

All Saints Talk for Sunday 4th August 2024

'The Danger of Hypocrisy' Dave Phillips

Acts 5:1-16

Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. With his wife's full knowledge, he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet.

Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied just to human beings but to God."

When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened. Then some young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him.

About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. Peter asked her, "Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?"

"Yes," she said, "that is the price?"

Peter said to her, "How could you conspire to test the spirit of the Lord? Listen! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also."

At that moment she fell down at his feet and died. Then the young men came in and, finding her dead, carried her out and buried her beside her husband. Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.

The Apostles Heal Many

12*The apostles performed many signs and wonders among the people. And all the believers used to meet together in Solomon's Colonnade. No one else dared join*

them, even though they were highly regarded by the people. Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number. As a result, people brought the sick into the streets and laid them on beds and mats so that at least Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he passed by. Crowds gathered also

from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing their sick and those tormented by impure spirits, and all of them were healed.

So, we've had the joys of family communal living together at New Wine and have all returned filled to the brim with exuberant joy, jubilation and passionate excitement as we wait to see what God has in store for us next as a church community.

Then we come together this morning and hear a sermon preached on Ananias and Sapphira!

I fear, at the end of this, to mis-quote the great PG Wodehouse, we'll all have, *"the look of one who had drunk from the cup of life and then found a dead beetle at the bottom!"*

Before we investigate this challenging passage, we need to look back and see what's been going on with the apostles to this point.

This is set right at the very start of the church. Jesus has been crucified and his resurrected body has ascended. We've had Pentecost, so the great wind of God's spirit had swept through Jesus' followers and filled them with a sense of God's presence and power. We heard from Emma last week how the disciples were determined in their efforts to carry out Jesus' great commission and, despite fierce opposition from the religious leaders, salvation through Christ alone was boldly and faithfully preached and the church was growing by the thousands.

Peter, who'd only weeks before broken down in tears because he'd lied and cursed and denied even knowing Jesus was now empowered by the spirit and was taking the prominent role in establishing this fledgling church.

Let's turn back to chapter four where we see how well things had been progressing:

Acts 4:32-37

The company of those who believed had one heart and soul. Nobody said that they owned their property; instead, they had everything in common. The apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus with great power, and great grace was upon all of them. For there was no needy person among them, since any who possessed land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sale and laid it at the feet of the apostles, who then gave to each according to their need.

Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, to whom the apostles gave the surname "Barnabas", (which means son of encouragement), sold some land which belonged to him, brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.

So here we have a social order which is working beautifully with everyone looking out for one

another, identifying needs within the community and responding accordingly. Not through any direct orders to do so, but purely on a voluntary basis through a God-given desire to care for the welfare of the local community.

We really did have a taste of this at New Wine!

Not only were our souls being nourished through prayer support, inspired teaching and collective worship. Around the camp, people were generously cooking more food than was necessary to feed their families and offering it to those around them. People were making cups of tea and coffee and asking whether those in neighbouring tents would like to join them. People were popping off to the shop and asking whether anything was required by anyone else. There was always an offer of help with setting up and packing away.

It all contributed to the establishment of a wonderful multi-generational fellowship community, united in love for Jesus and for one another.

When life is lived in this way, what could possibly go wrong???!!!

When life is lived in this way, not an awful lot.

Unfortunately, however, whilst this may be a tiny window, through which we get a glimpse of the life to come, we know we aren't there yet. For now, we still inhabit a world that is corrupted by the sinful human heart. As J John, in his own inimitable way puts it:

"The heart of the human problem is the problem of the human heart".

That's the root cause of so much that's wrong in the world today; our sinful heart. It pollutes our relationships; it pollutes our communities; it pollutes our society; it pollutes the whole world.

I'm sorry to say that even New Wine fell victim to our sinful nature. There was a marquis for communal use which, among other things offered charging points for those people requiring power to charge their devices. Very sadly, a small number of devices went missing!

As disappointing as this news is, we really shouldn't be surprised! We are human after all.

In Romans 7, Paul describes how, even if we know what is right and desire to do it, our "sinful nature" sabotages our efforts, "For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out" (Rom.7:18).

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, (Rom.3:23)

Indeed, there is not a righteous man on earth who continually does good and has never sinned (Ecclesiastes 7:20)

If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us (1John1:8)

There are so many more: our inability to behave ourselves in a manner according to our calling is very well documented!

So, let's focus now on Ananias and Sapphira.

I have to say, hand on heart that I have great sympathy for them!

On first reading this passage, it is evident that we have two people sharing a life together, keen to be numbered in the fellowship of believers and they go so far as to sell some property to give some of the proceeds away to the greater good. Surely this is a very generous act and one which deserves appreciation and respect. I wonder how many of us today would be equally as generous with a windfall.

The difficulty, of course, was that this great act of charity came with a great big lie. As the giving of the gift was directly after Barnabas had won the esteem of the church by so generously giving **all** his money away, it's likely that Ananias and Sapphira's **pride** led to the lie, simply to win the same high accolade. We can almost hear them saying to one another,

*"It doesn't really matter whether we're good Christians, we just want people to think we're good Christians! Look how much everyone now loves Barnabas, if **we pretend** we've given away all **our** money too, they'll love us just as much and our names will be in the Bible so everyone will forever know how wonderful we are!"*

It's as though the image of spirituality was more important than the reality of spirituality.

I wonder if, two thousand years later, things have really changed that much, if we're honest.

It's perhaps a little too easy to be happy with the **image** of living a spiritual life, rather than the **reality** of living a spiritual life. Image is everything, particularly now in a world so dominated by social media, with its barrage of photos and video

clips of happiness and perfection which can so often belie a quite different reality.

I wonder if I'm the only person here this morning who occasionally has a cross word with the family in the car on the way to church. Maybe someone wasn't ready in time and we're running late again; you can cut the atmosphere with a knife. The cross words can continue right up to the church door and then there's the sweet mask of serenity as we're greeted by the welcome team on the way in! I'm sure we'd be far better off if we were a little more authentic and said exactly how things had been on such mornings. On a particularly challenging morning we might even ask for prayer. Why wouldn't we? What are we afraid of? Being asked to leave because we aren't perfect?

Tired of having to endure the flawed characters in church, A man is said to have approached the great mid-nineteenth century Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon to seek his help in finding a perfect group of God's people. Spurgeon told him that, if he were to find such a group, he wasn't to join it, for, if he did, it wouldn't be perfect anymore.

None of us are perfect.

None of us can ever be perfect,

but all of us can choose to always be honest.

If we're serious about following Jesus and we want to enjoy a life in all its fullness with him, it's simply not possible if we don't at least strive to live a life of integrity. Maybe it would be helpful if we were to establish some time at the end of each day to tell Jesus how the day has been. Give him the day's news. That might initiate some level of accountability.

If that sounds daunting, I don't think it should be. Don't forget the promises of Romans 8:38 when we read that nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus. God knows that his perfect creation is fallen, and we play our part in its fallenness.

Through Christ we are shown the way to reconciliation and fulfilment. The enormity of what Jesus did for us on the cross meant that we're saved from the judgment we deserve.

There are still consequences, however to our sin and none of us are immune to Satan's temptations. He's still active in the world trying to make us stumble.

1 Peter 5:8, *"Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the Devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour"*.

Every time we do something we know to have been wrong, or to say something we know we shouldn't have said, we are weakened.

We are weakened as ambassadors for Christ; we are weakened in our relationships; we are weakened in our self-respect; and importantly, we are weakened in our relationship with Jesus.

How is it possible to have a meaningful and fulfilling relationship with someone when you know you're being unfaithful?

The danger of hypocrisy and lies and deceit is at the heart of God's message to us in this passage this morning. Ananias and Sapphira were generous in their giving. They were under no obligation to give anything. God didn't love them any more or less depending on the size of their gift. God would still love them if they gave absolutely nothing at all! The most serious thing here was the lie. It didn't matter at all that some of the money was held back. It wasn't mandatory to give everything. In verse four, Peter is incredulous when he asks, "Didn't the money belong to you before the land was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied to men, but to God."

While we're here building God's Kingdom on earth, there is quite simply no room for sin. However, with the quality of the builders employed to undertake the task, it's inevitable that sin will need to be challenged from time to time. We have an example in Acts 5 demonstrating how seriously God takes the integrity of the church.

While it's difficult for us to comprehend the way God's judgment was exercised, the fact that the sin was dealt with so quickly shows how important it is that issues within the church aren't left to fester and pollute. Because this particular sin was identified and dealt with quickly, the reputation of the church remained intact, and it continued to grow.

As the world is looking increasingly for a renewed sense of meaning and purpose, the church is uniquely placed through the teaching of sound biblical values to provide a life-enriching moral compass, but our teaching will be deemed irrelevant if it is not backed up by our actions. We must follow God's inner prompts and not be afraid to speak out in unity for what we know to be true, even when the truth is deemed counter cultural in our contemporary society.

A unified voice, spoken with conviction and integrity is essential if we are to bring about a meaningful and lasting revival.

Paul instructs us in Ephesians 4:25,

"Therefore, each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbour, for we are all members of one body"

So, I'm very sorry for the dead beetle! Take heart that we're living under God's grace, and we're very much loved. But it's hard to speak on the hypocrisy of Ananias and Sapphira and the potential harm it could have caused the early church without getting a little unsettled.

Let's pray:

Heavenly Father, thank you for your word to us today. Lord, we know we're all capable of falling victim to the temptation of sin in so many ways and we thank you for your grace when we come to you with repentant hearts. Father, may our faithful lives be authentic. May we be filled with integrity. Remove anything in us which isn't of you, Lord, and may our lives be used in fruitful ministry as we seek to build your kingdom in the places we inhabit. In Jesus' name, Amen