

Peter Haresnape, November 5, 2017

In the beginning, the universe was created. This has widely been regarded as a bad move and made a lot of people very angry - Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy

So - do you want the good news, or the bad news? We used to play an improv game called 'Good News Bad News'. One person would give a piece of Good News, and the next would point out a flaw. Then the first person would try to find a redeeming feature of the flaw. For example

- The good news is you won 1 million.
- The bad news is that it's a million potatoes.
- The good news is you run a fast food franchise.
- The bad news is that you sell pizza.

And so on. It's fun, because finding fault is fun, and you can be very imaginative in finding the positives or negatives. Of course - it's all the same piece of news. It's news, with good and bad perspectives, depending on where you focus. The 'Good News Bad News' game models the process of investigating the truth - going deeper, considering other perspectives.

Some Christians talk a lot about 'the Good News', or 'the Gospel'. It's one of those phrases that can mean very different things to different people. I wonder what you would say, if I asked you 'what is the Good News'?

Often, the Good News starts from the story of Jesus coming into the world as God in human form. He healed and taught, but was killed. What seemed like a defeat was in fact a victory, as Jesus came back to life, showing that evil has been defeated and that humanity could be reconciled to God and have eternal life because of what Jesus did. That's one formulation of the Good News.

So, what's the bad news? You don't have to look far to encounter the long and bitter list of bad things that the Church and Christians have been involved in. Everything from Residential Schools, religious wars and massacres, anti-semitism, Islamophobia, oppression of Queer and Trans* people, hiding or excusing abuse, and promoting sexism.

It's hard for people in those contexts to describe the impact of the church as being 'Good News'. It is hard to connect these experiences with the Good News story of Jesus.

Churches try various ways to make a connection. Some insist that there was good in all these circumstances, or assert that God's function is bringing good out of bad, even if the bad was caused by God's followers. Some churches focus on responding to the bad things of the world, and lose sight of their own Good News. And some double down on preaching the Good News and say that any harm done is the fault of those who don't receive God's message.

When we consider the scriptures for today, we hear deep criticism of the religious authorities engaged in similar manoeuvres to maintain their authority over hard-pressed people. The words of Micah and the words of Jesus are Bad News to the powerful and privileged. Both Micah and Jesus are pushing back at the religious elite, protesting the injustices that they

are complicit in. This Bad News for the authorities, that God sees their oppressive behaviour, is also Good News for the victims, that God is designing a new reality of justice and liberation.

I want to look at some other ways that Good News and Bad News function in the world today.

I met Mayra in Edmonton. She lives in Mexico, close to the border with Guatemala, and she operates a restaurant there. Mayra's experience of religion, growing up, was intricately connected with male power. It was her father who insisted on going to church, and the church that insisted on her father's right to dominate the family. Why would a girl be educated when she was created to get married and have babies? Why would she go to work? With the help of her godmother, Mayra left, invited her to come and live and learn how to become a seamstress. It was there that she learned something of her own creative capacity, her own worth.

She exercised this creativity later in life, reading the Bible with other women in the church she started to attend. The group found the space to ask questions. "Does the Bible really assign blame for the fall to women? Does it really command the silence and suppression of women? Is the father, the priest, the man the clearest image of God?"

If the 500th year of the Reformation has anything to teach us, it that is people reading the Bible themselves leads to disruption, disorder and danger. Good news for those seeking freedom from oppressive religion and oppressive states. Bad news for oppressive religions and oppressive states.

Mayra's Bible studies were good news for her. She encountered a God who created a good world, a Jesus who considered the words of women, and a Holy Spirit that urged her to use her own voice. Mayra's Bible studies were bad news for the order of the church. When she spoke of this time in her life, there was pain in her words, and in her face, pain that didn't require the service of the translator. Dismissed from that church, she lost friends, safe community. She still had the call of God on her heart.

Mayra's restaurant, as I said, sits close to the border with Guatemala. Many of the women who eat there are Guatemalan migrants, who cross the border into Mexico intending to keep going north to the USA. These women are often vulnerable, poor, and without support. Many of them are in the hands of the coyotes, the human smugglers, and this industry sometimes crosses over with human trafficking, forced labour and exploitation. Often the women who Mayra feeds in her restaurant are stuck, abandoned by their guides or pressured into other sorts of work, rather than continuing onwards towards the USA.

Some of the women become friends, rather than customers. They take their meals in the kitchen because Mayra knows they only have 15 minute breaks from their work in the bars. Mayra talks to them, and sometimes they ask 'are you religious'? And she says 'no'. Because these women grew up the same way she did, in a Christianity that said a woman's value was her role as a wife and mother, and shames all other women. And Mayra doesn't

want to shame these women. So she says 'no', and carries on feeding them, listening, and loving.

And maybe later, she talks about the God of Love, the God who is not a man, the God who she sees as Mother. With care and consideration, she offers the news, the Good News, that God is Love, that sin and judgement is not the end. And she carries on feeding, listening, and loving.

When I heard the story I was uncomfortable. Shocked even. One of my earliest memories of Christian education was the story of Peter denying Christ. As a child I felt such shame when I thought about times when I hadn't shared the Good News, hadn't admitted I went to church. Myra wasn't telling the truth. But she was offering the Good News.

Because she knew the question 'are you religious' really meant 'are you unsafe? Are you going to condemn me, hurt me?' And she knew that what was important then was not religious law or theological principles, but offering some Good News.

So, do you want the Good News, or the Bad News? The truth is both of those things. The full truth is Good News and Bad News.

The words of the prophet Micah are definitely Bad News. "it shall be night to you, without vision, and darkness to you, without revelation". That's a moodkiller. It's condemnation of prophets who lead God's people astray, it's angry and uncomfortable and raw. What is fascinating is that these verses are followed by the famous beautiful vision of the sword beaten into a plough, the end of war, and all nations coming together in harmony on God's mountain. But before that can happen, these words of disgrace and destruction are uttered.

The prophet's condemnation goes to the root of his society. Jerusalem is built up with bloodshed and wrongdoing. Therefore these structures of violence and oppression must be torn down, ploughed over, turned into a wooded height - which will become the Mountain of the Lord to which all peoples come.

These angry, condemnatory words are Bad News for everyone profiting off oppression, and Good News for the oppressed. But the prophet lets us know that the ultimate story is Good News. In the end, redemption is for everyone, tools of destruction can be recycled into tools of creation, and God saves us from the time of trial.

We can't have the Good News without the Bad News, even if we affirm that in the end, it is all Good News. As a faithful church community, we cannot just skip ahead to the good ending. But, in our relation to our hurting world, we need to let people know that there is a good ending.

So our challenge is to hold onto the reality of the pain that Christianity causes to others, and at the same time offer grace, hope and love.

I met Ada in St Catharines, in the Niagara region. She told us about the long history of people of African descent living in Canada and in that region. She talked about the lovely historic chapel we were meeting in, and their difficulties keeping it as a small functioning church. She told stories of enslaved Africans escaping the USA through the Underground Railroad, assisted by women like Harriet Tubman, who lived for several years nearby and worshipped at the chapel. Ada talked about how groups came from all over the US and Canada to visit this chapel, descendants of liberated former slaves who came to celebrate their history. She showed us the doll made and donated by one of those visitors, dressed as Harriet Tubman and toting a large rifle. The rifle was quite a shock for me.

“Some people don't like to see that rifle in the church”, she shared with us. “It's only out for visitors. The rest of the time I keep it in the room where the minister changes.”

When I took a closer look later on, I read the note on the doll. *‘A Black female soldier and brilliant escape strategist - As Tough as Leather, As Heroic As Moses. She endangered her life continuously to successfully escort over 300 slaves to freedom through her knowledge of the Underground Railroad. She wouldn't hesitate to shoot anyone who endangered her safe journey. Large rewards were offered for Ms. Tubman's life, she was never captured, and she never lost a passenger.’*

I didn't like that rifle, I will be honest. When I saw it as part of the museum display in the church sanctuary, I was shocked, discomfited. But, Harriet Tubman and the people she safeguarded over the border probably felt that her rifle was pretty Good News. And for the people who would have endangered her safe journey, it was Bad News. And from what I know about her, she knew when to put it down.

When Jesus spoke out against the Pharisees, he did not criticise their teaching or their beliefs, but their actions. They sit on the seat of Moses, he said, but don't copy what they do. “They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them.”

Ms Tubman went out as a Christian to rescue enslaved Christianized Africans from the clutches of Christians. She rejected the Bad News of the Christian masters, and she used the tools she had to bring liberation to her people. She went out as a guide and escort, as a prophet and servant. She went out as a Christian.

My Christian discomfort at that gun, based on my personal and mostly abstract notions about violence, does not really register in context. The people she was escorting did not need religion that would tell them that suffering in life was rewarded by treasure in heaven. They did not need to be told that God ordained the place of slave and master. What they needed was a vigorous woman with a map in her head and a gun in her hand. That is what Good News looked like. They needed to reject the false narrative, the religion of those that tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others, the Bad News of a God that condoned slavery.

If Liberation theology is understanding God from the perspective of those who are oppressed and in need of Liberation, then often the first Liberation needed is from the religion that claims that God is best understood by the victors.

This is the first thing that I have learned from Mayra, Ada, Micah and Jesus. Before you can offer Good News, you need to deal with the Bad News. Before healing can come, the violence must be halted.

This is the second thing that I have learned from Mayra, Ada, Micah and Jesus. Good News to one group can be Bad News to another group. The truth sounds like Bad News to those who profit from lies and apathy. It sounds like Good News to those who seek the truth.

This is the third thing that I have learned from Mayra, Ada, Micah and Jesus. The world needs this truth. In the end, Liberation is for everyone, salvation is for everyone, justice is for everyone. The last word is Good News for everyone. But we don't get there without struggling through some bad news.

This year our national church has restructured, our nation has marked 150 years, and our world has considered 500 years since the Reformation. In all these cases we have the chance to consider - what is Good News for today? Good News for the under-employed young adult, those in debt and struggling, those whose pension and retirement plans are under threat. What is Good News for the cultural Christian, the atheist, the agnostic, the spiritual but not religious, the ashamed and the afraid? What is Good News for people without a home, people with too many homes, people fleeing their home and people home alone?

The Good News that God loves us, God is with us, and God is working towards our freedom. This Good News is never spoken into a waiting vacuum or to a silent mass of listening people. It is spoken into a whirlwind of Bad News, of false images of God and divine emperors and manifest destiny. It is shouted down, criminalized, and dismissed as Fake News. But it is the promise of a better reality, God's desire for us, our neighbours and enemies.

I believe it is Good News. May it be so amongst us and around us. Amen.