

ACTS 5.1-11: ANANIAS AND SAPPHIRA

[Chelmsford: Café Church 8/2/09]

This evening I want us to look at a most unattractive story – the story of Ananias and Sapphira. Ananias, incidentally, means “the Lord is gracious”; while Sapphira means “beautiful”. Alas, there is nothing gracious or beautiful about this story. It’s a story most preachers prefer to skip – and yet we shall see that it is a story with lessons to teach us.

The story begins with the word BUT: “**But there was a man named Ananias, who with his wife Sapphira sold some property that belonged to them. But with his wife’s agreement he kept part of the money for himself and handed over the rest to the apostles**” (Acts 5.1-2). The little word ‘but’ indicates that this is a story of contrasts. Ananias and his wife Sapphira are being contrasted with Barnabas.

For in the previous chapter we learn that Barnabas too had a field – he too sold it – he too brought the money and handed it over to the apostles – save in his case, he gave all the money he had made, rather than just some of the money.

Although Barnabas may have been particularly generous, it would appear that he was typical of the church in general: for Luke tells us that “**those who owned fields or houses would sell them, bring the money received from the sale, and had it over to the apostles; and the money was distributed to each one according to his need**” (4.34,35).

Incidentally, Luke is not saying that the first Christians sold all their property – but what he does imply is that they gave all the proceeds of what they did sell. It was a time of amazing generosity.

BUT alas, Ananias and Sapphira, failed to show the same kind of generosity.

1, Enthusiasm is not enough

Actually I feel sorry for Ananias and Sapphira

They are often depicted as a loathsome couple – preachers have described them as mean, greedy, shabby people. Peterson, for instance, in his translation speaks in a very pejorative way of Sapphira “conniving”, and Ananias “pulling a trick”. You get the impression that they were pretty dreadful people - but in fact, I think they were fairly ordinary people, who ended up doing something dreadful.

After all, if they had really been mean, greedy, shabby people, then they wouldn’t have given anything at all to the church.

I think we should look a little more kindly upon them. I think they may well have had the best of intentions. Here they were a newly converted couple, swept along on a tide of enthusiasm. They saw Barnabas and others selling property and giving money to the church, and on an impulse they decided to do the same.

But then something went wrong – for once they had the cash from the sale in their hands, they found themselves unable to part with it. In the words of Luke: “**Ananias... with his wife’s agreement kept part of the money for himself and handed over the rest to the apostles**” (5.2)

I wonder, what went through their mind?

Did they suddenly become fearful for the future – they wondered what would happen to them when they became old, if they gave away all their assets.

Or perhaps they suddenly became aware of their responsibilities to their children, or perhaps some other relative who was in need?

Or did they suddenly doubt whether their money was really going to a good cause - did these poor Christians in their church really deserve their money?

Whatever, in one way or another they had second thoughts, and their enthusiasm began to wane.

Probably the truth of the matter is that they had failed to count the cost of being followers of the Lord Jesus.

I am reminded of the parable Jesus once told of the tower builder: **“If one of you is planning to build a tower, you sit down first and work out what it will cost, to see if you have enough money to finish the job. If you don’t, you will not be able to finish the tower after laying the foundation; and all who see what happened will laugh at you....”** Jesus added: **“In the same way, none of you can be my disciple unless you give up everything you have”** (Lk 14.28-29, 33)

Ananias and Sapphira were perhaps not all that different from some of us.

I wonder, have you ever had the experience of being filled with the best of intentions, and then found you were unable to carry out those intentions?

Ananias & Sapphira had difficulty with money – but so too have many Christians.

We hear perhaps a sermon on giving – as the sermon comes to an end we say to ourselves, ‘Yes, I will tithe, I will gladly give generously to God’s work’, but when it comes down to actually writing the standing the order or giving the money, that is another matter – with the result that perhaps instead of giving 10% we give just 5%.

Enthusiasm is not enough. Commitment is needed.

QUESTIONS:

- Do you have any sympathy for Ananias and Sapphira?
- Why is it that so many of us find it so difficult to give generously, and sacrificially?

2. God doesn’t demand instant perfection

We sometimes say *‘Jesus is either Lord of all, or he is not at all’*.

If I am honest, it’s the kind of thing I have said in my sermons in the past.

But on reflection, I wonder whether that is true? The reality for most of us is that we are in the process of making Jesus Lord of our lives.

And I dare to believe that God understands. In the words of one of my friends, God is not a *‘neurotic perfectionist’* (Rowland Croucher). God accepts us as we are.

The fact of the matter is that there has never been a perfect church.

Indeed, as the story goes, if you find one, don’t join it, because you will spoil it.

None of us are perfect – but, God willing, we are growing in grace.

Although it would have been nice for Ananias and Sapphira to have given all the money they had made on the field, they didn't have to.

Listen to what Peter had to say: **“Before you sold the property, it belonged to you; and after you sold it the money was yours”** (Acts 5.4). As far as Peter was concerned, Ananias was not duty-bound to give every penny he had made. Peter would no doubt have agreed with the Apostle Paul when he wrote to the church in Corinth: **“You should each give... as you have decided, not with regret or out of a sense of duty; for God loves the one who gives gladly”** (2 Cor 9.7).

God does not demand instant perfection.

Ananias and Sapphira didn't die because they didn't give their all to God – as we shall see later, they died because they lied to God and his church.

QUESTION:

- Just imagine if Ananias and Sapphira had said to Peter: *“We would like to be able to show the kind of trust and generosity which Barnabas showed. But unfortunately we are still struggling with working out our commitment to Christ. All we can do now is to give part of the proceeds. Would you help us grow toward what we would like to become?”* How can we help one another to grow in grace? How can we encourage one another to become more generous in our giving?

3. Hypocrisy is of the Devil

Ananias and Sapphira were not condemned for their thoughtless enthusiasm – nor were they condemned for their failure to give their all. Their cardinal sin was that of hypocrisy. They pretended to be fully committed to Jesus, but were not.

“Peter said to him, ‘Ananias, why did you let Satan take control of you and make you lie to the Holy Spirit by keeping part of the money you received for the property? You have not lied to human beings – you have lied to God’ (Acts 5.3-4)

Did Ananias actually say to Peter that he was giving his all? Luke doesn't tell us. However, we can be hypocrites not just in the things we say, but also the things we do. We can seek to give the impression that we are out-and-out Christians, whereas in fact we are far from that.

How Peter knew that Ananias was pretending to be more generous than he actually was, we don't know. Maybe he had heard on the grapevine the actual price Ananias had got for his property; maybe there was a certain shiftiness in the way in which Ananias spoke which suddenly made Peter realise that things were not as they seemed; or maybe Peter suddenly had a flash of prophetic insight. Whatever, he realised that Ananias was pretending to be more generous than he actually was.

Peter was incensed. Ananias, **“you have not lied to human beings – you have lied to God”**. As far as Peter was concerned, Ananias was not just seeking to deceive the

church, but also seeking to deceive God. Peter saw Ananias' sin in pretty stark black-and-white terms. So much so, that he accused Ananias of being a tool of Satan.

Wow! I wonder whether we would have taken such a serious view of Ananias' sin. Our trouble is that we live in a society where not telling the full truth is the norm. Our politicians, for instance, are constantly telling half-truths – indeed, it is not just our politicians. I've known Christian leaders to engage in spinning, which is actually a form of lying.

But just as Jesus had no room for hypocrisy, neither did Peter.

The fact is that pretence is a form of lying and it kills the life of a church.

For first and foremost the church is about fellowship – and by fellowship I mean a sharing of our life together.

Its about one anotherness – it is about loving one another, caring for one another, praying for one another, bearing one another's burdens.

If we cannot be truly honest with one another, then the very fellowship of the church is at stake.

What was at stake was the fellowship of the church: if we cannot be truly honest & open with one another, then church becomes a sham.

QUESTION:

- How honest and open are we as a church? Are some of us guilty of hypocrisy? What would Peter have to say about us and our church?

4. Be sure your sin will find you out

Ebenezer, the Strict and Particular Baptist Church on the corner of New London Rd and Parkway, often displays on its notice board words taken from Num 32.23: "**Be sure your sin will find you out**" –or as the GNB puts it: "**Make no mistake about it; you will be punished for your sin**". This was certainly Ananias' experience.

"As soon as Ananias heard this, he fell down dead; and all who heard about it were terrified. The young men came in, wrapped up his body, carried him out and buried him" (Acts 5.5-6)

Did Peter actually condemn Ananias to death? I don't think so.

All Peter did was to confront Ananias with his sin.

Peter may well have been as surprised and shocked as everybody else was to see Ananias die before him.

The temptation we face at this point is to rationalise Ananias' death and to say he died of heart failure due to the shock of being find out. Although that may be true, there is a deeper theological point, and that is that God does punish sinners. True, he does not normally punish sinners in such a dramatic and instant manner, but punish he does. In the words of Paul: "**sin pays a wage – death**" (Rom 6.23). We cannot sin with impunity – eventually our sin will find us out – we will be punished for our sin.

QUESTION:

- It has been said, “Christians today so luxuriate in the love and grace of God that they do not take seriously the consequences of deliberate sinning”. Is this true? To what extent do we just assume that God will forgive us, whatever?
- To what extent are we aware when we sin?

5. Yet another sinner is disciplined!

But the story doesn't end with Ananias' death.

Three hours later Sapphira enters upon the scene – apparently nobody had bothered to tell her of her husband's death – nor had she been invited to the funeral.

Just imagine the sense of horror that must have descended upon the ordinary church members, when Sapphira wanders on – and even more so when Peter asks her: **“Tell me, was this the full amount you and your husband received for your property”** (Acts 5.8). What on earth was she going to say?

I find it significant that Sapphira is treated somewhat from her husband.

Peter gives Sapphira an opportunity to come clean and repent.

Perhaps it was assumed that Ananias was mainly responsible for the actual selling of the property, even although Sapphira was in on the plan from the outset.

“Was this the full amount?” Sapphira could have told the truth and showed that she was sorry for the false impression that she and her husband had given – but as it was, she decided to stand by the original story. **“Yes”**, she answered, **“the full amount”**.

To be fair to her, maybe she was just being loyal to her husband – for she had no idea that her husband was dead.

Peter then somewhat brutally reveals what had happened to Ananias: **“The men who buried your husband are now at the door, and they will carry you out too!”**. Just imagine the shock the news of her husband's death must have been. Not surprisingly **“at once she fell down at his feet and died”**

CS Lewis, in his book *The Problem of Pain*, says that God's attitude to sin is analogous to that of a surgeon to cancer. The destructive tissue has to be removed. God's judgement is love at work destroying what is destroying us. God's judgement here may have saved the church – but it didn't alas save Ananias & Sapphira

No wonder we read: **“The whole church and all the others who heard of this were terrified”** (Acts 5.11). It was a pretty terrible end.

QUESTION

- According to the Reformers of the 16th century ‘discipline’ was one of the three vital features of any genuine church: they maintained that where the Word of God is rightly preached, the sacraments are rightly administered, and discipline is rightly exercised, there is the church. Indeed, the Anabaptist theologian Balthasar Hubmaier declared: *“Where this is lacking, there is certainly no church, even if baptism and the supper of Christ are practised”*. What does this case of church discipline have to say to us today? Have we grown too lax – or have we become more loving?