

XXIII ORDINARY TIME – September, 6th 2015

**HE MAKES THE DEAF HEAR AND THE DUMB SPEAK – Biblical Commentary by F. Alberto Maggi
OSM**

Mk 7, 31-37

At that time, Jesus, returning from the territory of Tyre, he went by way of Sidon towards the Lake of Galilee, right through the Decapolis territory. 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 to be by themselves, 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 at once the impediment 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 proclaimed it.

Their admiration was unbounded, and they said, 'Everything he does is good, he makes the deaf hear and the dumb speak.'

Every time we read Gospels we must bear in mind that they are not a matter of chronicle, but of faith, they don't concern history, but theology, they're not a list of events, but of truths. It is also the case in this episode. It seems completely illogical, inconclusive.

In this passage we see that Jesus isn't named, nor disciples are; there's no reaction on behalf of the healed, and, above all, the evangelist starts with the description of a very improbable itinerary. Let's read it.

"Returning from the territory of Tyre", Tyre is situated in the south, "he went by way of Sidon", that means heading for north, but it specifies "towards the Lake of Galilee", back to the south, "right through the Decapolis territory".

It is really an improbable itinerary. Why does the evangelist provide such strange indications?

He intends to recall the action of Jesus with pagan people, for the message of love he brings is universal, facing nevertheless the opposition of disciples. This is the general meaning of this passage.

“And they brought him...” - who are they? They’re those who cooperate with Jesus, those the evangelist defined as ‘angels’, those who understood and welcomed the message of Jesus, collaborating with him.

They brought him a deaf man, not a dumb, but a stammerer. It is the only time that this term ‘stammerer’ (μογιλωτοῦ) appears in New Testament. It is only once present in the Old Testament recalling the liberation from Exodius of Babylon (*“Then the lame will leap like a deer and the tongue of the dumb sing for joy”*, Is 35.6 LXX). It’s an image of liberation. But pay attention! It’s not a matter of physical healing, it’s an inner healing that Jesus is performing.

“And they asked him to lay his hand on him”. *“He took him aside...”*; in Mark’s Gospel we find the expression “aside” seven times (κατὰ ἄνω) and six of them concern disciples, their lack of understanding; so is this time, too.

“... away from the crowd, put his fingers...”, Jesus’ gesture is a bit violent, he clears his ears. In order to indicate ‘ears’ the evangelist uses the word ὄτα (ōta), from which the word “otitis” derives, that all of us know, and we will see why.

“... and touched his tongue with spittle” – Spittle was considered as being a sort of condensed breath, image of the Spirit – *“Then looking up to heaven”* – heaven means a communion with God – *“he sighed”* – this is the only time in New Testament that Jesus sighs (ἐστενάξατο) because of opposition of his disciples, represented by this deaf stammerer – *“and said to him, «Ephphatha»*. When in Mark’s Gospel an Aramaic word appears, it means that the episode is only addressed to Jews, not to pagans.

“That is «Be opened!»” The urge of Jesus not only concerns ears, but the entire individual, who needs to open himself.

“And his ears were opened”. Well, we have said that the evangelist used the word “ears” (ὄτα), but here he uses another Greek term (ἀκοα...), which means ‘hearing’. This was the problem: it was not a physical problem, but a problem of comprehension, as we are used to say: “There is none so deaf as those who will not hear”.

“At once the impediment of his tongue was loosened and he spoke clearly”. His inability of expressing was due to the fact that he didn’t listen; this is a clear reference to disciples who didn’t listen to Jesus’ message.

And Jesus already said that: “Are you also still without understanding?”

“And Jesus ordered them to tell no one about it”. Jesus knows that disciples’ liberation is not complete; a great and hard work is needed and will continue throughout Gospels.

“But the more he insisted, the more widely they proclaimed it. Their admiration was unbounded, and they said, ‘Everything he does is good, he makes the deaf hear and the dumb speak’.

The evangelist uses the same words that in the book of Genesis indicate the action of the Creator, who says, each time he creates something “Everything he does is good”, “God saw how good it was”.

The action of creating continues through Jesus by providing everyone with fullness of life.