

Acts 4:32-5:16 - 12th July 2020 - Russell Baker

What is it with the way news and journalism work?

I worked for many years in a disability employment service - we worked to get good employment outcomes for people with intellectual disability. We reckoned we did a pretty good job, and we had the stats and the stories to back up our claims.

We often tried to get our message out in the media because it was great news for everyone. We had good news of people with disabilities getting a fair go - of big corporations contributing positively to the community - of marginalised people becoming valued and productive employees and colleagues - of perceptions of disability being overturned - of government money being used in cost effective ways to get positive outcomes.

We soon learned that people don't really like good news - they prefer a bit of a scandal. When we spoke to journalists they always seemed to be looking for a controversial angle - some dig at the government, some injustice from an employer, some threat to the livelihoods of people with a disability. We could have dredged those stories up - those things did happen - but there's not a lot to be gained by attacking the government or the employers that you depend on. We didn't want to share those stories. As a result, when we did get in the press it was scheduled as one of those "feel-good" stories that only run on Boxing Day. Good news is boring.

I might blame the media for this, but really their priorities are just a symptom of human nature. They know what stories will grab peoples' attention - and which ones won't. We can probably feel this in ourselves when we look at this section of Luke's second letter, the Book of Acts. It is easy to focus completely on the shocking and scandalous story of Ananias and Sapphira when there is actually a lot more going on. Amazing, revolutionary good news is happening.

Now I admit, the incident of Ananias and Sapphira does stand out - there is something shocking about it. I reckon it was even more shocking for the people at the time, as we will see as we dig into this passage.

But as I've looked at these chapters, I've come to think that what is said at the end of chapter 4 - the section that feels like a bit of a pause between the action - has even more to tell us. And maybe, if we get our heads around what was happening before the incident in chapter five, we will understand that incident more fully.

So let's dig into this description for a while. Verses 32-37 of chapter four.

We are told that *"all the believers were one in heart and mind"*.

This seems a simple introduction - yet this is something that Jesus had prayed for - in John 17:20-23 - as looked towards his own crucifixion.

Here are some of Jesus words as he prayed for his disciples:

My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one — I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

This unity of love and purpose is a powerful demonstration of the reality that Jesus was sent by the Father and loved by the Father. It is no small thing.

In verse 32 Luke described this oneness that Jesus prayed for - and what was the first thing that Luke wrote as an expression of this oneness? *"No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had"*.

Being one in heart and mind has many implications - and one of these was shown in the way the believers dealt with their possessions.

Sure, there is more to expressing unity than sharing possessions - but sharing what we have is a central expression of our unity - and I would say that where there is no willingness to share, no commitment to the needs of others, there can be no unity.

I'm reminded of Jesus words to the rich young ruler. *"Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."* These believers were doing what the rich young ruler in Luke 18 could not or would not do.

What was driving this attitude to possessions? This sharing together was more than a social and economic agenda - it wasn't a case of sanctified socialism and it certainly was not capitalism that was at work in Jerusalem. God's people are called to something that's bigger and better than the systems of this world.

Luke wrote that *"God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them."*

What can lead a community to act in ways that ensure there are no needy people? It is a powerful work of God's grace that does this. What Marxism claims to provide but can't - what Capitalism doesn't even seem to care about - comes into being through the work of God's grace in his people. It was an amazing thing, an act of God, that was happening among the believers in Jerusalem.

And this powerful work of grace was something that demonstrated the truth of the resurrection. See how Luke inserts a statement right in the middle of this description - sandwiched between *"they shared everything they had"* and *"there were no needy persons among them"* we have *"With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus."* These words are not a side comment - this is all connected. One of the out workings of the gospel is a totally different attitude and approach to possessions and to the needs of others.

Now Dave has encouraged us to try looking at the book of Acts with a “Jewish perspective” and it is helpful if we do this again here:

When Luke wrote “*there were no needy persons among them*” he echoed God’s words to the people of Israel in Deuteronomy 15. A Jewish reader would have been reminded that God’s law told them to cancel people’s debts every seventh year and to be generous to God’s people who were in need. The people of God were to value each other far above their own wealth.

Now, in the New Covenant people in Jerusalem, we see the kingdom of God in action - and one of the out-workings that everyone could see was the way people’s needs were met. This was the Law of God put into practice, not through technical rule-keeping but through a greater love and the powerful working of God’s grace. This radically different mindset about possessions supports the testimony of the Apostles that Jesus has risen from the dead.

Jewish observers in Jerusalem, and Jewish readers of Luke’s letter, would recognise God’s plan at work among these followers of Jesus. They would see their love in action and be prompted to recognise that here are the true people of God. What a powerful testimony this is.

So practically speaking, how did this approach work? Luke gives us an example - there would be many more.

For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.

None of the economic systems of our world operate in this way.

Consider our current situation - there were problems for many people before COVID-19 and now we are facing serious economic difficulties - but there is more than enough for everyone’s needs to be met - the reason that some are suffering financially now and are

going to really struggle in the months and years ahead is not a lack of resources in our society.

There is enough - but our systems and priorities ensure that needs are not met as they could be. Love of self and love of possessions too often trump any love for our neighbours in the world we are living in.

It seems there are more votes to be gained by ensuring that people can hold onto their personal wealth rather than meeting the needs of other people.

Some clearly believe there is more to be gained by blaming people who are doing it tough and by suggesting that generosity will lead to laziness than there is in seeing our fellow people as neighbours, sisters and brothers in need.

Our world does not operate on Kingdom values - it cannot, because that would take Kingdom power to be at work.

The mindset and practice of these believers in Jerusalem was not like their world - and it was not like our world either.

Nor should we be like our world. Instead, we should probably be like Barnabas.

While many believers were selling their property to meet the needs of others, Luke makes a point of introducing Barnabas here. Barnabas is someone we will meet again in Acts. Barnabas is one of these people who is living out the new covenant.

(I've prepared a short character study on Barnabas, which is basically a review of all the places where he is mentioned in Acts and in the letters of Paul. I'll share this on the website and in e-mails later.)

It is in the context of this amazing work of God's grace that Luke brings us to the incident with Ananias and Sapphira. Let's spend some time trying to understand this now.

We're told that Ananias and Sapphira sold some property and brought some of the money to the apostles while keeping some for themselves.

Luke points out clearly that this was something Ananias and Sapphira did together.

"together with his wife" - "with his wife's full knowledge" - verses 8 and 9 make this clear as well. They were in this together, and they were both to be held accountable for their actions.

They kept back some of the money - but it becomes clear that they were pretending to give all of the money for the needs of God's people.

When Ananias presented the money, he did not receive the praise he expected - instead, he faced words of judgment from Peter.

What was the problem here? What was Ananias' sin - more correctly, their sin?

Peter's words to Ananias tell us more about the distribution of wealth that was described back in chapter four.

From Peter's words we learn that there was no compulsory communal ownership being imposed upon the church. There would certainly have been a level of social pressure at work - we can understand how Ananias and Sapphira might want to be seen as generous and godly people in the Christian community - but there was no requirement upon them to sell their property.

Nor was there any compulsion for Ananias and Sapphira to give the money they got from the sale to the community. The money they received when they sold their land was at their disposal. Peter was very clear about this.

So what was the problem with Ananias & Sapphira keeping back some of the money for themselves? We have to play detective here just a little bit, putting together the

information, but it's pretty easy to conclude that Ananias & Sapphira have been dishonest about the amount of money they got for their property. The sin was not that they kept some of the money but that they pretended to give it all while keeping some back secretly.

Their actions were not prompted by the unity of love and purpose that Jesus had prayed for - they were not acting in response to the power of God's grace working in them. They acted deceptively, presumably to make a good impression, but their actions amounted to a lie to the Holy Spirit - this was an attempt to deceive God.

And when he heard Peter's condemnation, Ananias fell down dead.

What did he die of? It's not stated, but given that his wife also keeled over soon after, we can conclude that this death was a divine act, not a human one. He didn't die of shock. The apostles didn't put him to death. They may have been as surprised as everyone else at first (although Peter knew what was coming later when he spoke to Sapphira).

It seems shocking to us and it was clearly a shock among the believers, who were seized with a great fear. Ananias' body is taken out and buried immediately - even before his wife knew he was dead!

About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened.

Peter asked her, *"Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?"*

Sapphira had the opportunity to speak the truth here. She was not excused or blamed for her husband's actions but was held accountable for her own.

What was her response? Another lie.

"Yes," she said, "that is the price."

Sapphira stood with her husband in this lie - a lie to the Holy Spirit, a lie to God.

And Sapphira was held accountable for her actions. She was not excused because she followed her husband's lead. She had the opportunity to speak honestly, to admit the deception and repent - but she did not. As a result, Sapphira faced the same judgment that had fallen on Ananias. She dropped dead and was taken out and buried.

What do we do with this judgment? Does it seem a bit harsh?

Yes, it does. We are used to being let off for things that seem to us small things. We don't expect to be held to account. We have heard so much about God's grace - and we rightly depend on it - but perhaps we have forgotten why we need grace so much.

God is a holy God, and this was being demonstrated powerfully to the people in Jerusalem. They would have been reminded of God's judgment in striking Uzzah dead when he touched the Ark of the Covenant. They might have thought of what happened to Achan, who had secretly kept treasure from the city of Jericho that should have been dedicated to God. Perhaps they also thought of God's punishment in the desert when the people made a golden calf as a means of worship. They would have remembered that God does not want outward acts of righteousness that cover up deceptive hearts.

As they thought of these things, surely they realised that the God who had raised Jesus from the dead is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob - is the God of Moses, the God of the Exodus, the God of King David. Yahweh was at work among them.

Just as the generosity of God's people had been evidence that God was at work - that the apostles spoke the truth - and that Jesus really is risen from the dead - so also this judgement on Ananias and Sapphira was evidence that it was God at work - that the apostles spoke the truth - and that Jesus really is risen from the dead.

I am glad that this account is recorded for us. I'm glad that God, in his grace, allows us to read about it and learn from it. I'm glad it is not a judgment that needs to be repeated on a

regular basis in our community in order for us to understand the reality of God's holiness. Let's learn from these words here!

Well, for the church in Jerusalem and those who heard of it - all this led to a great fear. What did this fear do for the church? Let's see, in the verses ahead.

This next section acts as a conclusion to the Ananias and Sapphira incident and also as a prequel to the persecution that follows. Yet it's another section that has much to say in itself - it's not just a book end. I won't spend too long here, because Dave will probably look at these verses as well as part of next week's talk (there's a hint, or a request, I guess).

But let's take a quick overview and we'll see something dramatic as we do.

Following from the judgment against Ananias and Sapphira, we learn that many signs and wonders were being performed among the people. The new Christian community continued to gather in the temple grounds, and they were held in high regard, even though people were afraid to be seen with them. Despite this fear, and because the work of the gospel going out, more people were coming to believe in the resurrected Lord Jesus and were joining the Christian community.

When we read of the healings, of the people being brought out into the streets, of the crowds gathering from all around - it should remind us of other events that occurred not long before - it sounds like verses right out of the life of Jesus - you'd think that Jesus was still around!

Because He was. He is. Everything we have read today demonstrates that Jesus was at work.

- Jesus was there and He showed it in the powerful generosity He worked in His people.
- Jesus was there and He showed it in the preaching of the apostles.
- Jesus was there and He showed it in the judgment of a Holy God against the deceit of Ananias and Sapphira.

- Jesus was there and He showed it in miraculous healings, just as he had done before His death and resurrection.

All this was occurring under the noses of the religious and political leaders in Jerusalem - those people who had thought they dealt with the Jesus problem such a short time before.

Jesus was at work. He is risen. There is good news for all who will hear.

Next week we will see how the religious rulers respond to this. **Right now, it's our responses we should think about.**

When we look at more than the dramatic story of Ananias and Sapphira, hopefully we've seen a whole lot more that's going on, and maybe even the terrible story starts to make more sense. In the end it seems to me that there is so much here - **what difference is it going to make for us today?**

Acts describes an approach to **possessions**. It does not set out rules for us to follow - but let's not try to wriggle out of this. Just like when we think about the Rich Young Ruler, we should avoid any explanation here that lets us off the hook when it comes to our own wealth and possessions. Jesus does not want to let us off the hook.

Real concern for the needs of others - radical generosity - have always been marks of God's true people. Let them be marks of our community too - not as outward signs of righteousness but as a powerful working of God's grace among us. **The love and unity expressed in generosity are powerful testimony to the reality that Jesus is the risen Lord of all.**

Let's also remember Ananias and Sapphira, and **guard our own hearts against a desire to impress people with outward signs of goodness** - signs that end up being attempts to deceive God. God's judgment against them should weigh upon us.

As I think about Ananias and Sapphira, I remember that each of them was held personally responsible for their sin - Sapphira was not condemned for her husband's sin - but she was not excused because she had followed his lead.

Now we probably realise how easy it is to follow someone else into sin - to go along with wrong doing can be much easier than standing up for what's right. But we have seen that submission is not a defence for sinful actions. A wife who thinks "I'm following God's will" because I'm submitting to my husband should read this account and think again. Do not submit to sinful leading - whether this be from a spouse, a parent, a friend or a Christian leader. **We are all called to submit to each other out of reverence for Christ - but submission does not allow for following someone into sin and submission does not excuse our sin.**

As I think of what we've read, what should fill me with wonder and awe is not just the judgment of God in Acts five - but also the reality that I'm still living and breathing after all I've done that dishonours God's name. Maybe we should all feel a genuine gratitude that we're still breathing!

While God continues to give us breath, let's remember what we have seen and learned together.

Jesus is risen - we have seen how this was shown in multiple ways.

Let's pray that God's powerful grace will work among us so that people today will also know - Jesus is Risen - Jesus Is Lord.