**SERMON 8.7.18 By Joy Dipple**

**Readings:- Acts 5:1-11 (4th tricky text - Ananias and Sapphira)**

**Mark 6:1-13**

‘Don’t mess with God!’ That was my initial reaction to our fourth tricky text which we were asked to preach on – the story of Ananias and Sapphira. It really is a shocking and unsettling story and led to the question we were presented with:- ‘If we are told that the New Testament teaches us love, forgiveness and compassion, then why do you think God takes such drastic action against Ananias and Sapphira?’ It is a good question; and a reluctance to deal with such questions on this story has often led to its avoidance.

However, as I delved into commentaries in trying to get to grips with it, I discovered its value as a wake-up call to all of us, and I hope you will find some value in this story as well.

I will initially give you some background information and discuss both the natural and supernatural explanations, leading to a possible answer as to why this story is important for both the church and for us as individuals.

First of all – the background information: In the life of the early church, and particularly in the area around Jerusalem, the early Christians lived as a very close community, where wealth was shared and people were provided for. The communal living may have been an off shoot of how the group known as the Essenes had lived – a bit like being in an early kibbutz. But it is clear that contributions to the community were very much on a voluntary basis. It was not compulsory to donate absolutely all of one’s wealth.

Before this story starts at the beginning of Acts chapter 5, we are told at the end of chapter 4 that Barnabas had sold a field he owned and had brought the money to the apostles. It is quite possible that Ananias and Sapphira wanted to be seen as good benefactors, like Barnabas. They sought approval for their actions, but that desire led to the lie of how much they were prepared to give. To gain the approval of others, including the apostles, they schemed to keep back some of the sale price of their property, pretending that the amount given to the church was the total cost of the sale. It was totally unnecessary but was a huge temptation they gave into for the sake of personal status and approval.

If we look at a natural explanation for what happened we could say that Peter already knew by natural means what the property cost, a bit like looking into an estate agent’s window, or hearing on the grapevine that the property was for sale for a certain price.

Ananias came in expecting praise for his donation. To lie about the amount and to then be challenged instead of praised, was a huge shock. His sin was seen for what it was, and the realization of that exposure may have led to a heart attack as a result of the shock of being found out. Sapphira would suffer the same fate as she reiterated the lie and then had the additional shock of being told the fate of her husband.

In a way the natural explanation makes the passage more palatable. It was less a striking down by God, and more a case of suffering the consequences of their actions.

But looking at a supernatural explanation we know that God is in charge of his church. He knows exactly what is going on, and nothing can be hidden from the presence of the Holy Spirit.

It is very likely that the Holy Spirit gave Peter the gift of knowledge to know without question the deceitful lies of Ananias and Sapphira, and also what would happen to them as a result.

To also be judged to the point of death is not without its Old Testament equivalents. Two sons of Aaron were consumed by fire from the Tent of the Presence of the Lord because they had made an unauthorised offering, and in another Old Testament story a man named Uzzah was struck down dead after he had tried to steady the ark of the covenant when the oxen stumbled who were transporting it. To be honest I find that story very unfair, but these illustrations depict the seriousness of sinful people being in the presence of the Holy God.

I think Peter was given a gift of knowledge about the lie of Ananias and Sapphira, but whether their deaths were a result of shock at becoming aware of their sin, or whether it was a supernatural action, is open to conjecture. However, the fact is that their deaths were allowed to happen before they had the chance to verbally repent.

Why did a God of compassion allow that to happen? Why is it so relevant for the story of the early church?

In ‘The Message’ Bible the last verse of this passage is translated into the following words: ‘The whole church and, in fact, everyone who heard of these things, had a healthy respect for God. They knew God was not to be trifled with.’

It was a huge lesson for the new church. God is truly in charge. If the incident hadn’t happened the way it did, people would have become complacent. Deceit would have been acceptable so long as it wasn’t found out, and when found out a quick apology would have sufficed without fear of deadly judgment. The church would have become sloppy in its operation, and sin would have been overlooked because people would have believed they could hide truth from God.

As it was, God revealed that he won’t tolerate hypocrisy and deceit. The Holy Spirit knows all and won’t allow the church to move away from God’s leadership. In church history God always brings his church back into line whenever there have been temptations to go along wrong paths, even though individual churches may go by the wayside. We can never cheat God. He will always have the last word.

Finally, what does this story teach us as individual members of the church family in the world today?

It teaches us that God is real, and expects the best from us, because he has a deep love and care for his church, the body of Christ. As a loving Father he knows all and exercises discipline where ever it is needed.

In today’s Gospel reading we are told that Jesus sent out the disciples to anoint the sick, drive out demons and most importantly to preach that people should repent. Jesus’ own sacrifice enabled sinful people to be put right before God and to be able to dwell in his presence, but repentance is vitally important. No matter what the crime may be, no matter how big or how small the sin, it needs to be placed before God and repented of. We cannot hide or make excuses, and certainly we will never have true peace until sin is faced and acknowledged, and it has to be repented of whilst we have the chance. One day, like Ananias and Sapphira, it may be too late.

The New Testament does teach us that God is a God of love, forgiveness and compassion, but to enable us to exist in God’s presence cost Jesus his life.

Sin is a big deal, no matter how big or small it seems. It cannot be hidden. Repentance is needed whilst there is still time to claim God’s forgiveness, and it is a constant and daily challenge for all of us. The all-knowing God is, and always will be, in charge. So I will end as I began – with the statement:

‘Don’t mess with God.’