

**Reflection on the Gospel-23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B
(Mark 7:31-37)**

-Veronica Lawson RSM

Those who are profoundly deaf frequently find themselves on the edge of the human and earth communities. Without access to birdsong, to spoken discourse, to the vast range of media communication, they often struggle to understand and to be understood. Their capacity to communicate their deepest wisdom, their hopes and dreams, their anxieties and fears, is limited not only by personal disability but also by the incomprehension of others.

In our contemporary technological world, sophisticated hearing devices and cochlear implants transform the lives of many who previously suffered from serious hearing loss and its social consequences. Whatever degree of deafness is experienced, relief from such an affliction offers far more than physical healing. It brings insertion into the life of family and community and workplace. It opens up new horizons and unimagined possibilities.

In first century Palestine, the chances of relief from hearing deficiency and associated speech impairment were minimal. Desperate people put their faith in folk healers who used their healing hands and drew upon their knowledge of the medicinal properties in certain herbs and other plants. It seems clear that Jesus was known as an effective healer and that he used some of the same methods as other healers of his time. Many of his contemporaries in that part of the world would have turned to Asclepius, the Greek god of healing, or his daughter Hygeia. Jesus turns, not to Asclepius or Hygeia, but to the God of Israel (“looking up to heaven...”) as the source of healing power.

There is layer upon layer of meaning in today’s healing story. Habitat features significantly. Jesus travels from Tyre on the northern Mediterranean coast to the Sea of Galilee via the non-Jewish territory on the eastern side of the lake. It was a regular route, but definitely not the most direct one. The gospel writer seems to be stressing the all-embracing nature of Jesus’ healing ministry. Land belongs to God and territorial claims on land are no barrier to Jesus’ healing ministry, a lesson Jesus himself has just learned from the Syro-Phoenician woman whose story is told in Mark 7:26-30.

As the gospel story has unfolded, we have found that the same healing power of God is available to Jews and Gentiles, to male and female, young and old alike. It is available to those with bodily afflictions and those who are paralysed by anxiety and fear. There is irony in the telling of the story: a Gentile deaf man can be brought from no hearing to hearing, from “speaking with difficulty” to clarity of speech, but Jesus’ own disciples will shortly fail to hear and understand, “Do you have ears and not hear?” (Mark 8:18). We open our ears to hear in the hope of understanding.