

Friday in the Fifth Week after the Epiphany

February 12, 2021

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Year One: Genesis 3:1–8; Psalm 32:1–8; Mark 7:31–37

Since Advent Sunday at the end of last November, most Sundays our gospel lessons have been from Mark. Since Monday, January 11, the day after the First Sunday after the Epiphany, we began reading all of Mark. Tonight, the lesson will be from the tenth of Mark's sixteen chapters. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. We will hear him speaking for the third time to his disciples about his death and resurrection. Meanwhile at the weekday Eucharists, on the same day the Daily Office took up Mark, we began with Jesus' learning of John the Baptist's death and the beginning of his own ministry in Galilee. Jesus preached, "The time has been fulfilled, and the dominion of God is has come near! Repent, and believe in the good news!"¹ Because the Daily Office and the Weekday Eucharists are on a two-year cycle, and the Sunday Lectionary is on a three-year cycle, it has been six years since we were in this situation of having a lot of Mark.

Yesterday's gospel was the healing of a gentile woman's daughter. Those of you who were here yesterday—or know the story—said to the woman, "Let the children first be fed, for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.' But she answered him, 'Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.'"² Her words changed Jesus' mind. He never saw the child. He pronounced that she was healed, and she was. Then he heads to an area inhabited principally by Gentiles, the Decapolis.

I am not going to review the scholarly arguments about where Jesus spat—or go into how spittle was understood in Jesus' time. So, he has just exorcised a demon from a child he has not seen. But for this helpless man, whose friends must bring him to Jesus, Jesus spits, puts his fingers in the

¹ Mark 1:15.

² Mark 7:24–30.

man's ears, then he spits and touches the man's tongue, and, looking up to heaven, he sighs and says, "Be opened!"³

Demons have no power over Jesus. When he commands silence, they must obey. But the healed man and his companions, do not obey Jesus' injunction "not to tell anyone."⁴

Joel Marcus reminds us that the Roman Catholic Church has preserved in the celebration of Baptism Mark's description of Jesus touching the deaf in its Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults. It is called by the Greek word Jesus speaks to the deaf-mute, "Ephphetha."⁵

Here is the description: "by the power of its symbolism the ephphetha rite, or rite of opening the ears and mouth, impresses on the elect"— "elect" is the official term for those who will be baptized—"their need of grace in order that they may hear the word of God and profess it for their salvation."⁶ Then today's gospel passage is read. The elect come forward. Then, "the celebrant touches the right and left ear and the closed lips of each of the elect with his thumb," and says "Ephphetha: that is, be opened, that you may profess the faith you hear, to the praise and glory of God."⁷

For some years in Michigan City, we had small number of adults preparing for Baptism. They would be enrolled for preparation the Last Sunday after the Epiphany.

This the formal public beginning: The Celebrant asks, "What is your name?" Then he or she says, "What do you ask of God's Church?" The answer is, "Faith." The third question is, "What does faith offer you?" The answer is, "Eternal life." The congregation is still and silence—it feels like the opening of Good Friday, which in a real sense, it is.

³ Mark 7:33.

⁴ Mark 7:36. Translation: Joel Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, Anchor Bible 27 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 471.

⁵ *The Rites of the Catholic Church*, 2 vols. (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1990), I:141.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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