

I'm going to begin today with a quick geography lesson. Mark tells us that Jesus left the district of Tyre and went by way of Sidon to the Sea of Galilee into the district of Decapolis. Some scholars tell us that Mark didn't know the geography of the Holy Land. His description of Jesus' route is sort of like saying that Jesus left Seattle and drove by way of Boise to Los Angeles. There is a more direct route to go from Seattle to Los Angeles just as there was a more direct route to go from Tyre to the Decapolis. Jesus' long route makes total sense to me because that is the way I travel. Years ago when I drove out to Missouri to see my sister's family, I went by way of South Dakota; not exactly a direct route. What Mark is saying, without actually saying it, is that Jesus was deliberately traveling through Gentile territory. Mark is alluding to the fact that Jesus has broadened the scope of his mission to include all people, not just the Jews. Saint Paul makes this very clear in his letters and James alludes to it in the letter we heard today; it's not up to us to make distinctions between people based on their appearances or any other factors, the kingdom of God is open to everyone—provided there is conversion of heart, provided that person casts off his old ways of sin and her old ways of believing and approaches Jesus with a heart open to living in the light.

I'll be speaking a lot more about James' letter next weekend, but for now let's stick with the other two readings. The gospel shows us Jesus actively doing what we heard about in the first reading from Isaiah: Jesus is clearing the ear of the deaf and making the mute tongue speak. And once again, Mark includes a hidden message. The Greek word that Mark used for "speech impediment" is only used in one other place in the scriptures and it's in the Greek translation of the passage of Isaiah that we heard today. That Isaiah prophecy is referring to the joy the Jews will experience when they return home to Judah after the Babylonian exile. Mark is making a messianic connection but this time he is applying it to the gentiles. The deaf man in the gospel is a gentile. Although the healing of this man's deafness and his speech impediment was a real physical healing, it can also be understood spiritually and symbolically: The Gentiles, who were previously deaf to God and mute concerning his saving deeds, have now, in response to his mighty works of healing, are able to hear his voice and sing his praises. Jesus' mission has moved beyond the Jews to include the entire world.

Notice something else about this healing. The surroundings in which it takes place. Jesus took the man off by himself away from the crowd. Every time Jesus heals someone, it happens in a different way. Sometimes he does it in a massive crowd, sometimes the people approach Jesus on their own and ask him for healing, sometimes the person reaches out on her own and touches his cloak, sometimes Jesus walks up to the person and asks if he or she wants to be healed, sometimes Jesus even initially refuses to heal in an effort to draw forth a statement of faith, sometimes he heals from a distance, other

times, like today it's through physical touch in a private one-on-one encounter. Jesus knows what each one of us needs from him and he wants to heal us accordingly.

The other thing about taking the man off by himself is that now Jesus can command his full attention. In a spiritual sense, the crowd represents the distractions of the world that keep us away from God. In order to be healed, in order to grow in our faith, in order to know God's love for us, we have to go away with Jesus and spend time with him on our own. We have to give him our full attention. The best place to do that is right here. Jesus is present in the Tabernacle twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. The only time he is absent is from the end of the Mass of the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday until the consecration at the Easter Vigil. We can't keep the church open for security reasons but that Tabernacle also opens out into the Adoration chapel and that is available all the time; just come to the office and get the code.

Finally, the shearling we heard about today is physical. Mark doesn't mention the spiritual effects of the healing, but usually physical and spiritual healings accompany each other. Sometimes when Jesus heals he first forgives sin other times the physical comes first, which is probably what happened today. Today is Mother Teresa's feast day and she understood the connection between the physical and the spiritual. In her work in Calcutta, she spent most of her time caring for the physical needs of the poor. And just like it says in James' letter she didn't care about their appearance; she didn't even care what their faith was. She saw the face of Jesus in each one of the poor and she treated them as if they were Jesus himself. When she came to the United States and the rest of the developed world, she saw a different type of poverty. A poverty of love. She is challenging us today, especially in the wake of the isolation imposed on us by the pandemic, but also just in the way we live our lives behind computer screens and phones and tv's. Make an effort today to reach out to someone who might be in need of human contact. Call them on the phone if you can't visit in person. When you go home today, instead of hiding ourselves behind your screens, talk to each other face to face; ban smart phones from the dinner table. We don't have to go to Calcutta to serve the poor. In one way or another, the poor are right here. Let us see the face of Jesus in each other and let us treat each other accordingly.

Saint Teresa of Calcutta, pray for us.