

"And again, departing from the coasts of Tyre and Sidon, he came unto the sea of Galilee, through the midst of the coasts of Decapolis. And they brought unto him one that was deaf; and had an impediment in his speech; and they besought him to put his hand upon him. And he took him aside from the multitude, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spit, and touched his tongue; And looking up to heaven, he sighed, and said unto him, Ephphatha, that is, Be opened. And straightway his ears were opened, and the string of his tongue was loosed, and he spoke plain. And he charged them that they should tell no man: but the more he charged them, so much the more a great deal they published it; And were beyond measure astonished, saying, He has done all things well: he makes both the deaf to hear, and the dumb to speak."—Mark 7:31-37.

HE DOETH ALL THINGS WELL
A Sermon by Theodor Zahn

THE lesson of this Gospel is taught us in a similar way in many other Gospels. How often during the Christian Year Christian congregations see the Form of the worker of miracles pass before them, that wonderful Form of the Man endowed by God with strength and power as no other man ever was, so that even without His intention, on His journeyings to and fro, He permitted health and strength to stream forth from Him to the suffering who desired His help. One day He gives hearing and speech to a deaf and dumb man. On another occasion He gives sight to the blind. Then again He gives strength to the palsied and lame, so that they are enabled to walk about vigorously, and even to carry the beds on which they had formerly been carried because of their helplessness.

We are also taken to death-beds, to biers, and even to graves that are closed, and we see the dead come to life again at His Word. How can this help us? What is the meaning of it to us in this our world of today, when we see others who are born blind and dumb remain so, in spite of the science of the physicians and in spite of all the love of those to whose care they are confided? What is its meaning to us when we hear, "Eighteen or nineteen hundred years ago, there was a man in the far East who knew how to help when the art of man and the love of man could do no more, and their weak hands fell helpless to their sides, while hundreds praised Him as their Saviour from hopeless distress"?

"Once upon a time there was a man." So begins many a fairy tale; and the East is the home of many a fairy tale. Are they only fairy tales that are told us about our Lord Christ? If I thought so, I would not preach to you. You need a portion of the Bread of Life on Sunday, and had I only a stone in my hand in the Gospel for today, how could I offer it to you? And even if I knew how to cut and polish it so that it would sparkle in the sun, it would still be a stone--hard and unfit for the food of souls that hunger.

I only preach to you because I know and believe that these stories of the wonderful works of Jesus are also essential parts of the Gospel, which will so satisfy us in this life that we shall live for eternity. It is true that to hear accounts of such deeds is not the same as ourselves to see and experience them. But whoever has experienced anything of the power of the consolation and sanctification which, flowing forth from Christ unabated by the course of time refresh and renew his heart, knows also that the Gospel is no fairy tale, but the power of God which saves and sanctifies. Now this Gospel has never existed apart from the proclamation of these wonderful works of Jesus; and their proclamation is part of the power of the Gospel, for they are deeds of

lasting importance and efficacy. If I were deaf and dumb and were to remain so till my death, if I were ill with no hope of recovery, if age had so broken down my strength that I had nothing more to hope for on earth but a blessed death, still these works of my Lord would not be lost to me. Nay, I might be only the more susceptible to their influence.

What was their efficacy when they took place? They surely did not affect the sufferers alone to whom Jesus gave health. In the Gospel for today we hear nothing more of the deaf and dumb man whom Jesus healed. We do not know whether he became a disciple of Jesus or whether he belonged afterwards to the community of the faithful. On the other hand, we hear of the mighty effect on the mass of people who saw the miracle, and on those afar off who heard of it. Though in many cases the impression of this and of many of the other miracles of Jesus may have been obliterated, yet not in all. Had it been so, the account of these deeds could not have reached us, and there would have been no community to be edified by their publication. The first witnesses of Christ's miracles received an impression such as we Christians of today ought also to receive. "They were astonished beyond measure, saying, He has done all things well; He makes both the deaf to hear and the dumb to speak."

These people do not seem to have gained very much from the deed of Jesus at the first moment. They only acknowledged what was known to many and what was doubted by scarcely anyone. The event of that day reminded them of the similar acts of Jesus, which they had seen and of which they had been told. They were amazed at such unheard-of power, and at the wonderful skill of the Man. Nothing was too hard for Him, nothing impossible. He succeeded in all that He undertook; all that He did was well done.

A crowd will often be thus enthusiastic about the skill of a man, even though it be of the most ignoble and useless nature. Many are often enthusiastic about a man whose name is even cursed by others, because he has used his skill for the destruction of many. But it was very different with Jesus. Jesus never injured any man by His wonderful power. He only did good--ever helping, healing, saving; never beating, wounding, and killing, not even when every just judge would have held that it was a righteous punishment. Moreover, the people saw how He went about His work; how He looked up to heaven, sighed, and prayed to His Heavenly Father; and how then, in the strength of the prayer that had been heard, He cried to the deaf ear, "Be opened." In spite of all their folly, the multitude acknowledged, "It is God who by Jesus does such great things and who does all things well." They gave glory to God by thus praising Jesus.

They had also heard Him preach of the kingdom of God, in which there should be no more sin nor suffering, no sickness nor death. They saw this kingdom already coming in the mighty works of Jesus which He performed on the deaf, the dumb, the blind, and the lame. How could those help being enthusiastic who had lived to see such things? Who could sigh over sickness and bodily infirmity when in company with Him who willingly and untiringly healed all infirmities? Who could be anxious about daily bread when in company with Him who could satisfy thousands with a few loaves? Who could fear gloomy death, knowing that the Man was among them who had called His friends from their graves? He who has done all things well, will also do all things well. He will also establish the kingdom of God which He preached. Who can hinder Him?

So thought those happy people. It would be well if we also could speak thus. We are not in this frame of mind every day. But God gives us days and hours of exaltation, when we become conscious of the irresistible power of His love, when our hearts are ashamed of their stubbornness and their faint-heartedness, and when our lips would lie if they did not say, "He

has done all things well." Oh that God would be gracious unto us, and make this hour of our gathering together such an hour of uplifting and of lasting blessing! We too may learn to say, "God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, has done all things well through His Son, and it only remains for us to give humble thanks." We are not without opportunities for such experiences which would enable us so to speak. We have only to consider what God does before our eyes.

1. What we see daily ceases to astonish us; therefore we generally reflect but little on it, and still less do we feel compelled to give thanks for it. How would it have been if we had all been born blind, and then one morning our eyes had all been opened so that for the first time we saw the sun rise in all his glory, run his course throughout the day from sunrise to sunset, and then set again in the evening in a golden glow? Suppose we had then learned that all he does on the earth on which he shines, all the green which refreshes the eye, all the other colors which make the world appear so fair, all that grows upon the earth and that had nourished us blind mortals hitherto, could not exist without the sun which gives light to our earth. Should we not have been astonished beyond measure, and have replied to anyone who said to us, "This has God done, this He has done for you"; [would we not have replied], "He has done all things well; He has ordered all things wisely and has cared for us with undeserved and truly Fatherly love"?

Is there therefore now less cause for wonder, for admiration? And need we no longer bow down in adoration because [for] God's goodness and faithfulness [which] are new to us every morning? Whoever has been permitted, like most of us, to leave the dusty streets of towns and the close atmosphere of the workrooms for a short time to come to the beautiful shores of the Baltic, not only to inhale the invigorating breezes that blow here and to refresh his limbs in the waves of the sea, but also to cleanse his soul from the dust of work and the cares of daily life--he to whom all this is something unusual or absolutely new must be affected and uplifted by it. If his heart is not deaf, he will hear in the roaring of the sea the voice of God who made heaven and earth, the sea and all that therein is; the voice of God who rides upon the waters, and who cries in the ears and to the souls of men on the shore, "It is I who made it all."

We are not distracted from these thoughts when we see men at their work in the midst of the grandeur of nature made by God--the fishermen sailing out on the high seas and returning with their cargo of fish; the great ships cleaving the waves by the power of steam while they shape their course in safety and pass by before us; when we see the light of the lighthouse multiplied a hundredfold by skilfully cut glass and like a guiding star lighting the ships by night on the sea; or even when we hear the thunder of the guns which reminds us that men must protect against the incursions of other men that portion of earth that God has given them. All this need not disturb us in the thought that God made it all, and that He has made it all good. It is just when we have received a specially vivid impression of the greatness of nature as the creation of God, and we see feeble and insignificant man disposing of all as if he were a lord, that we are impelled like the Psalmist to say, "What is man that Thou art mindful of him, and the son of man that Thou visitest him?"--for then the very contrast must incline us, like the Psalmist, to sing a song of praise to the glorious Name of God, who has made feeble man lord over all the works of His hands and has set all things under his feet.

It is true that we are not accustomed to speak in this way when we meet one another out for a walk. We then praise the invigorating air, the breakers on the seashore. We talk of the fine or bad weather, and then of one thing or another, while we hold our peace about what is best of all. But only the deaf are dumb. He that has ears to hear the voice of God can also speak of Him and to Him. Here especially, where it has been our desire to meet together in the light of the

presence of God, let us praise Him who made all things, and has made all things well. Let us thank Him for all the joy He has bestowed upon us here. Let the old song become a new one in our mouths: "The Lord is a great God: in His hand are all the corners of the earth. The sea is His, and He made it. Let us worship and fall down before the Lord our Maker."

Such songs of praise to the Creator and such joy in His visible works are not matters which concern everyone. There are plenty of blind men who, from no fault of their own, have no conception of the grandeur and beauty of nature; and there are men who are born dumb, and who have only stammering tongues. In this our watering-place there are many sick and infirm people, who are conscious of possessing but little of the strength which God gave to man that he might conquer the world and subdue nature; who are even ready to rejoice when their pain lessens and their weakness does not increase. Are they ready to say, "God has done all things well"? At all events, everyone in whom there is still some sense of religion can say, "It is God who apportions, according to His will, all the blessings and strength of bodily life. The same God who so skilfully prepared the eye and the ear, and who gave to man not only bodily strength but also the power of invention, so that he may feel and also show that he is lord of creation, made also the deaf to be deaf, the blind blind, the sick sick." And what God does is well done; His will is righteous.

So speaks the judgment of everyone who is thus tried and laid aside, but who still has faith in the Father of Heaven and in His pity on all His children, and indeed on all His works. So speaks man's judgment, but his heart does not [always] assent thereto. It is no small thing in itself when a man does not murmur against his lot. A cripple needs real faith to be able to say, "All was ordered for the best for me when God made me, or allowed me to become what I am." A man who can say that is doing heroic deeds of faith in silence, which, in the eyes of God, may be greater than many a deed extolled by his contemporaries and by posterity.

But the exact opposite of such heroism seems to be the rule even among men who yet would call themselves Christians. And how are we to expect calm resignation and thankful contentment in those who are sorely tried and really laid aside, when we see those who are well stumbling over the slightest annoyances in daily life, and allowing their tempers to be disturbed? Ill-temper is incompatible with living faith in the providence and government of God. Faith is sure that no evil, either great or small, from the slightest mishap in everyday life to the most terrible calamity, can befall us without the will of God. We are very ready to seek for the cause of the disappointments that put us out in man's perversity. And it is certainly true that if all men were only good-tempered and ready to help, a quarrel would be scarcely imaginable, and with peace there would certainly be infinitely more contentment in the world. But it is just as true that the suffering and misfortune that befall us through the fault of man are nevertheless the act of God, as it is that God rules the world.

God allows all to take place, and He allows nothing to take place--[not] because He cannot prevent it, but because it is His will that it should take place. Even the sin and wickedness of man are controlled and guided by the mighty hand of God towards the goal which He has foreordained. All must serve His purposes, and therefore must be for the best for those who love Him. We have no excuse if we cannot bring ourselves to say, "What God does is well done." How many of the most beautiful of our Evangelical Church hymns place this very confession in our mouths, and strive to draw us on to praise God even in suffering! How comes it then that even on the best of days and in the happiest circumstances we are often not even in a good temper, to say nothing of praising and thanking God for all He has done and is doing for us? This is not so

because what God does is not good, but solely because we ourselves are concerned in the one thing that God does not do--and which has great power over the lives of men)--and that is sin: "It is thine own will that creates in thee disinclination."

Our depraved wills hide the face of God from us and veil the ordering of His fatherly love and wisdom. Our unforgiven sins make us uncertain whether God always means our good. And when we do not know this, we are also unable to acknowledge that God has made all things good. It is this inner discord that makes us so discontented with the world and with the course of our external lives, and which even embitters the most innocent joy in the works of the Creator. It is well for us if we acknowledge it and no longer seek the cause of our discomfort in the perversity of other men, or in the management of the world, or in the incomprehensibility of the Divine government of the world, but in ourselves and in our resistance to God's will. If we wish to make our peace with the world, we must first be reconciled to God.

2. If we succeed in acknowledging joyfully that all that God does is well done, then we must look at the Man in our Gospel whose deed was acknowledged by the people as the work of God, and which they praised as well done. Like the multitude on that day, we must not stand gazing at one single deed, a single deed of kindness shown to a man who needed help, while ignoring all the similar deeds of love by which Jesus helped the suffering and the unhappy. We must fix our eyes, like them, on the whole of the Saviour's work on earth, and above all on the very kernel and essence of His work for the children of men. Jesus Christ did not come into the world simply to cause a few deaf men to hear and a few blind to see; and still less can it have been His intention to heal all those who were sick on earth and to put an end to all bodily suffering.

He came to seek lost souls, to call sinners to repentance, [and] to proclaim the love of God--which is greater than all sin--to those whose evil consciences had made them turn their backs on God (as though God were their enemy), and to enable those in whom He had aroused a longing for the grace of God to obtain the forgiveness of God, and to let it speak powerfully to their hearts.

It is true that Jesus often sighed, as in this Gospel, over external suffering which had been laid on one man or another by the decree of God; and raising His eyes to heaven prayed that God would give Him the right and the power to transform sickness into health. But He sighed most of all over the suffering of soul which we men are ever afresh incurring; over that blindness of heart which hinders us from recognizing the things that belong unto our peace. He sorrowed most over the deepest cause of all, God's anger. Many only begin to see that God is angry when they feel His blows in their outer lives. But, bleeding and praying, He wrestled with the anger of God even unto giving up His holy life as a sacrifice for the sin of the world. The wrestling of Jesus to obtain the grace of God for sinners did not remain altogether a secret of the Divine inner life, but was revealed to men in audible words and sighs and in visible suffering, so that some of them at least might realize the love of God which appeared in Jesus, and might become willing to yield themselves to Him. Those who thus yielded themselves to the love of God, because they felt that it laid hold of them, learned also to say, "He has done all things well." The Cross on which God offered up His only Son is the place where sinful man can feel most certain of the love of God. It is thither that we must return again and again, when in our own lives and in the course of the world which is around us we lose sight of the love of God.

Even the heathen, who as yet knew not the reconciliation of the world by Christ, were expected to seek for God the Lord in creation and in history, if they might so much as feel after Him and find Him; for He is not far from any man. God still speaks in sundry and divers ways to the children

of men. God is mindful of many who are not thankful; but plainly and unmistakably overcoming all honest doubt, and putting all sincere objections to shame, He has spoken to us first by His Son, our Saviour. He speaks to us today through Jesus Christ in every word of Gospel teaching that touches our hearts, in every absolution that we long for with our hearts and accept with faith. Thus we can be as certain of the love of God as of His anger against sin. There also are to be found the roots of our strength in the conflict of earthly life, and there too the sources of our joy and of the certainty of victory over the evil with which we are burdened. Every one agrees that it is a precious thing to have the heart fixed in this changing, uncertain life. But we so often forget that this only comes to pass by grace, the same eternal grace of God which has brought us forgiveness of our sins through Christ. We imagine again and again that outward changes must make us happy. And though we do not venture to say so, yet we think often enough that God ought to deal with us otherwise [in order] that we may be able to say, "He has done all things well."

But how would it help us if Jesus were now to pass through our land and literally to make all sick people well, to allow no more men to die, and to take away from all men all labor and anxiety about their daily bread, if He is not the Saviour of souls who has taken upon Him all labor and anxiety about our eternal life? This world would still be a hell if it were not reconciled to God, and if the love of God which forgives sins had not found faith in the hearts of men, ordained peace, and awakened unfeigned love for God and the brethren. It would then indeed have been impossible for anyone to say that all had been ordered for the best; for the deepest cause of all discontent and unhappiness would have existed as before.

If we are certain that God sent His only Son into the world for us, and offered Him even unto death for us, then we cannot any longer give way to the fear that God grudges us anything that is good. The heathen spoke of the envy of the gods. We Christians cannot doubt the ungrudging love of God for man, when we have once recognized His love for sinners in the life and death of our Saviour. There we learn to look at our life in this world in the light in which God sees it. All that God does and allows to come to pass is subordinate to His gracious will for us. He wills that we should be and should remain His children, free from the world that tempts and deceives us, that crushes and torments us; and therefore free and blessed, at peace with Him who governs the world. Neither does He leave us without experiences which show us that all things must be for the best for us. Even our sinful errors, of which we are justly ashamed, appear to us then in a subdued light when they have been forgiven, and we have rid ourselves of them by the grace of God. God knows even how to turn our sins so that they may at last serve a good purpose. We often thought to do evil, but God has made all things well.

3. This is a blessed experience, but who possesses it every day? We have not yet overcome all obstacles by the bold assertion of faith that God has done all things well through Jesus Christ, and that all things must turn out well for those who love God. Before Jesus healed him, the deaf and dumb man was not sure that God had done all things well for him. Where is the mother to whom it does not seem as though a two-edged knife had pierced her heart when she gradually discovers that her child is born into the world either deaf, blind, or an idiot? It is just those whose minds and limbs are whole and who have also preserved thankful hearts, who cannot see the suffering of their neglected and incurable fellowmen without a painful sense of sympathy.

The most religious Christian is dumb [silent] and has no answer to give to the question, why God ordains and permits all the fearful accidents to come to pass in the world that the newspapers relate every week. Whether it be a human crime or the violence of nature causing the disaster

which sweeps away the good and evil indiscriminately, we feel, when hearing of such daily occurrences, as in the presence of so many unsolved riddles. [It is] just because we believe in the boundless love of God for men, which has been revealed to us in Jesus Christ, and for that very reason [that] we are tormented--because we cannot trace that love in all the horrors we hear of every day. And when we look up to our Lord, as we see Him placed again before our eyes in the Gospel for today, we cannot acquiesce in a world so full of incomprehensible suffering and so full of the powerlessness of all that is good. We cannot allow that it is a clear mirror of the love of God. Neither ought we to do so.

For why did Jesus make hundreds of sick and crippled whole if He only meant to preach that man was to be content with the inner working of the grace of God, that he was to be joyful also in affliction? Were, then, all these acts of our Saviour only figures and parables? It is true that the Gospel teaches us renunciation of the world and of self, [of] self-sacrifice and submission. It demands persevering patience even under the worst conditions of life. On the way to the Cross Jesus said to His disciples, "If any man will follow after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross." But we should rob the Gospel of its truth and power were we to abridge it arbitrarily and so confine its demands to patient renunciation.

As there can be no true preaching of the Cross without the proclamation of the Resurrection, so it is no longer Evangelical faith if, in the picture of the Cross-bearer, we forget Jesus the Benefactor and miraculous Physician of suffering men. His deeds of healing were not only a few instructive examples of the doctrine He proclaimed, but real deeds of merciful love--so helpful, so powerful, and so numerous that the world had never seen the like before. Half of His power and His time Jesus devoted to this occupation. He worked as a Physician, much sought after, till far on into the night and till His strength was exhausted. His cures did really banish pain from the lives of many sufferers. They, for their part, really raised the curse under which sin has placed us, and under which the godly as well as the ungodly must groan in this life. They were the deeds of the same Teacher who had said that it were better to enter into life maimed than with a whole body to be cast into hell, and that the kingdom and righteousness of God were the only goal worth striving for in the life of man.

The same Lord who renounced all temporal joys which He might well have had, and who chose the Cross in order to win the grace of God for sinners and to open Paradise to the dying thief, gave health of body and temporal joy to hundreds of hearts and homes. How can we doubt, then, that the love of God embraces both our souls and bodies? Jesus' miracles of healing prophesy to us of a future world in which there will be no deaf and blind, and, in fact, no more sickness and no more pain; not a world of disembodied spirits who need no eyes and ears, but a world of men who are redeemed both in body and soul. The Saviour of sinners is also the Redeemer from all evil. He who died on the Cross is also the Resurrection and the Life of all the dying and the dead. Therefore, that we might believe this, Jesus went about as the Physician of those who were sick in body; and therefore we thank Him also for these deeds of His love. They help us to trust in Him even when He allows us to suffer, and tells us that His grace is sufficient for us.

May our Lord's deeds of healing not be in vain for us all. But as often as they are placed before our eyes by the Gospel, may we be strengthened thereby in the hope of the future world, where all tongues loosened from the chains of doubt may thankfully confess that Jesus Christ is the Lord, who has done all things well. Amen.