

TAKE TIME OUT – *Pastoral Retreat*

Half Acre, Horton Heath, Wimborne, Dorset, BH21 7JS
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Sunday Scriptures: 11th April 2021

Acts 5:1-11 *Ananias and Sapphira*

¹But a man named Ananias, with the consent of his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property; ²with his wife's knowledge, he kept back some of the proceeds, and brought only a part and laid it at the apostles' feet. ³'Ananias,' Peter asked, 'Why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back part of the proceeds of the land? ⁴While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, were not the proceeds at your disposal? How is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You did not lie to us but to God!' ⁵Now when Ananias heard these words, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard of it. ⁶The young men came and wrapped up his body, then carried him out and buried him. ⁷After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. ⁸Peter said to her, 'Tell me whether you and your husband sold the land and for such a price.' And she said, 'Yes that was the price.' ⁹Then Peter said to her, 'How is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out.' ¹⁰Immediately she fell down at his feet and died. When the young men came in they found her dead, so they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. ¹¹And great fear seized the whole church and all who heard of these things.

Reflection:

Having come through the traumatic events of Christ's crucifixion and the joy of His resurrection, the people of God now focus on building the Church. It is important to note that the previous verses tell us; 'those who believed were of one heart and soul' and that, 'everything they owned was held in common' (4:32). This is the first mention of the Church (Gk., 'ekklesia'), meaning the 'assembly' or 'assembly of believers' (5:11), as Israel was likewise called (Deut 4:10; 9:10; 18:16; 23:1-2). It seems significantly important, as we begin to emerge out of lockdown, to remind ourselves of how the people of God rose, like a phoenix from the ashes, to begin anew. Jesus had demonstrated what God wants and taught the people how to achieve it, both physically and spiritually. Now it was up to those faithful to God's Word to form the Body of Christ, His Church. Throughout history, 'the Church' has risen in faith and witnessed great outpourings of the Spirit in building the body of Christ. Sadly too, we have seen those vibrant beginnings slowly crushed by deceit, division, and power plays for human control. This record of the very beginning of Christ's Church rising up into the house of God as a beacon of hope and sanctuary for Truth, justice and righteousness, teaches a central lesson. In the midst of coming together, caring and sharing without fear or favour in generosity of heart, mind and soul, we see Satan's spiteful machinations. Lesson one; wherever God's people are obedient to His Word and faithfully following the example of Jesus, they will also find evil lurking in the shadows looking for opportunities to deceive and destroy. *Where might Satan find opportunity to deceive in your life? In what phase of destruction or growth might our experience of 'Church' be today? How might we discern the answers to these questions?*

Satan needs to be recognised and rejected in all his subtle guises of deception if the Body of Christ is to remain pure. The apostles knew this and insisted on openness and honesty above all things. They demonstrated no fear or favour, only boldness of faith to deliver justice through discerned judgement in accord with the Word of God and inspiration of the Holy Spirit. It is not what we do or say that will destroy our soul but what we think and desire in our heart. The apostles understood that the people of the new emerging Christian Church

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had both spiritual and physical needs. They began by first serving their spiritual needs through teaching what they had witnessed and experienced of Jesus Christ. They told of His obedience to the Word of God and how He applied it to everyday living. The foundation of their faith was contained in the divine conception, virgin birth, death and resurrection of Jesus, the Son of God. All believed in the physical resurrection of Christ; a Truth they embraced without question. This united them all in one common goal; they had vision and direction. Their faith combined with unity for the common good kept them living and discerning within God's will and purpose as equals. As a result they were blessed with the grace and providence of God and all their needs were met. *What do we fear? Who do we favour? What do we believe?*

Differences of opinion are inevitable as all human beings are influenced by a corrupt and fallen world. However, when conflict is handled in righteousness it can prove helpful for healthy growth, because situations will be handled with care and grace. It is always good to do right, especially when confronted with wrong. A wise aid to discernment was passed to me recently to ask ourselves: 'Is this the right thing to do?' and 'Are we doing it right?' Unity within the Body of Christ in obedience to God's Word and example of Jesus is essential to be seen and known in the world as 'Church'. No body of people or establishment will survive long-term without discipline, both self and corporate. John Wesley acknowledged this in his journal, as witnessed through the weekly 'class meetings':

"Victorious members were encouraged, defeated members were helped, and stubborn members were disciplined. Seeing how effective this practice was convinced Wesley that the work of God could not prosper without church discipline." John Telford, ed., *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.*, 8 vols. (London: Epworth, 1931), 6:362.

Ananias conspired with his wife, Sapphira, to deceive the Church. Barnabas had just sold one of his fields and gifted the proceeds to the apostles. By laying it at their feet he acknowledged discernment of Spirit within the apostles and validated respect for their authority under God. This was an open, honest and public demonstration of faith. Ananias and Sapphira agreed together to act *as if* following the example of Barnabas, but secretly to act in total contradiction of spirit. This was not a spur of the moment decision or dictated by unexpected circumstance, but a premeditated plan to look generous whilst following the selfish desires of their heart. The consent and knowledge of Sapphira discloses the conspiracy to lie which they contrived. Satan is associated with the premeditated nature of such collusion ([Luke 22:3-6](#)). Peter makes it very clear that Ananias and Sapphira were not merely challenging apostolic authority, but lying to the Holy Spirit ([v3](#)) and to God ([v4](#)) thereby putting the Creator of all things to the test. The same attitude is demonstrated by Israel in the Exodus ([Ex 2:17,27](#); [Deut 6:16](#); [Lk 4:12](#); [11:16](#); [Acts 15:10](#)). Peter discerns the presence of Satan straight away and publicly exposes the deception. The instantaneous result of lies revealed, and Truth upheld, in the public assembly is uncomfortable to contemplate, as the result was; "he fell down and died". When Sapphira arrived 3 hours later, Peter discerns the same presence of Satan but allows her the grace to answer him truthfully. Sadly, instead of speaking Truth she maintains the conspired lie and suffers the same sentence, "she fell down at his feet and died". *Do we fall into Satan's trap of manipulating Truth? Have we thought seriously about the consequences?*

Deceiving the Body of Christ and lying before God is something that grieves the Spirit of God the most. This lesson is not about property, or being prudent with our finances. As Peter

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points out, the property belonged to Ananias until he sold it under false pretences. The heart of the matter is the fact that this couple premeditatedly conspired to deceive. God is Truth, His Word is Truth, Jesus spoke only Truth and the Holy Spirit reveals Truth. If we think we can deceive God we are mistaken; if we think we can hide anything from God we are mistaken; if we believe that what we think or hold in our heart is secret, then we are mistaken. Not only does God see, hear and know all but He sometimes reveals it to others too! If we do not discipline ourselves God will inspire others to remind us to do so. If we do not take note of His messengers then God Himself will discipline. The Holy Spirit revealed the Truth hidden in the hearts of Ananias and Sapphira to the apostles through spiritual discernment. This demonstrates the futility of conspiring to deceive by plots and schemes conceived in the shadows of secrecy and so-called confidentiality. Ananias and Sapphira premeditatedly lied, to God and His people and in so doing grieved the Holy Spirit, which is the unforgivable sin, and sadly they paid the price. Is it any wonder that the Church community were in fear and awe of what they had just witnessed! Such communal fear is the characteristic awe of divine activity (2:43; 19:17; **Lk**1:12, 65; 2:9; 7:16; 8:37). Their fear changed the notoriety of the apostles, the respect they were now afforded and regard in which they were held. God's instant judgement in such a dramatic and final way certainly concentrated the minds of those present and so it should for us today. When God is at the centre everything is possible. The Holy Spirit falls in power unimaginable on those who fear the Lord and are faithful to His Word. *Was it the fear of the Lord; fear of the apostles or fear of knowing their own misdemeanours that transformed the attitude of the early Church?*

God considers Truth, Justice, and Righteousness paramount to the unity of His people and purity of the Body of Christ. God abhors lies, plots, schemes, false testimony and any form of deception. When people are not told the Truth they are unable to make sound choices and discernment is, at best inhibited, at worst corrupted. Truth builds trust, but lies destroy it! Deception of any kind creates nothing but suspicion, frustration and anger. Such behaviour turns one against another, quite the opposite to God's intention of harmony. Guilt makes a person fearful and paranoid; projecting their suspicions onto those they are most fearful of. We know right from wrong, and the Holy Spirit will not leave us alone until we repent of our wrongdoing. It matters not what we say or do or demonstrate in public, God sees only our heart, whether it is pure or corrupt. Some will point to a 'white lie' as being a 'good' lie or somehow not so bad. However, any lie is a manipulation of the Truth! We are called to love one another, which demands that we live in Truth. Truth sometimes has to be delicately and sensitively put, but told nevertheless. If we do not challenge deception, in whatever guise, we are vulnerable to the evil manipulation of Satan and will undoubtedly experience the discipline of God. When a child is born it does not deceive. When it is hungry, thirsty or hurting it shows distress and cries; when it is fed, watered and attended to it shows contentment and laughs. It may be demanding on the parents when the baby does not yet know patience or have understanding. However, a baby is open and honest in demonstrating its needs, which enables the parents to care and provide for it. *Are we not God's children? Does God not want us to demonstrate our needs so that He can provide?*

Remembering that God gave us all we have frees us from worldly power struggles. Since we understand that God will provide for our every need, there is no requirement for control, only self-discipline. The True Church gives no room for jealousy, selfishness, power or control, because believers know that they are all created equal. When Jesus blessed us with the Holy

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Spirit we were given the power to overcome our human desires and live in obedience to the Word of God. The early Church was built on pastoral care, service, discipline, generosity of spirit, and above all, Truth. If those who call themselves Christian were to act in the same manner as the apostles and demonstrate the love and teaching of Jesus, the whole world could be changed. God's people gain peace through belief in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God and Messiah, through whom we receive eternal life. Christians do not need to 'see' this by physical proof; they believe it by faith. It was the demonstration of spiritual unity and display of corporate support by the early Christians that attracted others to join them. We are about to emerge from the most challenging time of isolation the world has ever recorded. *Will we carry on where we left off without change or will we recognise this opportunity to rise like a phoenix from the ashes as something new and pure? Was our previous witness different to the world and attracting others to join or was it no different to the world and therefore ignored? Will we speak Truth and challenge wrongdoing within the Body of Christ or remain silent and undisciplined?*

Reflecting on the beginnings of Christ's Church has raised some challenging questions, particularly for our time. Let us remember as we wrestle with them that united we will stand but divided we will surely fall. Sadly, many in the church regard it as their personal club rather than the House of God; some regard leadership in the church as a career rather than pastoral and spiritual care for God's people; some use it to gain personal power that secular society would never afford them. Integrity gains the regard of others; when we speak only Truth and our word is our bond; when our life demonstrates what we believe; when we offer genuine care without thought of gain. *If we compromise with world view in order to be popular, then what, in Truth are we? If we do not adhere to the Word of God or follow the example of Jesus can we still call ourselves 'Church'?* May God forgive the weakness of our doubt and unbelief and give us the strength of faith to remain True to the Word of God and example of Jesus. **Amen!**

Hymn/Song: BIND US TOGETHER, LORD

Chorus:...

*Bind us together, Lord, bind us together with cords that cannot be broken;
Bind us together, Lord, bind us together, O bind us together with love.*

There is only one God,
There is only one King,
There is only one Body
That is why we sing:

Chorus:...

Made for the glory of God,
Bought with the love of His Son.
Born to be holy and free,
Victory for us Jesus won:

Chorus:...

God created all gifts
Given to us through His Son.
Healing the body of Christ,

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Inspiring a faith that is one:

Chorus:...

We are the family of God,
Joined by the Spirit above.
Working together with Christ,
Growing and building in love:

Chorus:...

Poem: THE MORE YOU GIVE *Anonymous*

The more you give the more you get;
The more you laugh, the less you fret;
The more of everything you share,
The more you'll always have to spare;
The more you love, the more you'll find
That life is good and friends are kind;
For only what we give away,
Enriches us from day to day.
Cling to your standards and fight the good fight;
Take a firm stand for the things that are right;
And let nothing sway or turn you away
From God's old commandments, they are still new today.
In this troubled world it's refreshing to find
Someone who still has the time to be kind,
Someone who still has faith to believe
That the more you give the more you receive;
Someone who's ready by thought, word or deed
To reach out a hand in the hour of need.

Prayer: Our Father in heaven, reveal the Truth of our inward thoughts and hearts desires;
Lord Jesus Christ, reveal to us the Truth of God's Word and Your example; Holy Spirit, inspire
us to speak only Truth, reveal only Truth and live only in Truth. **Amen!**
