

Week by week we are building a picture of the life of the early church in 1st century Jerusalem . This week "Sharing Life". In addition, I also want to try to make some sense of the shocking and dramatic story a Ananias and Sapphira.

The book of Acts tells us that members of the early church prayed together, broke bread and ate together in each other's homes, gave to each other so there was no one in need. It sounds a lovely community to have been part of.

From the day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit came, filled people, changed people. The early church grew rapidly. We are told 3000 joined on the first day! Peter and John were the leaders. We've heard about the frequent miraculous healings. More people joined. They were the talk of the city.

What was it that was attracting people to join? People were changed. From the outside looking in you could see your friends and neighbours were radically different. The early church demonstrated a new way of life people had never seen before. Their relationships were so loving, caring and supportive. This is what happens when the Holy Spirit touches human lives. The presence and the power of the Holy Spirit changes people, enabling them to support each other and share life together.

I have seen evidence of this transforming power in action, when we visited Uganda. The communities that had worked through the PEP process, which is a means of spiritual and lifestyle transformation, were so much more like the early church than those that had not. Taking in relatives children, paying for them to go to school, helping each other build new houses, caring for the elderly.

Getting back on track, Our Acts reading starts "All the believers were one in heart and mind." I think this is a really significant statement and I hope to explain to you how it makes sense of the rest of the passage, even the story of Ananias and Sapphira!

Now over the last few weeks we have seen that the key work of the Holy Spirit is to transform us into the likeness of Jesus. This is what the coming of God's kingdom hinges on, us being prepared to allow the Holy Spirit to change us so that our lives can be used for Gods purpose. Whilst I believe this is true, I find this hard to get my head around. If God created all the variety we see around us in the world why would he want millions of us all the same? I find there is resistance within me to change. Of course, I would love to be as caring, wise, in touch with the Father as Jesus but then I also quite like being me, a woman, in charge of my own life. I find myself aware of an inner conflict, God's way or Jane's way! But then I have to remind myself that so much about God isn't either/or, like our world, His Kingdom is both/and. We can all enjoy our uniqueness as a God given gift while at the same time allowing the Holy Spirit to build in us more of the qualities we see in Jesus.

We've heard a lot about the fruit of the Holy Spirit, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control, all these and more, truthfulness, trust- worthiness, hopefulness, perseverance. These are all qualities we see in Jesus, qualities the Holy Spirit wants to grow in us and qualities that were in abundance in the early church which is why " they were one in heart and mind."

The early church was exceptional. Has there been a church like it since? As a movement they were united, they were "one in the heart and mind", they shared, gave generously. We are told there was not a needy person among them. The Holy Spirit enabled them to be truly generous and to move beyond the human default position of selfishness.

Our little grandson is 2 and his favourite word is "mine"! Sharing doesn't come easily to him! The American preacher, Tim Keller, says as we become adults we are still basically selfish we are just much more skilled at hiding it! But those in the early church were so caring and trusting of each other that when provision was needed they would sell a piece of property and give the proceeds to Peter and the other elders to use the funds where they were most needed.

To be "one of heart and mind" as a group, I believe the individuals, who make up the group, need to be of "one in heart and mind" within themselves. When we think in terms of spiritual growth the word "Heart" means the centre of our being, our will, our desires, where our spirit dwells, while the "mind" includes our thinking, intellect and all our feelings and emotion. To feel at peace our heart and mind need to be in tune with one another. Our will, thinking, emotions and desires matching up. If they are not the result is inner conflict, stress and tension. We know that in the main people of the early church did not experience this inner tension because we are told "they were of one heart and mind".

So to the story of Ananias and Sapphira.

We imagine that Ananias and Sapphira would have been thought of as virtuous and generous when they sold some land. They agreed between themselves that they wouldn't give the church all the money but keep some back. Ananias came forward and presented the apostles with a bag of coins. Peter, was given a word of knowledge from the holy spirit, this is when supernaturally God downloads awareness of something relevant. Peter acting on the information God has given him challenges Ananias saying "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the holy spirit and kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land." Next moment he fell down dead. About three hours later, his wife came in, not knowing what had happened and when asked "was this the money Ananias got for the land?" she said "yes, that was the price" and she also dropped down dead. What crime had they committed? All they did was tell a lie. Which of us haven't lied at some time or another, even little white lies. Why did God deal with Ananias and Sapphira so harshly?

You see, it was their land and they were perfectly entitled to have sold a portion of it, and to have kept some of the money but it was their dishonesty that was the problem but more than that they were being used!. Let me explain.

Whenever a church is moving forward and the gospel is being preached, there will be opposition. This opposition is always rooted in evil forces even though that may not be how it appears. David last week told us we live in a battlefield but one where we can always have hope because we know Jesus won the victory over all evil through His crucifixion and resurrection. In practice the battle still being fought but the victory is assured. In line with our Acts reading I'm referring to evil as Satan.

Commentaries I have read say that God was aware that Satan was trying to infiltrate and damage the new church. It's one thing to attack from the outside, for example when Peter and John were arrested, as David told us last Sunday, but as they were released, that tactic didn't work. So the sly enemy wormed his way into the inner ranks. Satan had been able to seduce and use Ananias and Sapphira. God dealt with this attack in a very decisive way. Referring to Ananias and

Sapphira's death the Message bible says that "by the time the whole church heard of these things they had a healthy respect for God, they knew God was not to be trifled with".

I believe Ananias and Sapphira were divided in heart and mind, this was why Satan was able to target them and persuade them that it would be alright to lie to church, he might have whispered into their minds "what will it matter anyway?, nobody will ever find out". Ever been there?

They didn't trust God to look after them. I wonder how many of us have the same feeling? We can trust God so far but then need a safety net in case something goes wrong. We look ourselves for our own security rather than rely on God to care and provide for us. I remember, years ago, it must have been in David's early years here, he told us, in a meeting, that he and Kathryn had no savings. Now that really earned my respect.

Living out the gospel is painful and challenging. We need Holy Spirit wisdom and discernment. Thinking of the vote to leave to EU. Were we as a nation seduced by lies? Time will tell.

Lying and hypocrisy are serious. They are dangerous for followers of Jesus, we need to be transparent, people of integrity, with our words and actions in line with one another. We need to be of "one heart and mind", as individuals and as a community. This is what people outside the church look for. This is what will attract them to want to meet Jesus and join us.