used in Aramaic, the language spoken at that time, in Mark’s gospel, it means that the episode concerns Jesus’ disciples, and it is imperative, *“open up”*. The imperative is aimed at the individual, it is the man who must open completely.

*“And immediately the man’s ears were opened,..”* and here the evangelist does not use the word for ears as before, but uses another word *“acovai”* indicating hearing and understanding. That was the problem, it wasn't a physical problem, it was a problem of understanding. *“.. his tongue loosened, and he spoke plainly.”* Here the reference it is taken by the evangelist from the prophet Isaiah, chapter 35, 5-6, where he speaks of liberation and of the exodus from captivity. Isaiah writes: *“Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy.”* Therefore the evangelist sees this liberation that he brings in the works of Jesus.

*“Jesus ordered them not to tell anyone. But as much as he ordered them not to do this, they proclaimed it all the more.”* and here the reaction is strange because Jesus has healed a deaf-mute, but it is extended to all, the plural indicates that it concerns the disciples, *“He has done everything well.”* The word *“well”* is taken from the book of Genesis of the creation, so it shows in the works of Jesus the continuation of the creative action of the Father, *“He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak.”* So the work of Jesus is to free these disciples from these prejudices, the religious nationalists who divided them for the gentiles. But why does Jesus forbid? To avoid easy enthusiasm. The journey will still be long and Jesus will still have to reproach them later on saying *“..you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear.”*(Mark 8,18) The path is long.