

Josh 7:1, 16-26, Acts 4:32-5:11

They were a Holy Community

A certain woman, preparing to entertain guests, went to a small grocery store to buy food. She stopped at the meat counter and asked the attendant for a large chicken. He reached down into the cold storage compartment, grabbed the last chicken he had, and placed it on the scale. "This one weighs four pounds, ma'am," he said. "I'm not sure that will be enough," the woman replied. "Don't you have a bigger one?" The attendant put the chicken back into the compartment, pretended to search through the melting ice for another one, and then brought out the same bird, discreetly applying some finger pressure to the scale. "Ah," he said with a smile, "this one weighs six pounds." "I'm just not sure," the woman said with a frown. "I'll tell you what—wrap them both up for me!" Sin has a habit of catching up with us; this is what we will see in this section of Acts.

One of the great things about the bible is that it tells things as they are. We have marvelled so far on our journey through Acts at the faith of the disciples and the power of the Holy Spirit. It is perhaps with something of a jolt that we come upon today's account of events and we find ourselves asking the question, what is going on?

There are places in the bible where the chapter breaks are not always helpful; we must remember that when the accounts were first written they did not have the chapter and verse breaks that our modern translations have, these were added much later to help us find parts within the bible. In the same way the sub-headings that we see in the NIV are not to be found in the original Greek or Hebrew. There is no doubt that Luke's original intention was that the Barnabas section and the Ananias and Sapphira section should be read together.

Luke begins this section by reaffirming to us what he had said in chapter 2. You will remember I'm sure that the believing community were described as, "devoting themselves to the apostle's teaching, and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." In the reading before us this morning we see that, "All the believers were one in heart and mind. No-one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had."³³ With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all.³⁴ There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales³⁵ and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need."

At first glance this can look a bit like Marxism before Marx. That is very definitely not the case. This is not some Governmental central plan that forces everybody to conform to a particular pattern and mindset; this is the fulfilment of one of God's great promises.

In Deuteronomy 15 we read, “At the end of every seven years you must cancel debts. ²This is how it is to be done: Every creditor shall cancel the loan he has made to his fellow Israelite. He shall not require payment from his fellow Israelite or brother, because the Lord’s time for cancelling debts has been proclaimed. ³You may require payment from a foreigner, but you must cancel any debt your brother owes you. ⁴However, there should be no poor among you, for in the land the Lord your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, he will richly bless you.” This new community of believers in Jerusalem is the fulfilment of this command and promise, the people seek to look after each other and supply each other’s needs because of the great debt that has been paid for them by The Lord Jesus Himself.

There was no compulsion, no necessity to sell all or indeed any of one’s positions and lay them at the feet of the apostles, but there was a rich reward for those who did.

Luke the master story teller now introduces us to the former Levite who hailed from Cyprus. Barnabas, as he came to be known, becomes an important character in the account of Acts as we move forward, for the time being all we need to know is that he is so overwhelmed with love for God and for the community of believers that he sells a field and gives all of the money to the apostles to distribute to those who were in need.

Barnabas’ action was not necessarily the norm, which is why Luke holds him up for us as a special example, not the norm, but to be highly praised, word undoubtedly got out of his and others selfless acts of giving and Satan saw an opportunity.

It is undoubtedly true that the apparent villains of the piece Ananias and Sapphira acted out of wrong motives. They had seen the esteem that Barnabas and others were held in by those within the community and they wanted the same for themselves. They wanted to be associated with that level of self-sacrifice but didn’t want to face the hardship that this course of action could bring.

The important point to note in this is that the husband and wife team had agreed together what they were going to do. This was a premeditated act of deceit and it is that premeditation that is a major factor here.

The sin of Ananias and Sapphira is not that they kept some of the money, no it is the fact that they said that they had given it all. When Peter accuses Ananias of keeping some of the money for himself, the word that is being used is actually to embezzle. What this means is that the couple had told the Apostles that they were going to sell the land and give them the money but didn’t keep their word.

Peter reminding Ananias that the money was his in the first place and was therefore at liberty to do with it whatever he wanted, clearly shows us that keeping the money was not the issue; the real issue is the lying. Peter then goes onto say, “you have not lied to men but to God.”

This is the second of Satan's methods that he brings to bear in an attempt to stop the fledgling church in its tracks. He is, as we know, the father of Lies, and as such he now insights this couple to lie to the church in order to gain for themselves an enhanced reputation. Earlier we saw how he attempted to bully the church into submission, now he is attempting to ruin its reputation. He knows that once lying starts within the community it will grow and grow until eventually the people both within the community and those outside it will not be able to trust anymore.

Peter, who as we know, is full of the Holy Spirit, is able to both discern the lie and to know the source of it. "How is it that Satan has so filled your heart?" Peter asks the hapless and helpless Ananias.

The Spirit filled leader cuts right through the pretence to the heart of the matter; he has received a word of knowledge from the Spirit and now uses that knowledge to challenge the man standing before him.

Spurgeon told the story of how one day when he was preaching he found himself unaccountably denouncing someone in the congregation whom he didn't know. Words came into his mouth describing how this man was cheating his employer, stealing from him and apparently getting away with it. He challenged the man to repent at once, or he would be found out.

After the service a young man came to Spurgeon and begged him not to tell his employer. Full restitution was made and the man repented. Spurgeon was left pondering how without asking for it he had been given a word of knowledge about someone he didn't know.

There are many similar stories down through the history of the church of how in times of revival and outpouring of the Spirit; that Spirit works in such powerful and amazing ways to cut through all of our defences and show us our need of God and Jesus. That is one of the roles of the Spirit and that is why all of us as believers need to be filled with that Spirit so that we can speak into people's lives with words of challenge and of encouragement.

In any revival movement there is always an increased sense and presence of holiness. Peter and the others were full of the Holy Spirit. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 6:19, "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; ²⁰you were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your body." We are the new temple, each one of us is called to be holy just as the temple was holy.

The people in the time of Joshua were also called to holy; as we heard earlier Achan did not heed that call for holiness and let the trappings of this world entice him. As a result of his sin the whole community suffered defeat. The only cure for this was the removal of that sin from the community, in the same way we see with the death of Ananias and Sapphira the removal of that sin from the holy community.

Ananias and Sapphira were guilty of taking God for granted; they were treating Him as some sort of domesticated being, a God who would operate on their terms and do the things that they wanted when they wanted.

In C.S. Lewis's "The lion the witch and the wardrobe, we get the following interchange.

'If there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than me or else just silly.'

'Then he isn't safe?' asked Lucy.

'Safe?' said Mr. Beaver. 'Don't you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you.'

Ananias and Sapphira had forgotten that the King of the Universe is not safe but that He is good and He is Holy and they paid the price for their lack of vision and wisdom.

Let us not get too smug or superior at this point, we may not be being struck down in the same way that this couple were, we may not be withholding funds that we promised to Apostles but are we guilty in other ways?

Do we, like them, limit our God in our understanding, do we say God doesn't work like that, or God can't do that, or it's ok if I do this particular thing because God won't know? If God is truly God then He is capable of doing anything, seeing anything, knowing anything. We have already seen in our studies in Acts how He has enabled uneducated fisherman to become fluent linguists, and how ordinary people were given the ability to heal a man who had been born paralysed.

The religious leaders of the time said, "God doesn't do that" but He did. Satan was trying to blind the eyes of those in authority to the power of the one who is truly the ruler of creation. His strategy hasn't changed in the intervening years, he still tells lies and he still tries to blind people to the power of the Holy Spirit, and indeed to his own sorry existence.

Even the people of God have subconsciously learnt to expect little of God; after all if we expect little, we have little chance of being disappointed. The Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus is challenging us here and in this country as a whole to seek Him and expect more of Him.

Our God is a holy God and calls His people to holiness, to give all of their lives over to Him in gladness and joy, not because we have to but because we want to. To give our tithes and offerings to Him, not because it will make us look good in the sight of everybody else but because we just love the Lord so much that we want to give Him everything.

If we truly want to see the kingdom of God grow in this place, and I believe that we do, then we must allow God to do what needs to be done, both within our individual

lives and our corporate life. This may at times be uncomfortable, change and challenge often causes discomfort. In the same way that hard soil has to be ploughed and broken up before new seeds can be sewn and new harvests reaped, so the people of God need from time to time to have their hearts re-broken and to come afresh to The Holy one and say have your way in my life, in our lives. As we do this we will be filled with the Spirit we will develop those fruit of the Spirit that mark us out as holy people, we will be revived and we will see revival in our village, our county, our country and our world.