

Canon Ian Barlow's Sermon Outlines – September 2009

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost Year B

Sunday 6th September, 2009

From the Gospel Reading we have just heard: "They were astounded beyond measure, saying, He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak. (Mark 7:37)

Jesus had just restored sight and hearing to a man who had been deaf and afflicted with a speech impediment. And the crowd was most impressed. Here was a man who was not only a great preacher, but who had the power of healing, in the tradition of the ancient prophets - in fact some seemed to think that Jesus was Elijah, re-incarnated. "They were astounded beyond measure." Perhaps today they might not be so awestruck. There is a lot spoken and published about so-called "faith-healing"; there is a real place for Christian healing by prayer, laying-on of hands, and anointing; there are undeniable cures and healings at devotional shrines, such as Lourdes, in France; and there are marvellous things done by surgeons and doctors which are well-nigh miraculous. And if we too stay just at the superficial reading of the incident, we too might be impressed and even astounded beyond measure - but that is all. That wonderment would soon wear off!

The incident is, however, one more in a chain of marvellous happenings in our Lord's earthly life. It was one more thing to cause the disciples to wonder about this person whom they followed and called Master. It is one more incident in Holy Scripture to lead US to a deeper appreciation of the concern of God for us, His creatures.

To us, the revelation of Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ is complete. We know Him to be the Son of God, and knowing this, the greatest of all miracles, we hardly marvel at His power over the things of this world. If we did NOT know Him as Christ and Saviour, this or any other miracle would not mean much to us anyway, and certainly would not be sufficient of its self to convert us. So let look closer at the implications of the story.

There is a far worse form of deafness and dumbness than that recorded here. It is the deafness of those who WILL NOT listen to the voice of God; it is the dumbness of those who WILL NOT seek either to speak to Him in prayer, or of Him, in witness. We hear the voice of the world, clearly, and we pay plenty of attention to it. It is a very insistent voice. We hear the voice of our own desires, and we pay even more attention to that: it is a very persuasive voice, and we are basically selfish creatures.

But although God has so much to say to us, and although He has the words of eternal life, yet we have little time or inclination to listen to Him. We are deaf because we WILL NOT hear God speaking to us in our hearts. This is deafness indeed - the willful deafness of those who block their ears. He might want us to change our comfortable ways and our self-centred thinking; it might be uncomfortable and it might make us different from the others, if we listen to the prompting of God. "Like the deaf adder," says the Psalmist, "which stoppeth her ears; which refuseth to hear the voice of the charmer, charm he never so wisely." (58:4)

Quite often a person born deaf is also dumb, most commonly Rubella children. Not that there is any physical fault, but because they never hear speech to imitate it. Today these people can be taught to speak, through the work of the Oral Schools. But even so, it is quite likely that some impediment will remain. The frequent and natural result of willful deafness to the voice of God results in a spiritual impediment in our attempts at communication with God. When the time comes when we WANT to seek God and perhaps MUST find God, we might find that we cannot worship Him or pray to Him, and tragically, many people find themselves cut off entirely. God has not rejected them - they have done it themselves. And because God never forces our return to Himself, the way back if we DO turn back, is arduous.

For all of us, there come times when we find ourselves unable or unwilling to pray, or even reluctant to worship God at all. At such times we ought to ask ourselves: "Why?" and spend a little time in self-examination. Is it lack of real concern for the things of God? Is it self-centredness, instead of God-centredness? Is there some matter in which I am willfully refusing to hear God because I know He will ask me to do something I don't want to do? Am I praying in effect: "Thy will be done - but not by me"?

The part of the country in which this incident took place was in Decapolis, just across the Sea of Galilee from Capernaum. In this area on a previous occasion, Jesus had healed a mentally sick man, and as a result the people ordered Him to leave their country - they were afraid of Him. Today a great number of people act in the same way - they are afraid of Him and they keep their distance. His standards are too high; His requests are too demanding; they are not prepared to make the sacrifices which they know they would have to make. They will not listen, and they shut the Holy Spirit out of their hearts in case His prompting becomes too uncomfortable. And here is where we come in. Here is where we, who have had some experience of His love and His power, must play our parts as His disciples - in our own homes and among our friends and

neighbours and acquaintances. This does NOT mean buttonholing someone in the street or shop or business and asking: "Brother, are you saved?!" It is rather the word spoken with humble conviction as opportunity arises; it is the constant, devoted, uncomplaining service devoted to God and to our neighbour; it is the consistent, high standard of behaviour; it is THESE things which are so often fruitful in our vocation as disciples of Christ. God makes us articulate in some way within our nature, if we will listen to Him and make ourselves available to Him.

Jesus took the dumb man aside in private, away from the crowd, to heal him - away from the distractions and the noise. If we are to be Christ's faithful hearers, so that we may be effectual doers, He must be able to work this miracle of love in us first. And continually renew us. Therefore we must be always seeking to go aside with Him, away from the noise and distraction of the crowd. He Himself sought to go aside frequently, not to 'get away from it all,' in a selfish sense, but in order to keep His own will conformed to the will of the Heavenly Father. Time and again He spent hours in prayer. Surely we must make time to go aside from the world specifically to seek Him, to open ourselves to Him.

All too often though, the time we do give to God is filled with one-way conversation. We tend to spend it all in telling God what WE want HIM to do for US, or telling Him what WE think is best for others. Frequently we do not even think to add 'if it is Your Will.' When the prophet Samuel was a child, he heard his name spoken one night as he lay in his bed. The old priest, Eli, realizing that it was the voice of God Samuel had heard, advised the child to reply "Speak Lord, for your servant heareth.' He did not say, 'Listen Lord, for thy servant speaketh!'

And yet God is always more ready to hear than we are to pray, and is always inclined to give more than we deserve or even desire, which is far greater.

So let us seek continually, through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, Whom He sends, to have our ears opened and the string of our tongues loosed, so that we may praise Him, not only with our lips but in our lives, and by walking before Him in holiness all the days of our lives. **Amen**

Canon Ian Barlow's Sermon Outlines – September 2009

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Year B

Sunday 13th September, 2009

"Jesus called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them: If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me..... For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?"

(Mark.8:34 & 36)

It is becoming more and more difficult for Christians to worship God and still play their full part in the society in which they live. Once, it was no problem to attend Sunday worship, and also to take part in sporting events, working bees, and ordinary commerce. Today, Sunday has become just another working day for many; a convenient day for working bees for others; a sports day for still others. And Christians who are sportsmen and women, or want to pull their weight in organisations to which they belong, or work for certain firms, find themselves in a difficult dilemma.

The cult of physical health which arranges Fun Runs, Bicycle Health Rides, and other "Life be in it" activities, seems to ignore the need for development of spiritual life. Perhaps we should mount a "Spiritual Life be in it" campaign! The ovals and courts are crowded with youngsters on Sunday mornings - too bad if their parents want them to go to church. The matches would still go ahead, but the youngster would miss out: there are plenty who would not be at church in any case, even if there were no matches, no working bees, no shops open.

But what will it profit a man, a woman, a youngster, if he or she becomes a top athlete, or creates useful things for the community, or earns extra money, if he or she thereby forfeits eternal life? Exactly that is at stake. To place the demands and the pleasures of this present life before the demands, and yes, the pleasures of following Christ, is to risk one's hope of eternal life.

When the Church proclaims that uncompromising statement of our Lord's, it is not a matter of blaming those various activities for drawing people away from something we have not made vital enough, or inviting enough, or interesting enough to withstand competition. It is not mere jealousy or envy by the Church of the world's success. It is with deep regret that we acknowledge that people have not heard what the Church has been saying, or have not heeded if they have heard. Perhaps we will have to answer on the Day of Judgement for our lack of eloquence!

We may be somewhat comforted to read of our Lord's grief over the people of Jerusalem in their rejection of Him: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem how often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not." (Matt.23:37)

It all comes down to a matter of priorities. And the priorities are set by the answer people give, consciously or unconsciously, to the question Jesus put to the disciples: "But who do you say that I am?" God has no grandchildren or stepchildren: each individual person must accept God as his own Heavenly Father. We cannot get by on the faith of our parents. We cannot regard God as a sort of Heavenly Uncle, or as simply an acquaintance, or even as a friend. It is only by acknowledging God as Father that we dare refer to Jesus as Brother, and then only in that sense. For Jesus is the Saviour, the Messiah, the Christ.

Our answer to the question is expressed by our response. As St. James wrote in the extract from his Letter used for the Second Reading: "Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith." Each one of us must find some means, some works, whereby we can express our faith.

How much does your religion cost you? Not simply in terms of money, but also in terms of energy and time and thought and prayer and worship? There is the measure of your faith! If it is the occasional hour of a Sunday and the couple of dollars spared from the housekeeping money, there is the measure of your faith.

If it is the regular Sunday-by-Sunday worship; service on one roster or another; membership of some committee or organisation, a carefully-worked-out giving of a proportion of your income: there is the measure of your faith. Our Lord called for a pretty high standard from His disciples. "If any want to become My followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow Me." And that means considerably more than left-overs, of time, talent and treasure that seems to be the extent to which some who profess and call themselves Christians are prepared to undertake.

There was an occasion when Jesus healed ten lepers - only one came back to express appreciation. And Jesus asked: "But where are the other nine?" How do you think He feels when we consider how crowded this church could and should be; how affluent this as a congregation and as a Parish could and should be; what could and should be done in outreach to the unconverted?

Hear again the challenge of our Lord: "If you would follow me - deny yourself; take up your cross; **be** my disciple; be positive in your response."

getting easier to be a disciple of Christ. But in the long run – and life eternal is at stake – the crosses of this world are worth enduring. ‘Those who are ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will be ashamed when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels.’

God grant that we may be enabled to keep our Baptismal promises to be true to Christ crucified, and never to be ashamed to confess our faith in Him.

Amen

Canon Ian Barlow's Sermon Outlines – September 2009

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Year B

Sunday 20th September, 2009

"The disciples asked Jesus privately: 'Why could not we cast it out?' And he said to them: 'this kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer'." (Mark 9:29)

This incident, according to St. Mark, follows immediately on from the great event of the Transfiguration. What a let-down! Peter and James and John, together with Jesus, had just come back down the mountain after that incredible and awesome experience, and there was this crowd with the rest of the disciples and some kind of hurly-burly going on. Apparently the disciples had tried to heal the lad and had failed. And you can hear Jesus sigh: "O faithless generation How long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you?" You can almost hear him say: "Will they never learn?" As He so often did, Jesus cross-questioned the father about his faith in his ability to heal, to drive out this demon causing the boy's mental problem. At first the man was a bit hesitant: "If you can do anything, have pity on us and help us." Jesus takes him up on it: "If you can!" What kind of faith statement is that? The father then cries out: "I believe: help my unbelief." The boy was then duly healed.

That is a good phrase to have in mind as we pray for someone or something important to us. As we know, we are not always granted the answer which we seek to our prayers. There are good reasons for this which we do not often appreciate. Sometimes it may be lack of full belief: "I'll ask, but I can't really see it happening". Sometimes it may be that we are asking for something we just cannot have, like a child asking its mother for something it would be unwise of her to give. "You're too young", "too inexperienced"~ it wouldn't be helpful to others". It IS a problem when we believe as fully as we think we can be. It is not easy to take "No" for an answer, especially when we believe our cause is right and just. But if we have full belief we ought to be able to place the matter in our Lord's hands, recognise full picture, which we do not, and say: "Thy will be done" each time we say the Lord's Prayer.

And still we are slow to accept it There are many stories in the Bible where God has responded to the prayers of the faithful and the persistent in the way they asked. Jesus himself told parables urging us to be persistent, believing that if our cause is just, God will come to our aid. Many people approach prayer in this way, relying heavily and even naively on the single verse: "Ask and it shall be given", as if God is some kind of doting grandmother. But have all probably had the experience of not

having our prayers answered in the way we want, and we are disappointed and even cross with God. We need to remember that we do not always or even often see things from God's perspective. Sometimes, although we might not see it straight away, God's reply is "Wait patiently in faith - the time is not yet ripe". Sometimes the thing we ask for has been marred by mankind's inhumanity to man, or what he has done to his environment, and God requires mankind to work through that. Sometimes the answer is just plain "No'- you're asking for the impossible". God sees the whole picture: we don't. And let's not forget that when Jesus prayed so fervently in the Garden of Gethsemane, when his sweat became "like great drops of blood falling down upon the ground" as St. Luke records,-his prayer was "Father if it be possible let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not my will but thine be done."

The answer, even to the Beloved Son was "no!" Because the answer was No, our salvation was achieved - that was behind the Father's response. So we too must pray faithfully, hopefully, expectantly, always acknowledging "Not as I will, but as thou wilt."

But intercession, asking, pleading, is only one aspect of prayer, although most people tend to make it the most important, even perhaps the sole aspect. There is an acronym, the letters of which stand for aspects of prayer. The word is ACTS, and the letters stand for Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication. As we pray,-:those various aspects should be included, at least to some degree, to keep our proper spiritual balance.

A is for Adoration "O come, let us adore him". Straight-out, no-strings attached worship, because we know him as our Lord and Saviour.

C is for Confession. How dare we approach the Lord God Almighty, sinful, self-centred beings that we are! The fabulous thing is that as we face up to our faults and failings, and admit them, we are made clean, and forgiven, and acceptable.

T is for Thanksgiving. Thanksgiving for the knowledge that we can be forgiven, that the way to God is open to us, that the Holy Spirit is there to support, strengthen, and guide us.

And at last S for Supplication: placing before God all those needs and desires and heartaches and agonies and disillusionment and worries which have to be faced up to as we make our pilgrimage through life.

One last point about the acronym ACTS: action should be the outcome of our prayers. We now have to get on and do something about whatever it is that we've

prayed about. We may not sit back smugly and say: "Well I've prayed to God about it, now it's up to him!." Even if it is so colossal a problem that we cannot hope to get near to it, like praying for peace in the Middle East, we can in our own little corner, with our own little candle of faith and courage burning, help maintain a Christian awareness and influence in our own community and country, which will eventually influence our own leaders and the leaders of the nations.

There are, as Jesus said, some things which can only be driven out by prayer. As His followers we must be faithful in prayerful service, adoring, confessing, thanking and supplicating. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are his, now and for ever. **AMEN**

Canon Ian Barlow's Sermon Outlines – September 2009

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost Year B

Sunday 27th September, 2009

What a strange and bloodthirsty and non-Christian passage we have put before us today as the First Lesson! Can we really "hear the word of the Lord" and give thanks for it in this extract from the Book of Esther? It would appear that the point of it is for us to see that the Jews of the day were saved by God from extermination and given relief from their enemies, and that they were to commemorate this as a time when sorrow was turned into gladness, and a time of mourning into a time of rejoicing. The Jews still celebrate this occasion as the Festival of Purim - a popular festival of parties and merry-making. Purim is a happy reminder that while evil may seem all-powerful at times, it can be defeated if people of good faith work together.

How historically accurate the story is, is open to some doubt. The book does not contain an explicit reference to God, or to the religious practices of Judaism. It does imply that God protects His faithful people. The story is placed during the reign of the Persian King Ahasuerus [A-has-u-erus] or Xerxes [Zerksees] in 486 to 465 B.C. The majority of the Jewish people had been taken into captivity and transported to Babylonia. There was a beauty contest of the most beautiful young women in the empire - the King was looking for a new wife. Esther a young Jewish girl, was chosen, and became Queen of Persia. Because the Jews would not allow themselves to become assimilated, but doggedly stayed as a people in exile, hostility broke out between the Israelites and the Amalekites, reviving ancient feuds. Mordecai, a Jew, ran foul of a high court official, Haman, an Amalakite, who drew to the attention of King Xerxes the exclusiveness of the Jews. Xerxes granted Haman permission to issue an edict for the wholesale massacre of the Jews. Sounds familiar, doesn't it?

Mordecai persuaded Queen Esther, his cousin, to risk her life on behalf of her people by going to the king, even though an unsummoned visit was punishable by death. And that is where today's Reading begins. The tables were turned on Haman, who was hanged on the towering gallows (50 cubits equals 83 feet!) that he had had built for Mordecai. His ten sons were executed with him, thus bringing the last of the Amalekites to an end. The 14th and 15th days of the month Adar in the Jewish calendar (February - March in ours) were declared days of rejoicing..

Although the author of this book does not refer to religious matters, its nationalistic theme is basically religious in character. It expresses the conviction that

God has called His people to be separate from the world and has promised to vindicate them against all their enemies. In the light of the history of the Jewish people it is not hard to see why this book and the Festival it created, is popular with that persecuted race. I do not know why the book was selected to be part of the Old Testament Canon, apart from that popularity with the Jews. Nor do I know why the extract appointed for today's First Reading was considered of importance, but I thought you might be interested in its origin and setting.

Today's Gospel Reading follows straight on from last Sunday's. You may remember that the disciples had been-arguing about who was the greatest in the apostolic band: Andrew,. the first to follow perhaps; or his brother Peter whom Jesus nicknamed The Rock because of his expression of faith; or perhaps Judas, the treasurer. Jesus reminded them that His Kingdom was not about kudos or fame, but humility and service. "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." This saying of our Lord's occurs several times or another. Indeed Mark quotes it again wants to be great among to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Mk.10:43-45) Luke and Matthew quote similarly. And Jesus took an infant in His arms, saying: "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me, welcomes not me but the one who sent me." The true disciple achieves greatness not by holding high office, but by doing services for insignificant people, like this child. The classic example of such service is, for instance, the late Mother Teresa.

Then John abruptly changes the subject: "We saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him because he was not following us." How difficult it is to accept that other people, other denominations, and perhaps even non-Christian religions might have insights into the will and the way of God that we ourselves have not yet come to! Having been brought up in a particular tradition and expression of worship, or having chosen it because of its appeal to us, tends to set our prejudices that of course our way is the proper way! "You can worship God in your own way and we will worship God in His own way."! And of course because a particular style and indeed a particular interpretation of the Scriptures appeals to us, we become convinced that it is the only really true way. To some extent this is right and healthy - to chop and change between expressions and understandings of worship and Scripture may well indicate a broad and accepting mind. It might also lead to a confusion and to vague generalities. We must keep an open mind and be prepared to learn, as we observe other people at worship.

History records that the early Christians were often faced with the problem of the pagan exorcist who successfully used the name of Jesus for purposes of exorcism, without becoming a Christian. Possibly this was the first of such pagan, even superstitious, incidents where the name of Jesus was invoked. Our Lord did not seem to mind that His name was being used by-an unbeliever - the important thing was that the work of casting out demons was being done. And of course, once a person recognizes the power of Jesus, and works in His name, then there is no way that he could ever become an enemy of Christ. Jesus would want to encourage any indication of interest in His work and of the disciples'. A first sign might be a kindly action to someone known to be a follower - even a cool drink on a hot day. And woe betide a disciple who discourages the first timid steps of a would-be follower! The term "one of these little ones" is often taken to refer to little children, harking back to earlier in this chapter when Jesus took a child in His arms and said: "Whoever welcomes a child in my name welcomes me." But in the verses following, we have a dramatic contrast between the thought of service to others and the timid approach to Christ, with the opposite thought of hindering or obstructing any who might be small, even childlike, in their faith, and who need building-up and encouraging. It is a very "over the top" warning of the severity of punishment in store for those who discourage any from their following of Christ. Sometimes strange people turn up at church, or people who don't fit our ideas about "properness", or who perhaps we don't like or approve of. And we are tempted to discourage them, freeze them out, talk about them disparagingly. We must be so careful not to put stumbling blocks in their way - for surely these are the little ones of whom Jesus spoke.

From the warning of causing others to stumble is now added the warning of stumbling ourselves on our Christian journey. Again it is a very dramatic illustration which even the most literal of Bible believers accept as not meant to be followed as read - the removal of such parts of our bodies as cause us to falter . But we do need to strongly put away from us those things which cause us to stumble: things we do; places we go; sights we look at.

The very unpleasant alternative to entering the Kingdom of God is not really meant to be explicit teaching about the fate of the lost, but is a quotation of traditional language which all would recognise. It comes from the final verse of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah actually. The original word for hell was Gehenna - a valley near Jerusalem where once children were sacrificed to the god Moloch. Later it be-came a

refuse dump for the city, thus explaining the imagery of worms and fire, from the maggots in offal there and fires smouldering perpetually in the refuse. Because of all these bad associations, the Jewish imagination had come to picture 'Gehenna - hell - as the place of future torment for the wicked: an image of utter horror.

And then to end on a cheerier note, Jesus encourages His followers to be like salt: an essential and valued ingredient in food to make it tastier and tangier, whereas otherwise it would be flat and boring. The words echo those in the Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus said to His disciples: "You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again?" (Matt.5:13)

So at the end of today's Gospel passage He says to us: "Have salt in yourselves and be at peace with one another." In other words, be alive, be active, be vital, put some tang into your life as you follow Christ - and live in peace with one another. **AMEN**