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Wherever we access our news it is rarely 'just the facts plain and simple'. News is passed on with a commentary – or a tone – or even a picture that puts a particular gloss on the story it accompanies. Whenever somebody tells a piece of news their own understanding or misunderstanding, enthusiasm or lack of – their own bias becomes a part of that news and it affects the way that people hear it.

A couple of weeks ago something unexpectedly newsworthy figured in many conversations that I had. This was Michael Currie's address at the Royal Wedding – it was newsworthy first because the style of its delivery was unusual and possibly unexpected in the context, it was newsworthy because in all kinds of ways it touched a nerve for people and it was newsworthy because its content was engaging and appealing. It was Good News – and, I have to say that, speaking as a professional churchperson it is pretty rare for a sermon of any kind to be newsworthy – and even rarer – possibly unheard of for a sermon to be good news!

During this week there's been a bit of a twitter storm about a New York Times article much retweeted by politicians, social activists and some church people about the effect of austerity in the north of the country telling the story of a particular town Prescott. Other sources, including the Daily Mail, countered the story with every bit of good news they could find about the town – but some of this made local people despair because it was wrong! There wasn't much news about this – quite a bit of opinion and a great deal of misunderstood or misrepresented information.

However, the Good News Bad News approach to telling a News Story is a common one. Jeremiah is a prophet with quite a name for telling the bad news – well deserved as this evening's reading demonstrated. Given that the role and purpose of a prophet is to look at the signs of the times and interpret them in the light of God's guidance it is perhaps unsurprising that prophecy is often uncomfortable and frequently has a bad news feel about it. In chapter 5 Jeremiah is pretty much unmitigated bad news – there's just a moment in verse 5 when he hopes for better – these are poor folk without understanding – I'll go and ask a better class of people and they will surely know the ways of the Lord .... Sadly (but perhaps we are not surprised) he is disappointed!

In many ways Jeremiah's world sounds amazingly familiar – a society where it is hard to find a just and truthful person, guilty of every kind of sexual misdemeanour, setting false gods on pedestals. You would not look much further than your regular news source to find similar criticisms of our own society and you might want to make criticisms of your own. Fortunately for those whom he accuses Jeremiah's bad news is relieved by just a tiny glimmer of hope. This people will not, after all, be destroyed by their enemies instead they will receive a just punishment... "As you have forsaken me and served foreign gods in your land, so you shall serve strangers in a land that is not yours.

The New Testament reading from Luke's gospel reads a bit like one of those Good News Bad news stories. It goes like this:

Bad News – much loved servant of Centurion at deaths door  
Good News – famous healer enters town  
Bad news – healer not known to be a friend to Roman Centurions  
Good News- Jewish friends willing to plead his case  
More Good news – famous healer sets off for the Centurions house

But then this is derailed because the next news is not so much bad as well, just plain odd....

Centurion sends a message to healer telling him not to bother!!

In some ways this is not unlike the ‘American Archbishop preaches unexpected sermon at royal wedding’ headline..

The unexpected has an extraordinary power and the Centurions message for Jesus is certainly unexpected... Don’t bother to come ...

The rationale behind this extraordinary message is both logical and wise but above all demonstrates a deep understanding of authority properly used that is worth looking at closely.

The centurion recognises Jesus as someone, like him, who is working in relationship with authority – As the centurion understands it each of them commands authority and owes obedience to a higher authority. In particular the centurion has grasped that Jesus does not need to come to his house to heal the servant – he has the authority – if he wills the healing his physical location is irrelevant.

Usually in the gospel stories the crowd or the onlookers are amazed at the things that Jesus says and does – in this account it is Jesus who is amazed. He is amazed at the depth of understanding of this centurion. Amazed, perhaps, to hear such a depth of understanding from a totally unexpected source. This is undoubtedly a good man – generous and respected by the Jewish authorities – they were clearly more than willing to speak for him. Perhaps they recognised the depth of insight which went with the generosity that they commended to Jesus. In the Gospels it is often interesting to look and see what has gone just before. Close to the end of Luke chapter 6 we read these words: “There is no such thing as a good tree producing bad fruit, nor yet a bad tree producing good fruit. Good people produce good from the store within themselves – the words the mouth utters come from the overflowing of the heart.” This centurion did not need his well-connected friends to plead for him, he did not need Jesus to lay a hand on his servant - his love for that servant and his intuitive grasp of Jesus authority left Jesus himself amazed at the understanding that came from Centurions heart.

I wonder what the cause of Jesus surprise was – perhaps he was surprised to be proved right? After all

- he taught that people could be judged by their ‘fruit’ - their words and actions – and here was a man who proved that absolutely
- he said that he had come for people who were outside the Jewish community of faith – and here was a man who proved that he was right to expect to find a welcome and understanding in unexpected places

Or perhaps Jesus was surprised to be accepted rather than tested.

- he was used, even so early in his ministry, to people who, for good reasons, made endless demands on his time and energy and here was someone who didn’t need him to come

- he was expected to prove himself in a context of enthusiastic wonderment and here was someone who said, I know that this is what you do, please do it

I think this Centurion and Archbishop Currie have quite a bit in common.

They share a world view that is based on equality justice and compassion

They spoke the truth as they saw it from the heart

They surprised their hearers – and that gave their message more impact

They spoke about things that mattered

If we judged most of the news we receive by these criteria much, but not all of it would fail.

If we judge ourselves by these criteria in the way that we speak of what matters to us how would you and I measure up?

Do we speak of Jesus, of God – as having something to prove or do we speak knowing in our hearts that we expect healing and love and peace from the God who loves us?

Do we look at the world with eyes of compassion that seek equality and justice and speak the truth from our hearts when we do not see it?

Do we speak of things that matter to such an extent that the people who hear us sit up and listen and wonder...

Lord, open our hearts to the needs of your world and open our mouths to speak for you every day. Amen