

## Luke 4:21-30

Many situations we encounter in life bring both good news and bad news with them. A promotion at work may come with an increase in salary but also more responsibilities and longer hours. A workplace evaluation may involve both praise for jobs well done, as well as suggestions for improvement. When you are about to get a shot of good and bad news, what is your preference—good news first, or bad? And what should your preference be? This issue was explored in an interesting paper in the March, 2014 issue of *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* by Angela Legg and Kate Sweeny. The study focused on participants delivering news. Participants who were instructed to think about how the other person would feel when getting the news were more prone to give the bad news first and then the

good, compared to those in a control condition who were not given any specific instructions.

But which is actually better for us, getting good news first or bad? It was suggested that the answer to this important question depends on whether you are focused on your mood or on changing your behaviour. Participants filled out a personality inventory and then were given bogus feedback about their results. The feedback consisted both of good news (some positive personality traits like being a good leader) as well as bad news (some traits that are not so positive, like being low in creativity). The study varied the order in which participants got this feedback—and before and after getting the feedback, participants rated their degree of worry, as well as their mood. After getting the feedback, participants rated how committed they were to learning to change the negative aspects of their

personality. At the end of the study, participants had the option of watching some videos to help them make personality changes or helping the experimenter by stapling some packets together. Participants who got the bad news first were in a better mood and were less worried overall than those who got the good news first. However, participants who got the bad news first were less interested in changing their behaviour, and were less likely to elect to watch videos to improve their behaviour, than those who got the good news first. Overall, we like to get improving sequences of news (bad news first) because the last thing you hear affects your mood. However, it turns out that being a little unsettled can be motivating. So, if you are motivated to act on the bad feedback by making changes in your

behaviour, it is better to focus on what is wrong, and to hear it last.<sup>1</sup>

Last week, remember, we read about Jesus delivering his inspirational sermon in the synagogue in Nazareth where he proclaimed the year of the Lord's favour. There would be good news for the poor; release for the prisoners; sight for the blind. Wonderful news and this news we read about this morning is fulfilled today. It was fulfilled in Jesus' day and it is fulfilled every time the passage is read and the teaching is realised. Good news for today! But that good news soon, in fact almost immediately, was received as bad news in Nazareth. If Jesus knew about the modern study that I have mentioned then he would, I'm sure, appreciate that this was good medicine for the synagogue attenders to hear.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/ulterior-motives/201406/why-hearing-good-news-or-bad-news-first-really-matters>

This offered the potential for a change of behaviour that would be life-saving in its impact. But none of this was without its dangers as Jesus enforced march to the top of a cliff edge demonstrated.

So what caused the congregation to change their minds? What was it that lead them to interpret the good news as bad news? It is recorded that the congregation said; “is this not Joseph’s son”, as if that was the problem. However it wasn’t until Jesus referred to two well-known Old Testament stories that the atmosphere changed. He spoke about the widow in Zarephath in Sidon who received a visit from Elijah and so found God’s grace and love provided for her. He spoke about Naaman, the Syrian, who was healed by God through the ministry of Elisha. It was these two stories presented as a challenge to a narrow religious mindset that provoked the furious response. I would suggest to you that that

kind of reaction is still encountered today when people with narrow, religious views become unsettled. As it is a core element of the gospel - the good news of Jesus Christ - to unsettle; this is all particularly concerning.

For me, there are three questions that are raised by this story that should be before us.

Firstly, is our faith centred on our own peace of mind, an inner peace, or is it centred in finding justice for the oppressed? The people of Nazareth sought satisfaction and comfort in their tradition. They were who they were because God had provided them with a rich salvation and so they looked for comfort through the re-telling of the familiar stories. News that God was primarily concerned with the welfare of foreigners, with issues of justice, did not fit and so were rejected. We must always be reminded that our good news is not about personal reward but about changing the world. If

we internalise and privatise it we will miss the point of God's kingdom and we will become resistant to the voice that challenges us.

Secondly, is our faith about protecting ourselves from other beliefs? I remember well the controversy at a General Assembly of the Church of Scotland when a Commissioner protested about a minister who had permitted the use of church halls for Hindu worship. The protester insisted that as church buildings were consecrated for the worship of the trinitarian God under no circumstances should people of other faiths be permitted to hold worship services in the buildings. More recently the Provost of St. Mary's Episcopal Cathedral in Glasgow got into trouble because at an ecumenical service held in the Cathedral he permitted a Muslim cleric to lead in prayer in Arabic. I am personally very uneasy with the permissive attitude of

these clergymen but I have to challenge myself. Why am I uneasy? Is it because I am insecure in my faith? Does Jesus and his message need my protection? Is it because, deep down, I am a builder of walls rather than a promoter of justice and peace? These are the same root questions Jesus posed in Nazareth all those years ago.

Thirdly, is our faith about resisting change? This question is a most telling one because I think it hits the sore spot for most churches. We are creatures of habit and we like the familiar. We like things the way they always have been and that's especially the case when it comes to our religion. It provides stability because it has remained constant through the generations. But times are a-changing and if we value constancy above relevancy then we are in danger of disappearing from



view. How can the good news be proclaimed without a voice calling out?

I want to end with a positive note today. Observe what happened to Jesus when he was taken to the brow of the hill where there was apparently no room for manoeuvre. There was no hope. He was going over the edge of the cliff and nobody cared. What does the text say? “He passed through the midst of them and went on his way”. What does that mean? It doesn’t give us the details. He simply passed through the trouble. ‘Today’ this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. Today is the day of salvation. We are continually challenged by God not to rest in our comfort zones. Take heart that God’s prodding is good for us. Let’s seek together to keep the difficult questions before us that we might continue to live in the kingdom of God.