

Introducción



The verb “to listen” occurs 1159 times in the Old Testament. It often refers to God who—Isaiah assures—is not deaf (Is 59:1). But unlike people, who often close their ears to the cry of the poor who cries out for help and immediately they pay attention to as soon as they hear praises and compliments. God is attentive only to prayers, cries, and laments of his people. “When he cries to me I will hear him, for I am full of pity” (Ex 22:26). No text of the Old Testament says that “he hears the praises” addressed to him.

They are very different hearing sensitivities.

In the book of Deuteronomy and in the prophets’ mouth the insistent invitation returns: “Listen, O Israel” (Dt 6:4); “Hear the word of the Lord” (Ezk 2:4). Deafness to this voice is the great sin.

Zechariah addresses a serious charge to his people: “But they refused to listen and stubbornly turned their back, stopping their ears. They made their hearts as hard as diamonds so as not to hear” (Zec 7:11-12). Jeremiah calls Israel “stupid and senseless people! Who have eyes and do not see, who have ears and do not hear” (Jer 5:21). The Lord asks His people obedience and adherence to his Word, but the answer he receives is disappointing: “You live in the midst of a house of rebels—Ezekiel confides—they have ears for hearing but do not hear” (Ezk 12:2).

Deafness, in the Bible, is the image of the rejection of God's Word. It shows the condition of a person seduced by misleading voices. It is a dramatic condition, a serious disease, but the Lord has promised to treat it.

To internalize the message, we repeat:

“Give me, O Lord, a heart that listens to your word.”

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First Reading: Isaiah 35:4-7

The prophet tells the Israelites, exiled to Babylon, and promised them a bright future: “Let the wilderness and the arid land rejoice, let the desert be glad and blossom. Covered with flowers, it sings and shouts with joy” (Is 35:1-2). With these sweet images, the imminent intervention of God on behalf of his people is announced.

Then there is the exhortation to hope: “Have courage, do not fear ... See the God who comes to save you!” (v. 4) and the description of the renovation caused by the coming of the Lord: “Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unsealed. Then will the lame leap as a hart and the tongue of the dumb sing and shout” (vv. 5-6).

In the Bible, blindness, deafness, paralysis, and mutism are often referred to Israel, “people who have eyes but are blind, who have ears but are deaf!” (Is 43:8), people who—as the prophets often repeat—closes his ears to the voice of his God, and not having heard his word, is unable to announce it.

But the Lord—the Prophet ensures—is going to intervene on behalf of Israel. All her weaknesses and infirmities will be cured. The light of salvation will soon appear and the deported will journey toward the land of their fathers. Their feeble knees will be invigorated; they will hear and proclaim the wonders of their God.

From this oracle the conviction that, at his coming, the Messiah would have made a remarkable transformation of the world came up. Realizing these signs, Jesus presented himself as the long-awaited Messiah.

The reading ends (vv. 6-7) with the announcement of a change also of the land that will host the exiles returning from Babylon: “The arid land will become springs of water” and the places, first inhabited by wild animals will become fruitful fields and irrigated gardens. Not only people but all of creation will participate in the salvation of the Lord.

Second Reading: James 2:1-5

“The rich man does wrong and is unconcerned; the poor man is insulted and apologizes” (Sir 13:3). It is the bitter observation of a pious Jew of the second century B.C. and it is also what each of us verifies in everyday life. The rich and the powerful have privileges, seats of honor are reserved for them, whatever they say is applauded and even if they are wrong, few have the courage to raise their voices

to condemn them. In our society this discrimination between the rich and the poor is accepted as normal; but will it be permissible to introduce it in the Christian community?

James answers this question with a very provocative example: “Suppose a person enters the synagogue ... wearing a gold ring... and a poor person enters dressed in rags...” (vv. 1-4). The community that makes such discrimination conforms itself to the spirit of the world where the rich are treated preferentially and the poor do not count. The community was formed instead to give an opposite sign, to indicate God’s preference for the poor. “He, in fact, has chosen the poor of this world to receive the riches of faith and to inherit the kingdom” (v. 5).

For the poor, the Bible does not mean only those without money, but also all those who are disadvantaged in life, those who, for whatever reason, tend to be marginalized. It is to them that the Christian community needs to pay more attention, showing that its criteria for judgment are contrary to those of the world.

The discriminations James stressed have completely disappeared or are disappearing in our churches. We experience an instinctive discomfort when a place of honor is still reserved for a certain person. One notices the inconsistency, incompatibility of such an attitude with the celebration of the Eucharist.

The problem today does not arise within the Church, but outside. The seats reserved for the authorities, the eminent benefactors, dignitaries no longer exist, but discrimination persists outside. In everyday life, it is difficult to make concrete the sign of brotherhood and equality that we celebrate when we gather in the holy assembly to hear the Word of God and to share the bread of the Eucharist.

For this, some accuse our community of hypocrisy, but it is not correct. Like all people, even Christians are weak and sinners. Our meetings, gathered in the Lord’s day, do not celebrate what we already are, but what we need to become. The Eucharist reminds us how the new world that we are called to build must be; a world where all people, especially the last, feel welcomed and loved.

Gospel: Mark 7:31-37

One is surprised when confronted by some rather unusual details present in this passage. Jesus does not cure the sick, as he usually did, with a simple word. He leads him to a secluded place, away from the crowd, puts his fingers in his ears and touches his tongue with spittle, looks up to the sky, groans, says a funny word, and finally, just after having loosened the tongue, imposes silence. His behavior recalls, very closely, that of the magicians.

The singularity of this scene must not amaze us because therapists of antiquity used to accompany their healing actions with mysterious gestures. They tried to create a mysterious atmosphere; they kept secret their exorcism practices and their recipes; they resorted to the imposition of hands and uttered esoteric formulas. Jesus adapts himself to the people’s mentality of his time. He does the usual gestures of the healers, but, as we shall see, he gives a new meaning to these gestures.

Let us first consider “the place” where the story is set. We are in the Decapolis (v. 31), the region where Jesus drove from a possessed person a legion of demons that then entered the pigs, and then rushed down into the sea (Mk 5:1). We are therefore in a pagan land and this geographic location,

placed deliberately by the evangelist is to show that it has a definite theological significance.

The sick to be healed is a deaf-mute, or more precisely, “a deaf man who speaks with difficulty,” that is, he expresses himself in a disjointed and incomprehensible way. The Greek word *moghilálos*, with which the evangelist defines the illness, is very rare. In the Bible, it only occurs in our story and in the first reading’s passage from Isaiah. It is clear that by using it, Mark intends to refer to the prophecy and proclaim its fulfillment.

For Isaiah, the “stuttering deaf” was the people of Israel. However, the patient who is presented to Jesus is a pagan. As we have just pointed out, it is the condition of every person who has not yet met Christ.

The deaf person is unable to hear what is being said to him and, therefore, cannot even communicate what he did not hear; he lives in isolation, locked in his own world.

In Jesus’ time, all diseases were considered a punishment from God, but deafness was even a curse because it prevented one from hearing the word of God proclaimed in the synagogues.

In Mark’s Gospel the “stuttering-deaf” is an image of someone who has never had the opportunity to meet and listen to the Gospel of Christ. It also indicates one who deliberately closes his ears and not allows the word of salvation to penetrate his heart.

Who is suffering from “spiritual deafness” and does not adhere to the faith cannot even celebrate salvation because he had not yet had the experience: “By believing from the heart, you obtain true righteousness; by confessing the faith with your lips you are saved” (Rom 10:9-14).

Healing the deaf-mute Jesus proclaimed the beginning of a new dialogue between heaven and earth. To men and women, Jews and Gentiles, the ears and the hearts are opened; everyone can hear the Gospel, receive it in faith and proclaim it to others.

The healing work of Jesus also marks the beginning of new relationships between peoples, religions, and cultures. It is the sign of the encounter, dialogue, and understanding. Who does not confront, who is not able to dialogue with others, who remains close in his own world, convinced of already possessing the whole truth and have nothing more to learn, is deaf and dumb.

The word of Christ opens the ears and loosens the tongue even in our families, in the Christian communities, in social settings where often more than communicating, we attack each other because we are unable to listen to the reasons and needs of the other.

In this episode—as we noted at the beginning—many details take on a symbolic meaning and they are explicit references to the rite of Baptism.

We begin by highlighting the fact that the deaf and dumb does not present himself to Jesus alone, but is accompanied by some people. By himself, he could move on his own. He was not, in fact, in the same conditions of the blind man of Bethsaida who needed to be led by the hand (Mk 8:22-23). If Mark stresses this particular, seemingly superfluous, fact, it means that there is a message in it. To come to

Christ and hear from him the word that heals, one must be accompanied by someone, who has already known the Master and has experienced the saving power of his word.

In the early church, those who first approached a man bent on himself, away from God, closed to dialogue with the brothers and sisters and took him by the hand and spoke to him of and led him to Christ, on the day of Baptism, acted rightly as “godfathers” of the neophyte.

The miracle takes place “away from the crowd” (v. 33). The reason is the same for which, in the end, the order not to disclose the incident was given (v. 36). Jesus does not want them to spread the news that he is the Messiah.

In Mark’s Gospel, the “secret” imposed by Jesus to his identity is always recalled. Until Easter, the crowds are not able to figure out who he is. They are constantly exposed to the danger of considering him a glorious Messiah, a lord of this world. We still have this, because a few Sundays ago we have meditated on the misunderstanding of the crowd in front of the sign of the “multiplication” of the loaves. Only after his death and resurrection, the disciples will have a clear idea and only then they will be sent to announce to everyone that Jesus is the Son of God.

The particular of turning away from the crowd could have also another meaning: he, who in Baptism, is cured of deafness and listens to God’s Word does not belong to the multitude of the heathens; he becomes a chosen one “separated,” not physically, but for the completely new moral life.

Before performing the miracle, “Jesus looks up at the sky and groans ...” (v. 34). In ancient times the healers often did similar gestures. They did so to focus, to let themselves be penetrated the power of the gods before performing the miracle. To the miracle worker, it was recommended: “Suck in, with all the strength, from God, the breath of the spirit, looking at it directly.”

Performed by Jesus, these gestures become prayer (Mk 6:41). They are signs of his union with the Father and for us an invitation to establish a deeper relationship with the Lord before intervening to help a brother. Only after having “inspired” the Spirit, the breath of God, are we able to communicate this life-giving power to those who are in the condition of death.

The act of “putting the fingers in the ears” (v. 33) is the same as is done in the celebration of the sacrament of Baptism. The minister touches the ear of the person to be baptized with the thumb and pray: “Lord Jesus who made the deaf hear and the mute speak grant the privilege of listening soon to your Word and to profess faith in you.” The Christian is not only one who can hear the Gospel, but it is also one who is qualified to preach the message he has heard.

To understand the gesture of “touching his tongue with spittle” (v. 33), it should be noted that, in the popular conception, the saliva was considered a kind of focused breath, a materialization of breath. Touching with his saliva, the tongue of the deaf-mute, Jesus, therefore, intended to communicate to him his breath, his Spirit. This is what happens in Baptism: the Christian receives the Spirit of Christ which makes him become his prophet, the messenger of his gospel.

Effatà is an Aramaic word, the language spoken by Jesus and it means “Be opened!” It is not addressed to the ear, but to the man who at first was unable to hear. It is an invitation to open the doors of the heart and let Christ in and his Gospel in his life.

The last part of the passage (vv. 35-37) reports, in detail, the outcome of that healing intervention of Jesus and ends with a “final chorus.” The crowd sings its joy because the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled: God has made “the deaf hear” and “the mute speak” (Is 35:5-6).

This grateful cry is the profession of faith of the community who saw another man attain salvation. Now, this brother is able to participate in the assembly that meets, on the day of the Lord. He joins the community to hear the Word and proclaim, not stammering, but in a clearly articulated and conscious way, the wonders of God. He experienced the healing power that comes from contact with Jesus and sees repeated in the sacraments, for him and for others, those same gestures that saved him.

[There is a video by Fr. Fernando Armellini in English](#)

Fr. Fernando Armellini