

One of my heroes is a young man called Jonathan Bryan. Jonathan is an extraordinary person. Just three weeks before he was due to be born, Jonathan's parents were involved in a terrible car crash. The impact of this was to leave Jonathan with severe cerebral palsy. This means that he cannot speak or walk, has only limited control of his limbs and must be fed through a peg in his stomach. Jonathan lives with a whole list of ailments – chronic lung disease, a transplanted kidney, liver issues and more. He's almost died on a number of occasions. Until he was eight, it was assumed by most people that Jonathan also laboured with profound and multiple learning difficulties, capable of only the most limited mental processes.

But then something amazing happened. With the help of his parents and others, it emerged that Jonathan was able to learn his letters and his numbers. Even more wonderful was that through using the movement of his eyes, Jonathan can pick out letters from a spelling board in order to form words and sentences that enable him to communicate his thoughts, feelings, preferences and ideas. The life of a boy who was locked in by severe cerebral palsy was thrown open revealing depth, and subtlety, originality and insight that is extraordinary. Jonathan is now an accomplished author and blogger, a campaigner for the educational rights of disabled children and above all a poet who delights in the use of words to express feelings, emotion, sensation and possibility.

I've thought about Jonathan as I've pondered the story of the man described in today's Gospel reading. Mark relates Jesus's encounter with someone described as 'deaf and with an impediment in his speech'. I wonder what this man's life experience must have been? Though he didn't labour under the physical constraints of my hero, I suspect that his experience of being 'locked in' would be something that Jonathan could relate to. Unable to participate in so much of the world around him. Unable to give voice and expression to his ideas, his needs, his understanding.

So when Jesus speaks into the deaf man's situation, his words and his actions are, yes, about physical healing. But their implication goes far beyond that alone. Jesus makes possible for the man he heals a whole new world. And this is shown by Mark's making use of one of his rare verbatim quotes of the word in Aramaic that Jesus would actually have spoken when he undertook his miracle. 'Ephthatha' Jesus says. Be opened. Opened to hearing the thoughts and ideas of others. Opened to expressing your own deepest stirrings and longings. Opened to joining fully into the life of the community around you. Opened to a world of new perspectives, different experiences, surprising interpretations, the breadth, depth, intricacy and wonder of creation all around you.

As well as all this being shown by the use of the word 'Ephthatha' there's another, small, intriguing word in the Gospel text that signals the magnitude of what this miracle means. Just before Jesus utters his word of power, Ephthatha, Mark says Jesus 'sighed'. Why sigh? My dictionary says that to sigh is to 'emit a long, deep audible breath expressing sadness, relief, tiredness, or similar.' That hardly fits with what Jesus is about. To understand what this sigh means, we have to look elsewhere in scripture – to the eighth chapter of St Paul's letter to the church in Rome where the apostle speaks of the whole of creation longing to be set free from its bondage, to obtaining the freedom of the glory of the children of God. And Paul says that while creation waits for this longed for freedom it groans, it sighs. Mark and Paul use exactly the same word to describe what's going on. This sighing, this longing that Jesus expresses is in hope for a whole new world.

What might this say to us? I'm not shut in we might well say. I can hear, I can speak, I can fully engage with the world around me. Yet I'm afraid to say that the reality that we increasingly see around is very different. More and more, each of us are locked into our own echo chambers. We understand the world around us not through rational and open engagement with the breadth and diversity of facts, thought and perspectives that are there to be encountered. Instead we prefer to

encounter only beliefs that coincide with our own, reinforcing our existing views and refusing to engage with those of others. Just think about the camps we form around our views on Brexit or vaccines or how churches should relate to questions about sexuality. The result is that we become locked in, partisan, entrenched in our positions, nurtured by slogans and the line taken by whatever media reinforces the understandings we already have. Words become not invitations to openness and dialogue, but weapons to be deployed against the enemy – whoever we might think that happens to be.

Maybe we need a bit of Ephthatha' too. Of being opened. Opened to hearing the thoughts and ideas of others. Opened to expressing our own deepest stirrings and longings. Opened to joining fully into the life of the community around us. Opened to a world of new perspectives, different experiences, surprising interpretations, the breadth, depth, intricacy and wonder of creation all around us.

This is what Jesus sighs for. This is what he makes possible through encounter with the man born deaf and mute. An encounter that's personal and intimate. Fingers in his ears, spit on his tongue. An encounter that says 'You don't need to be afraid. I am with you. Beside you. You can trust me to step alongside you out of your echo chamber into the world that's all about. I am here for you. Be opened.

This the life that our hero Jonathan has chosen. For as well as being an author, blogger, mathematician and poet, this young man is someone of vibrant, living faith. I finish by reading to you the words Jonathan wrote to mark his confirmation by my colleague the Bishop of Swindon:

Jonathan wrote

With Jesus as my saviour, companion and friend, I have lived my hours here with happiness in my spirit and contented calm in my soul. Knowing Jesus is with me, cradling me in pain, sheltering me from darkness and beckoning me forward, has given me the strength and serenity to look life in the eye and smile. Like the constancy of the second hand of a clock, Jesus inhabits the quaver beats of my life, and as that beat slows, I look forward with excited anticipation to the day I will see Jesus and live together with him in the garden forever. In the meantime, I cleave to Jesus: my faith and my life.

Ephthatha! May we be opened to a faith and life like that too!

Amen.