

A Warning and An Example

Acts 4:32-5:11

The story of Ananias and Sapphira is a warning. Luke put it into his book of Acts to remind Theophilus, his reader - and any other readers - that you don't mess around with God. They do, and so you have the archetypal picture of God blasting someone from on high. If there isn't a flash of lightning, or a thunder-clap you almost feel that there should be, because this is one of the very few places where we see God taking direct action against a human being, and it is upon this that the cartoon and folk versions of looking up to the sky and waiting for God to be drastic is based.

It is a warning. But that is only part of the story. The first part of what we read deals with the on-going growth of the early church, growth in numbers and growth in faith. They are being blessed by God, and if anyone was inclined to doubt that, then such doubts should be put to rest by Luke's insistence that "There was not a needy person among them..." (v:34). The Jewish reader, or the Jewish convert, familiar with Hebrew scripture, on reading that would be reminded of one of the promises recorded in the book of Deuteronomy. There, through Moses, God says "When the Lord blesses you in your land there will be no needy person among you." (Deuteronomy 15:4). When Moses said this, and in all the years of their reading it, very likely no one interpreted it as being fulfilled in the way that it was. Most likely it was interpreted as God making the whole nation rich as individuals - so that everyone could keep all he had and not need to look after anyone else, because all would have plenty.

This is what is at the heart of what is called a Prosperity Gospel - the idea that if you obey God he will make you rich - you, yourself as an individual. You don't hear it so much in this country any more, but you can still hear it, even - especially - on the airwaves in America. You obey God and he will take care of your business and make you rich. The corollary of that is that if you are not rich, perhaps you are not obeying God fully.

But this is not how God's promise came to be fulfilled. It wasn't done by God enriching individuals, but by everyone sharing. No one was rich, but no one was in need, which is the point. God blesses them with his Spirit, with his love, with his Son and with his salvation and all this outpouring of generosity from God causes the Christians to want to share. And then God's blessing grows in their sharing, and they see it by the fact that there is no needy person among them, because Christian love has seen to it that there will not be. That's how it worked then, on a fairly small scale, and that is the only way it will work now: by those who have giving, giving, giving - and giving up, for love of God and love of God's children. God's ideal is not that all will be rich - for riches tend to engender selfishness. God's ideal is that there should be no one in need.

And so they give, not just their loose change, but all they have. They sell lands and houses and put the proceeds at the apostles' feet. This may mean literally or figuratively, but the effect is the same: they were trusting the apostles to see that the money is properly used: they are putting themselves and their gifts under the apostles' authority.

We are told that all of them did that, and then we are given one specific example - and example showing someone who is later to reappear in the story. Joseph sells his

lands and gives the money to the church. The apostles are pleased with him and encouraged by his act, and so they give him a new name: Barnabas, the son of encouragement.

But Ananias has a different motivation. We are not told exactly why he and his wife acted as they did. No one was told that they had to sell and give, or give all; it was just how most of them felt about this great good news, this wonderful new way of living. Maybe Ananias saw how the apostles smiled on those who gave. Maybe he wanted the recognition that Barnabas got - being on nick-naming terms with the leaders. Maybe - almost certainly - he wanted to look good, as good as Barnabas and the others. But he hadn't really taken on the whole gospel. His gift was not inspired by God's Spirit, or by the thankfulness of a redeemed heart. He was giving to get - not to get materially - he was still giving a substantial sum - but to get recognition, perhaps prestige. He thought he could buy his way into position in the church.

And so this is a story of contrast and of warning.

Why do we give? Is it because we think God needs it, and can't do without it, so we can feel in God's and the church's debt? Why do we give?

Listen to what God had to say, when he spoke through Asaph, the poet, to those who worshipped in the Jerusalem temple:

Read Psalm 50:7-15

“Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving.” If we give from any other motive than to thank God, then it's easy for things to become twisted. Even if we give because we hope to be able to help those who have little, it is too easy for us to begin to think of ourselves as being better than we are, because we give; it's too easy for us to become patronising; it's too easy, as has been seen in the way that Western institutions and nations have imposed conditions on developing countries, too easy to make the gift conditional and assume that giving gives the giver rights over the recipient. Give from thankfulness to God.

Ananias and Sapphira did not, and so Luke uses the same phrase of them as has earlier been used of Judas: Satan has entered their hearts. Like Judas, they broke the fellowship by seeking something of their own. And the couple's biggest mistake was to think that the church was just another human institution, that the usual rules and the usual blind-spots would apply. Peter negates that when he says: “You did not lie to us but to God!”

I wonder what it was like for Peter? Did he know with a calm and undeniable inner certainty that there was trickery going on here. Or was it one of these moments when he was putting his faith on the line? Did he look at Ananias and notice that he is blinking too often and sweating slightly more than the day requires, that he refuses to meet his eyes? Had he any idea what would happen when Ananias persisted in his deception? You notice he doesn't call down God's judgment; it just happens. The early church put a lot of trust in the apostles, to be just and fair, and to lead them in Jesus' way, and this was a test of that. If Ananias got away with his deception, then later he could undermine the Apostles' authority.

But the church is not just another human institution, however much it may look

like it at times. The church is the body of Christ on earth, and God has put his Spirit, his life in it. One of the gifts of the Spirit is wisdom and discernment, and we certainly need that as we seek to work with each other to bringing the Kingdom of God.

The story of Ananias and Sapphira is, as we said, a warning. God is not to be approached casually. Here is how the poet Asaph continues this theme:

Read Psalm 50:16-22

“You thought that I was one like yourself.” But God is not. God does not need us to give to him, either in the way of food and drink, as some of the temple worshippers were supposing, or in the way of pecuniary resources - money in other words. God owns the cattle on a thousand hills and he is quite capable of, for instance, making there be an abundance for all.

A scholar on Psalm 50, Robert Davidson, made this comment: *“God would still be God if we offered him nothing, but we would not be truly human if we did not make an offering.”* I read Scripture and look at the world around us, as I hear news from all over the world and then look at our own country, and increasingly I am convinced that the challenge to the West, to us, is in our giving. Last Sunday night I heard the report from the team who went to Malawi, and one of the things they said, as you always hear from such visits, is how generous the people were - to them, to the church to each other. The Christians of Zomba may not have much money but they work and they work to give and to give themselves and their energy to those who need. But we give what we can spare, what we won't miss. It is easier to give, easier to share somehow, if you have nothing to start with. But just because it is hard for us doesn't mean that we can stop trying.

We live in a greedy culture. We are expected to have, to service and improve what we have and to want more. To want to be rich is the expected thing. But God calls us to sacrifice of thanksgiving, to offerings of more than we think we can give. Can we be truly counter-cultural and trust God that if we do he will bless us, as he blessed the early church so that there will be no needy person? Can we trust each other to work together honestly?

The very last verse of Psalm 50 says this: *“Those who bring thanksgiving as their sacrifice honour me; to those who go the right way I will show the salvation of God.”* May we be those who bring a sacrifice of thanksgiving, not just a throw-away gift.