

THE EMMAUS SERIES

23rd Sunday Year B

Isaiah 35:4-7

James 2:1-5

Mark 7:31-37

Be opened!

Our readings from the Gospel of Mark make us aware of the way in which this gospel makes use of material concerning the life of Jesus – perhaps supplied in part by the apostle Peter. While he allows the events speak for themselves, Mark's presentation points to implications he wishes to emphasise. Today's reading concerns the healing of a deaf man with a speech impediment. While the healing and the wonder it provoked are described in detail, the fact that Jesus 'ordered them to tell no one' is again emphasised. Mark is maintaining a delicate balance: Jesus was truly a miraculous healer, but Mark wants those who hear the gospel to look beyond this fact to the nature of the mysterious mission Jesus has received from his Father, as the messiah who 'must suffer'.

'Be opened!' These dramatic words of Jesus are the climax of the story. In Mark's text, the Galilean mission of Jesus has ended with rejection by those of his 'home town'. Mark begins his account of the cure by describing the strange route taken by Jesus - through pagan territories – probably pointing to the infant Church's mission to the gentiles and the openness with which that mission to preach the gospel truth was received. We too are invited to reflect upon the importance of openness, and to acknowledge the many ways in which we can be more open to God's call to the fullness of life. For Mark, life and joy will be found by those who become true disciples of the Crucified One, and so enter with him into his glory.

The second reading, from the Letter of James, brings this whole program down to earth. Let us be open and generous to those around us, and not imprisoned in our selfish outlooks, 'making distinctions between classes of people'. The teaching of James does not remain an abstraction. Who is not moved to reflect upon assumptions taken for granted, when confronted by the simple example of the 'beautifully dressed' person and the poor person 'in shabby clothes'? But for James this is more than a moral story; it is a story about discipleship – learning, in the company of Jesus, to identify with the ways of God: 'those who are poor according to the world God chose to be rich in faith and to be heirs to the kingdom'.

The first reading from Isaiah – describing the liberating ways of God – comes from the final pages of the first part of the Isaian tradition. It is taken from a passage that proclaims the magnificent future God has in store for Israel. The confidence of the Prophets expectations is amazing – in the continuation of the passage, he foresees God's people 'shouting for joy, their heads crowned with joy unending. We can rejoice, with James, that we know already the mysterious intimations of that future. We are challenged by the prophet's confidence, to become a Church giving the vital witness our troubled world needs, if that world to find hope by being 'open' to God's future.

John Thornhill sm