

A SCARY STORY

Acts 5:1-11 [MW21-16]

Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton on Sunday 02 May 2021

Who's heard this story before?

- who's never heard this story before?
- what do you think?

[space]

I can still remember the first time I heard this story

- I was shocked, and amazed
- I found it hard to believe it was in the Bible even

In my first year at university my friend John became rather keen on a young lady

- who sang in the choir at St Mary's Karori
- she encouraged him to come along to the Sunday evening Bible study
- and being the good friend he was, John encouraged me to go too!

It was at one of these Bible studies I first heard this story about Ananias and Sapphira

- I was discovering a lot of new things about the Bible
- learning heaps and enjoying the open discussions we had
- but this, this, was just a bit heavy
- a couple sell their land, hand over most of the money
- and end up being struck down dead
- from all the times we attended that Bible Study
- this is the only story I remember specifically
- and I remember it because it just seemed so odd
- out of character, scary, strange, disturbing ...
- I read it again for myself when I got home and sure enough that's how it happened
- but then I was too busy with assignments to think more about it on Monday

So, Ananias and Sapphira ...

- I've come to the conclusion that it's a good thing their story is in the Bible
- that's very big of me isn't it!
- but seriously, it shows the Bible deals with real people and real issues
- it's not an ideal story with a happy ending, but still it is included
- right at the very beginning of the church
- the world-wide and history-wide family that we are part of today
- not that long after the resurrection
- and the joy of discovering that what seemed all over was only just beginning
- when the fledgling church was growing, miracles happening all over the place
- and then this ...

The verses just before tell us how well everything was going:

The group of followers all felt the same way about everything. None of them claimed that their possessions were their own, and they shared everything they had with each other. In a powerful way the apostles told everyone that the Lord Jesus was now alive. God greatly blessed his followers, and no one went in need of anything. Everyone who owned land or houses would sell them and bring the money to the apostles. Then they would give the money to anyone who needed it. Joseph was one of the followers who had sold a piece of property and brought the money to the apostles. He was a Levite from Cyprus, and the apostles called him Barnabas, which means "one who encourages others".

There's something about the contrast between this Barnabas

- and Ananias and Sapphira
it's clear that Ananias and Sapphira sinned
and sinned big time, such that it caused their downfall
- but what exactly was their sin?
what exactly did Ananias and Sapphira do that was so wrong?
what was it that got them into such big trouble?

Any thoughts ... ?

Classic Bible scholar Matthew Henry puts it very well:

[Ananias and Sapphira] were ambitious of being thought eminent disciples, and of the first rank, when really they were not true disciples ... [they] pretended they could come up to the terms, that they might have the credit of being disciples, when really they could not, and so were a discredit to discipleship

Perhaps they had seen the example of Barnabas and wanted to have a reputation like his

- perhaps they wanted to be applauded for being generous
to be thought of as first rate disciples
an example to be admired and aspired to
- that's what it looked like: they sold their property and handed over the proceeds
yet that was not the whole story
they kept some of the proceeds back for themselves

Why did they do that?

- could it be that in a moment of zeal, a moment of fervour
caught up and stirred by this new movement
- they said let's do it too, let's sell our land
well give them the money and join the life of this exciting community
- c'mon, it's what we're meant to do, it'll be fun, the beginning of a new life

And then their nerve failed

- perhaps rationality entered in
perhaps it was too much to part with all at once
perhaps they couldn't fully trust in this new community, in God
- perhaps they couldn't believe that they really would be provided for
what if it all falls apart?
wouldn't it be wise to keep something for ourselves?

Perhaps the sin of Ananias and Sapphira was to try to serve God and mammon

- Jesus said it couldn't be done
but it was surely worth a crack when this much money was at stake
- however this couple were neither one thing nor the other
if they had been truly worldly, they wouldn't have sold their land
if they had been truly followers, they wouldn't have kept anything back
- so they ended up in the worst place: on the fence

Sure they looked like the real deal

- but in their hearts they were waverers, fence-sitters
they didn't really trust
they weren't really part of the community
- because they had only partly joined, by giving only a part of themselves

But maybe even that's not the heart of the matter, the root of their sin

- it all comes down to deceit
Ananias and Sapphira happily pretended to be one thing
when really they were something else all together
- my initial difficulty all those years ago with this passage
starts with, it's their land, their money, can't they do what they like with it?
- do they have to give it all to the church?
what is the big deal!
- yes it is their land and their money
and no they don't have to give it all to the church
- the problem is they agreed to "cheat", to deceive
to say they were giving everything when in reality they were not
- the problem that I initially skirted over
is that it's not how much, or what percentage is actually given
it's what the person says they have given!

Ananias and Sapphira said they had done just what Barnabas had done

- given everything
so they looked overwhelmingly generous and trusting
- but they weren't
and Peter knew ... Peter knew

That's another thing I had trouble with

- how did Peter know? what gave him the right?
of course it is the work of the Holy Spirit through Peter
but just imagine it ...

A couple turn up with an incredibly large gift of money

- such a huge amount that it makes people gasp and wonder
everyone says how wonderful, how generous, what great followers these are
- and Peter is the exact opposite: angry and accusing
it must have taken great faith on Peter's part to go out on a limb
- when everyone else is praising this couple, he is condemning them
how dare he! what if he is wrong?
- but Peter is now indeed the rock, the bold one, and he is right

Even so that just leads to another difficulty, for me anyway

- why didn't Peter just take Ananias aside and say:
look mate, I know that's not all the money, go home and get the rest
- yet it seems Peter knew that Ananias' heart
instead of being filled with the Holy Spirit, was filled with Satan
- it was not just a fraud against people, it was a fraud against the Holy Spirit

Anyway, when Sapphira turned up later Peter gave her the opportunity

- to say that the property had been sold for more, but she didn't
both Sapphira and her husband could have said at any stage:
no, this isn't everything - we actually decided to keep something for ourselves
- but how would that have looked ...
so Ananias and Sapphira persisted in their lie
and they both ended up being struck dead

And that for me was the biggest problem of all with this scary story

- it was the biggest problem for all of us at the Bible study
- I remember an animated and lively discussion about this
unfortunately I don't remember if we arrived at any satisfactory answer

For sure Ananias and Sapphira sinned, sinned big time

- but should they have died because of it?
it just seems far too harsh, more than over the top, (over kill?)!
- maybe the overwhelming shame or the realisation that they had
grieved the Holy Spirit caused them to have a heart attack or something?
- maybe it shows just how God reacts to deception and division
the early church was very vulnerable and God moved to ensure its purity and survival

Then of course there is the reaction of the rest of the community

- they were afraid; stunned and shocked
great fear seized the whole church and all who heard these things

Doesn't seem to be too much positive there

- so I wondered then and I wonder now: is there any good news here?
how would this fear, awe, whatever be of use to God, help the church?

I checked my commentaries which say things like:

- if God is so severe with these believers, we'd better watch our step
it was a reminder that you can't fool God or the apostles
so you'd better get on with the job and no shirking or holding back

Perhaps in these heady days after Easter

- when we're celebrating and on a 'high', this story invites us to consider:
are there ways in which we might be like Ananias and Sapphira?
- now would be a good time to grow beyond that and be amazed and awed at God

I invite you to take a moment and reflect

- on Ananias, and Sapphira, and Peter
and what all this has to do with you as a follower of Jesus today

[Space for reflection]

A concluding thought - one preacher states:

In reading the Scriptures I find a great moral power. Therein am I made aware of two great forces for good in human experience: the "fear" of God and the "grace" of God. Without the fear of God I should not stop at doing evil; the fear of God restrains from evil. Without the grace of God I should have no desire to approach positive goodness. The one is a deterrent from evil; the other an encouragement to good.