

## XXIII ORDINARY TIME- 9th September 2018

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

#### Mark 7,31-37

*Then he returned from the region of Tyre and went through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. And they brought to him a man who was deaf and had a speech impediment, and they begged him to lay his hand on him. And taking him aside from the crowd privately, he put his fingers into his ears, and after spitting touched his tongue. And looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, “Ephphatha,” that is, “Be opened.” And his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. And Jesus charged them to tell no one. But the more he charged them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. And they were astonished beyond measure, saying, “He has done all things well. He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak.”*

The difficulty and the resistance of the disciples to accept that the Jesus' good news was addressed also to the gentiles, is only narrated in this episode from the evangelist Mark. It is chapter 7,31-37 let's read “*Then he returned from the region of Tyre and went through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis.*” It is enough to look at any geographical map to see that it is an absurd and ridiculous itinerary, because Jesus departs from Tyre, he had already gone to the pagan land, goes up to the north as we can see on the map, to Sidon, then descends to go to the Sea of Galilee, but does a wide tour passing through the Decapolis, the pagan cities. Why is this ? The evangelist does not want to indicate a topographical but theological itinerary: Jesus' work that of the good news, embraces all the gentile world and it is here where he encounters 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 welcome Jesus' message and for this are not able to communicate it.

“*..they brought to him a man who was deaf and had a speech impediment,*” it refers to the prophet Isaiah 35, where it talks of the exodus, the liberation, “*and they begged him to lay his hand on him*”. Well, Jesus does not lay his hands on him, the situation is much more serious and Jesus acts almost violently. This expression “*..taking him aside ..*” of all seven times that it appears in Mark's gospel, six of them regard the disciples. So, with this figure of this deaf man the evangelist intends to represent the resistance on the part of the disciples.

“*..taking him aside from the crowd privately, he put his fingers into his ears,..*” he literally inserted them, that is, he stuck his fingers in his ears. Here the evangelist uses the Greek word ‘otà’ indicating the physical organ, “*..and after spitting..*”, saliva was thought to be condensed breath and was an image of the Spirit, “*..touched his tongue. And looking up to heaven...*” heaven represented the divine sphere “*..he sighed..*” and it is only here in the New Testament that Jesus sighs. It is the

resistance and the fatigue that Jesus does to make them understand that the Kingdom of God has no boundaries, on walls of confinement, but doors open to all.

*“..and said to him, “Ephphatha,”* When words in Aramaic are used in the Gospel of Mark, the language spoken at that time, it means that the episode regards Jesus’ disciples that used this language, *“..that is,”* and it is an imperative *“Be opened.”* The imperative was addressed to the ears, Jesus should of said *“open”*, in fact it is the man that must open completely. *“ And his ears were opened,”* and here the evangelist for ears does not use the word he used before, but another word *“acuai”* that means to hear and to understand. This was the problem, not the physical problem, it was the problem of understanding.”.. *his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly.*” here the reference the evangelist has taken from the prophet Isaiah chapter 35,5 where it speaks of liberation, of the exodus from imprisonment. Isaiah wrote *“Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy.”* Therefore the evangelist sees in the works of Jesus this liberation that he brings.

*“And Jesus charged them to tell no one. But the more he charged them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. And they were astonished beyond measure, saying,....”* And here the reaction is strange because Jesus had healed and blind and deaf man, but it is extended to all, the plural indicates that it concerns the disciples. *“He has done all things well..”* Done well comes from the Book of Genesis, from the creation, therefore it is seen in Jesus’ work the continuation of the creative action of the Father, . *“He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak.”* And so Jesus’ work is that of freeing these disciples from this nationalist and religious prejudices that closed them to the pagans. But why does Jesus forbid? To avoid an easy enthusiasm, the journey will still be long and Jesus will still have to reprimand them later saying *“You have ears and you do not hear”,* the journey is long.