

Telling Lies to God

Have any of you seen the movie, 'Catch Me If You Can' with Leonardo DiCaprio and Tom Hanks -based on a true story? Hanks plays FBI agent Carl Hanratty who is pursuing a high schooler, Frank Abagnale Jr.

Frank idolizes his father who is in trouble with the tax authorities and when his parent separate Frank runs away with \$25 dollar to NYC, vowing to regain his dad's losses and get his parents back together – so then starts the life of deception. Frank poses as a Pan Am airline pilot; a pediatrician and a lawyer, forging and cashing \$4M of cheques along the way – before of course eventually getting caught, tried and sentenced to 12 years.

He was faking it, an imposter, an actor if you like putting on any mask that would continue his visible life to those around, yet behind the mask it was a sham...

And this is what we hear of in todays reading with Ananias and Sapphira – they wear a mask of deception and pay the price, the ultimate price of their lives under the judgement of God, and I guess it makes hard reading for us today.

We perhaps don't want to believe in a God who would cast such immediate and final judgement, because, well after all that wasn't what Jesus taught, was it?

And surely, we would never be like Ananias and Sapphira ourselves, would we?

Yet, lying to God comes with consequences and I wonder what today we think those consequences may be. For us and for our church?

We must consider what hypocrisy is?

What are our thoughts on the judgment of Ananias and Sapphira?

And what are our reactions considering this story?

I'll leave that hanging as we consider the first part of our reading this morning?

The first part of reading deals with the early church – and their attitude to sharing possessions, but it is more than about just sharing possessions, like much in the Bible, it goes much deeper.

This early Christian community was the true 'covenant community' that God had intended to set up.

If we consider the Old Testament – God related to humanity through individuals – Adam; Noah; Abraham; Moses – the nation of Israel, with whom the covenant was through relationship and adherence to the LAW.

But Israel's attempts to follow, to comply with and live up to the law could not and would never achieve complete relationship with God – because of sin.

The achievement of a covenantal community could only truly be in relationship with God, by the massive and total forgiveness of sins and debt accomplished by Jesus' death.

In Deuteronomy 15 we find the commands for the remission of debts every seven years but the in verse 4 it says

'There should be no more poor among you, for in the land the LORD your God is giving you to possess for your inheritance, he will richly bless you'

... and now we see in the community of Christ followers this come to fruition – a covenant community that were in practical terms making the implied promise of provision for all in need a reality, through their generosity of sharing.

Not only would debt be forgiven, but they would share their own private property for the benefit of the community.

And note the opening words from our reading, *'All the believers were one, in heart and mind'* – a real unity of purpose, a sacrificial unity of purpose...

But what it does not say is that these followers of Christ sold the roofs from over their own heads. This is not some 20th or 21st century cult where some charismatic leader gains great status and wealth through followers selling all and joining them.

This is not about giving up all wealth, but rather providing for the needs of the community – living together, sharing in common together, as the true people of God.

The Temple authorities thought that they were the guardians of official tradition in Israel – following the commands and ways, laid out in Deuteronomy, Leviticus and Numbers.

But this new community practices true covenant life and upstages the Temple in its practical provision for all.

So, what you do with and how you relate to possessions and money loudly declares what sort of community you are, and the early church statement was loud and clear – they not only sought agreement on disputed matters but had regard for each other needs.

Jeremiah 32.39 says

³⁹ I will give them singleness of heart and action, so that they will always fear me and that all will then go well for them and for their children after them.

What is 'singleness of heart and action'?

It is unity in our belief, in our worship and in our lived lives beyond the church walls which brings us into the holy place of God.

And this is what the early church conveyed – a holiness

And this holiness is demonstrated by the introduction of Joseph, whom the apostles had called Barnabas (Son of Encouragement). Here he illustrates what a generous and willing giver he is; he is the counterpoint to Ananias and Sapphira.

And so, the other side, the darker side of humanity, insidiously corrupted by Satan is then shown at the beginning of chapter 5.

And as I've said, the story may make us uncomfortable – We want Ananias and Sapphira to acknowledge their wrongdoing – their cheating.

We want them to confess and repent. To maybe re-visit their decision and think about what they really intend to do with the proceeds of the property sale, or just hand over what they said they had given – i.e. all of it.

But they don't.

They deceive and are full of hypocrisy and immediate judgement falls upon them.

Ouch.

It makes you take a breath and for me at least say, there for the grace of God go I.

I'm sure I could take a look, in fact regularly do, and know I am not reaching the standards God expects. I'm fallen and only by His grace and mercy can I go on.

So where was His grace for this couple?

Absent?

I referred to holiness earlier and I want to expand the theme a little.

God is HOLY, and he alone is righteous.

By nature, we are fallen, yet there is sense in which the church is holy but awaits its true holiness. St Augustine wrote

"Whenever I have described the church as being without spot or wrinkle, I have not intended to imply that it was like this already, but that it should prepare itself to be like this. At the time when it too will appear in glory"

To be holy is to be set apart, and the New Testament restricts that idea to individuals rather than the nation of Israel, Jerusalem, the Temple - as in the OT.

It is now people rather than places or things that are holy.

So the people of God are His church and he desires for them to be Holy.

So, to speak of the holiness of the Church is to speak of the holiness of its' members, which will one day be achieved as we share in the life and glory of God.

But what about now?

Holiness cannot be corrupted.

God cannot accept such corruption and it is this point, that at the time of the early church where we see a committed holy people, so close in time to the resurrected Christ, living in a holy community - the actions of Ananias and Sapphira were so magnified.

If we consider other times when God's judgement came quickly we will see the parallel of the holiness sharply contrasting with the unrighteous

2 Samuel 6.6-9:

As the Ark of the Covenant was brought into Jerusalem, Uzzah put his hand on it, attempting to steady it on the ox-cart and was struck dead. He had disregarded the instruction 'not to touch' and had suffered the consequences in proximity to such holiness.

Leviticus 10.1-2

The two sons of Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, infringed the holiness of the sanctuary and suffered the immediate consequences

Joshua 7 see God's judgement against Achan, who had taken gold and silver following the destruction of Jericho. His actions brought trouble to Joshua and the Israelites and when found out, immediate and supernatural judgment comes.

Lastly 2 Chronicles 26

Tells us about King Uzziah, who 'did what was right in the eyes of the LORD' during the days of Zechariah who instructed him in the fear of the LORD. Yet when he became powerful his pride became his downfall as he disregarded the ways of God. His outcome - he was struck down with leprosy.

Does this make you feel any better?

That at times of holiness among the people of God, He finds deceit, hypocrisy abhorrent. And we are not in such a time of holiness.

Maybe it doesn't, and you find this God who makes a snap decision and takes two lives immediately a god you cannot understand, admire, follow or find comfort in.

But if you want to accept and admire all that was good in the early church we have heard of and will continue to hear of – like healings; standing up to bullying authorities; bringing people to Christ in large numbers and this astonishing property sharing.

If you accept all this you must accept that the early church is living as the Temple of the Living God, in a covenantal fashion.

And if you accept that, then know that God will take such a community seriously – He will take seriously their deep faith; their desire to live as Christ commands and as the Holy Spirit

leads. God expects from such a community and failure to live by His ways has deep consequences – even death.

Because if there are no consequences then all that is left is cheap grace.

If we think we can deceive Christ, not live to His standards and expect to have forgiveness without repentance; baptism without church discipline; and communion without confession, we're left with cheap grace.

Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ – it is saying I want the benefits of Christian life without the cost.

This is not grace. Cheap grace doesn't exist because...

Jesus is not only Saviour, He is also Lord.

We cannot expect salvation unless we also allow Him to be Lord, and this is the failure of Ananias and Sapphira.

In fact, our reading says more...

³ Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land?"

Satan has filled his heart

It isn't that he only gave part of the proceeds of the sale to the Christian community, but that he deceived by implying all was being given. And when his wife was challenged she too deceived.

And it is Satan, doing his best and using the age-old tool of lying.

Oliver Wendell Homes (19th C American writer) wrote

"Sin has many tools, but a lie is the handle which fits them all".

Satan is a murderer and a liar (John 8.44). He lied through and to this couple, and the lie led to their deaths.

In his judgement of Ananias and Sapphira, God also judged Satan, letting all know he would not tolerate deception in His church.

So, we must beware that Satan will try both to defeat the church from the outside and from within.

This is what happens when disunity takes place.

Remember that when Paul wrote to the Ephesians about taking upon them the armour of God, it was to Christians he wrote – because it is they who are in danger of being used by the devil.

And so, what for us today?

What is the takeaway to consider over your lunch today; as you sit in this evening with the Strictly Results, or as the rest of your week unfolds with family, at work, or just chilling.

The takeaway is this:

- What does our unity look like at GMC before God?
- Are we coming together not be a holy huddle that keeps others out, but to become truly holy – serving and sacrificing of our time, talent and finances to serve His kingdom
- Are we doing this honestly
- Are we doing so with integrity
- Are we open and accountable – with one another.

I've already said that on Tuesday it is 1yr since my ordination and induction, and reminded you of my commitment ... and so now I will remind you of what you as a congregation agreed to that night...

I pray that as we grow, as we journey together as church, as the body of Christ, and as others join us, that we share with one another – our experience, our tie, our gifts, our resources – for the benefit of us all, and that we may serve God in our community: both in these walls and without.