

'Ephphatha'

a sermon preached on the

14th Sunday after Pentecost

Sunday 6 September 2009

at

St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

by Fr David Moore

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Lecton: Isaiah 35:4-7a, Psalm 146, Mark 7:24-37

Jesus seems to have been acutely aware that a momentous upheaval and transformation of consciousness was taking place in his lifetime. The signs of this upheaval had been in the air for the last several centuries of that period we call Before the Common Era (BCE) – a turning point in human history which has been called the 'Axial Period'. Tumultuous events, astonishing ideas and intellectual developments, and a profound spiritual yearning. The Incarnation of Christ takes place at the end of this great turning point in human history, ushering in an entirely new period in the development of human consciousness.

It seems from the gospels that Jesus came to appreciate not only that history had changed, but that his own life was vital to this revolution. What makes Jesus the pioneer of our salvation is that he embodied two seemingly-contradictory movements of the human spirit – he committed himself completely to the new religious, political, and intellectual development, and yet he eschewed absolutely every form which might prove the success of this development.

This is so astounding that we struggle to take it in, even now, all these centuries later, so it is worth repeating, in slightly different terms. On the one hand, though he was faithful to the received Jewish tradition, yet he gave his allegiance to that call of the Spirit within him. He was obviously sufficiently open to the Spirit as to hear God's call as the call from within himself, an intimacy with the Father unmediated by even the Torah, let alone the Temple and synagogue. And this seems to be the source of his increasing criticism of the keepers of the religious tradition, that they refused to attend to the same Spirit within the human soul which he himself had come to trust as worthy of the greater allegiance. God no longer in scrolls and Law and Temple, but God incarnate in human flesh. That, in a nutshell, is the nature of Jesus' commitment to the new development erupting into human history spelling the end of the Axial period.

On the other hand, while Jesus sought out those with eyes to see and ears to hear what he had seen and heard, and while he called them 'disciples', he founded no political or institutional movement to establish the revolution. This is of capital importance to the Christian evangel, without which the name Christian would be mere totemism. This absolute rejection of the normative methods we humans employ in order to establish anything is expressed supremely in the sacrifice of Altar at which he offers his very own flesh, and on the Cross where any whiff of triumph or success is extinguished. At his trial the religious and political leaders, and the crowds, accurately mock him – 'You call this kingship!'

That is the astounding revelation in Jesus, the good news that the very nature of humanity is changing, that human consciousness itself is undergoing a revolution of tectonic-shift proportions. Indeed, the foundations of the world are shaking! The Divine-human geography of the cosmos has undergone a Copernican revolution! God is no longer in the sky, nor in the Temple, nor in the Law. Thus the new allegiance is to the Divine within the human soul. Equally, the earth is shaking because, revealed in Jesus, this new allegiance eschews all outer signs of success or triumph or power, anything which might prove its success. Perhaps, even, this may be the more devastating earthquake to us, so committed are we to the ideologies of success and accomplishment, and to the power-loving and empire-building institutions the churches became. Two thousand years on, are we yet able to truly grasp and embody the revelation in Jesus?

I take some heart from today's gospel, which so eloquently reveals Jesus' own struggle with one particular aspect of the new humanity which the Spirit of God was bringing to birth in the post-Axial age. For in spite of

all that he has come to know about the reality of the Spirit of Divine incarnate in his own soul, and in spite of what he has come to teach and show about the Kingdom of God, in this encounter he meets his own religious superiority, his Jewish ghetto spiritual tribalism. Many commentators have marvelled at how Jesus is surprisingly exposed through his harsh words to the Syro-Phoenecian woman. His heart, for all its openness, remains embedded in Jewish xenophobia and tribalistic puritanism: “Let the children [of Israel] be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs [all outsiders who will not be saved].”¹ It’s important to realise that while we are shocked, Jesus’ treatment of the woman would have been perfectly acceptable to all at that time. This articulation of the spirit of the pre-Axial religious mindset is completely unsurprising. What is surprising is the outsider woman’s perceptive and forthright response to Jesus: Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.”²

The earth is shaking, under his very feet! And the means through which the Divine Spirit is rattling the old earth is an outsider, someone considered unclean, who should not even have the cheek to approach a Jewish man, let alone a Rabbi – who would have been rendered ritually unclean even by her being in his presence. On this occasion it is without doubt that this woman, motivated by compassion for her suffering daughter, is the true hero of the day. Through her the earth has turned yet more. Because of her, Jesus is miraculously healed from his own deafness and from an impediment in his speech – his inability to hear the Divine voice of love for all men and women, the impediment which prevents him from speaking Divine words of grace to the Gentile woman. It is as though she has said to Jesus: Ephphatha! Be opened! And so in the encounter which immediately follows it would seem that out of this experience of being liberated from his deafness and muteness Jesus is able to heal and liberate the deaf man who had an impediment in his speech. He can say ‘Ephphatha’, “be opened”, to that man because the woman has called him to become open to a non-tribal vision of the Kingdom of God.³

Thus, the demon which has been set free this day is not only that which rendered the girl sick, but that which rendered even the consciousness of Jesus sick – the demon of tribalistic purity and Jewish nationalism. In short, the full flowering of Jesus’ faithfulness to the new thing which the Spirit of God is doing in human history at this turning point in human history actually depends upon this despised outsider. He becomes open, the impediment in his speech is healed, because of her. Furthermore, taking the man away in private, ordering those who apparently witnessed this liberating event to remain silent, Jesus eschews the publicity and visibility by which he and they might be tempted to turn the Divine work of salvation into yet another success plan.

And because we share the same humanity as Jesus, we too are saved from our ego-selves by that which is unwanted, unsought, despised and rejected. And, like Jesus, eschewing all publicity and success-ideology, we, having been healed from our deafness, the impediment in our speech healed, we too are to speak the life-giving word to others: ‘Ephphatha!’

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¹ Mark 7:27

² Mark 7:28

³ Mark 7:34