

14 February 2025 - Friday of the 5th ordinary week

1R 11, 29-32. 12, 19; Mk 7, 31-37

Homily

The Gospels rarely show us Jesus outside the territory of Israel. In the Gospel of Mark that we have been reading these days, Jesus went to the region of Tyre, north of the Lake of Galilee. It was a border region, with a mixed population, mostly of pagan origin. It was there that he had healed the daughter of the Syro-Phoenician woman. And at the beginning of today's text, we see him leave Tyre, go through Sidon towards the Lake of Galilee and go straight to pagan territory, to the federation of ten cities called the Decapolis.

What did Jesus do in pagan, i.e. non-Jewish, lands? He didn't preach. He did not try to convert the inhabitants to Judaism. He doesn't even talk to them about the Kingdom, as he does to the Jews. Rather, he brings about the Kingdom. He simply heals them. And this story is an introduction to the story of the second multiplication of the loaves.

This story of healing, which is unique to Mark, is full of details that are heavy with symbolism. It says, for example, that the sick man was deaf and dumb. Now, the Greek adjective (*mogilalon*) that we translate here as mute, meaning rather someone who speaks with difficulty, does not exist in classical Greek and is found only once, here, in the NT and once in the OT, in a prophecy by Isaiah which foretold that the eyes of the blind would be opened, the deaf would hear and the mouths of those who had difficulty speaking would shout for joy.

So a deaf-mute was brought to Jesus. In Mark's mind, this man could well represent the disciples who, in the previous text, had not understood Jesus' teaching (about what comes from the heart of man), and so could not yet properly convey Jesus' message. The sick man was brought to Jesus; he did not come of his own accord, and it was not said who brought him. They beg Jesus (they don't simply 'ask' Him, they 'beg' Him) - not to heal him, but to lay hands on him, and thus to pass on to him His life force.

Jesus raises His eyes to heaven, in a gesture of prayer to His Father, sighing - which underlines the importance of the moment, and probably expresses His sadness at the slowness of His disciples to understand. After touching the sick man's ears and tongue, He said to him: 'Open up'. The word '*effata*' is an Aramaic word, an imperative in the second person singular. Jesus did not say to the ears, 'open

up''. He says to the patient, to the person: 'open up'. When a person opens up to the grace and the person of Jesus, they can speak and listen. They are freed from their obstacles.

Let's go back to the context in which Jesus performed this miracle. It was one of the rare occasions when He entered Gentile territory. He did not speak to these non-Jews in the language of the prophets of Israel. He will obviously not try to turn them into Jews. He will evangelise them -- not by bringing them intellectual content, by talking to them about salvation, but simply by bringing it to life in their midst, by bringing them salvation in the form of healing.

In some countries today, it is not possible to proclaim the Gospel in words, as what is known as 'proselytism' is forbidden. In Algeria, for example. In these countries, small communities of Christians evangelize simply by living charity among the people. Just as our brothers at Tibhirine did, with such obvious and surprising results.

Even our European societies, which from a material point of view are fertile lands like the Decapolis of Jesus' time, have largely lost touch with the oral expressions of the Christian message. Some of us are undoubtedly called to preach this message in words. But this is not possible everywhere or always. What is always possible, for all of us and at all times, is to live the kingdom, to embody Christian love in gestures of charity and communion like those of Jesus touching the ears of the deaf man with his fingers and touching his tongue with his saliva.

The Reign of God is in actions before it is in words.

We celebrate today the memory of Saints Cyril and Method