**COVENANT COMMUNITY ONLINE SERVICE**

**Presenter: Revd Dr Calvin T Samuel**

**Sunday 28th June 2020**

**~ Lying to the Holy Spirit ~**

**WELCOME & INTRODUCTION**

Good Morning. My name is Calvin Samuel and I’m Methodist minister for the towns of Rochford and Rayleigh in the County of Essex.

Welcome to this covenant community online service on the 28th of June. We are internationally dispersed, and socially distant but we come together in worship as a covenant community.

What in the world is lying to the Holy Spirit? Over the last couple of weeks, we’ve begun a journey into the Book of Acts in the period following Pentecost. Today we hit the disturbing story in Acts chapter 5 of Ananias and Sapphira, both of whom lost their lives for the sin of lying to the Holy Spirit. If you’ve no idea what that is or have always found the story of Acts chapter 5 a bit of a challenge, then stay tuned. We’ll be exploring this later in the service.

But let’s sing together now. Holy Spirit Rain Down

**Hymn : ﻿Holy Spirit, rain down, rain down** (StF 384)

Holy Spirit, rain down, rain down

O Comforter and Friend,

how we need your touch again.

Holy Spirit, rain down, rain down.

Let your power fall,

let your voice be heard,

come and change our hearts,

as we stand on your word.

Holy Spirit, rain down.

No eye has seen, no ear has heard,

no mind can know what God has in store.

So open up heaven, open it wide

over your Church and over our lives.

*Russell Fragar*

**Hymn : King of Kings, Majesty** (StF 331)

King of Kings, Majesty

God of Heaven living in me  
Gentle Saviour, closest friend  
Strong Deliverer, beginning and end  
All within me falls at Your throne

*Your Majesty, I can but bow  
I lay my all before You now  
In royal robes I don't deserve  
I live to serve Your Majesty*

Earth and Heaven worship You  
Love eternal, Faithful and True  
Who bought the nations, ransomed souls  
Brought this sinner near to Your throne  
All within me cries out in praise.

*Your majesty, I can but bow…*

*Jarrod Cooper*

**PRAYERS**

As we come to our prayers I invite you to respond using the words in yellow which appear on your screen, or the text in bold type if you’re listening on audio and working from a hard copy.

Let us pray.

Holy God,

who teaches the hearts of your faithful people

by sending to them the light of your Holy Spirit:

grant us by the same Spirit

to have a right judgement in all things

and evermore to rejoice in his holy comfort;

through the merits of Christ Jesus our Saviour,

who is alive and reigns with you in the unity of the

Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. **Amen.**

**Prayers of Confession**

Let us make our confession to God:

**Gracious and holy God,**

**we confess that we have sinned**

**against you and against our neighbour.**

**Your Spirit gives light,**

**but we have preferred darkness;**

**your Spirit gives wisdom**

**but we have been foolish;**

**you Spirit gives power**

**but we have trusted in our own strength.**

**For the sake of Jesus Christ, your Son,**

**forgive our sins, and enable us by your Spirit**

**to serve you in joyful obedience,**

**to the glory of your Name. Amen**

*Silence*

There is now no condemnation

for those who live in union with Christ Jesus;

for the law of the Spirit of life

has set us free from the law of sin and death.

**Amen. Thanks be to God.**

**SCRIPTURE**

Today we’re continuing our journey into the Book of Acts. For two weeks we looked at Acts chapter 2 exploring the question, ‘*Why do people join the Church?’* Last week we talked about Confident Discipleship in Acts chapters 3 and 4. This week we wrestle with that unusual idea of lying to the Holy Spirit.

Our scripture lesson today picks up where we left off last week at the end of Acts chapter 4, as the church began sacrificially to share its resources

**Acts 4.32–5.11**

*Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means “son of encouragement”). He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles’ feet.*

*But a man named Ananias, with the consent of his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property; with his wife’s knowledge, he kept back some of the proceeds, and brought only a part and laid it at the apostles’ feet. “Ananias,” Peter asked, “why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back part of the proceeds of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, were not the proceeds at your disposal? How is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You did not lie to us but to God!” Now when Ananias heard these words, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard of it. The young men came and wrapped up his body, then carried him out and buried him.*

*After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. Peter said to her, “Tell me whether you and your husband sold the land for such and such a price.” And she said, “Yes, that was the price.” Then Peter said to her, “How is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out.” Immediately she fell down at his feet and died. When the young men came in they found her dead, so they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. And great fear seized the whole church and all who heard of these things.*

This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

**The Sermon**

Let’s not beat around the bush. This is a troubling and disturbing story. It began so well. The Church made the radical decision to hold its possession in common, in order to help the poor. So, many who owned lands or houses made the radical decision to sell them, laid the proceeds at the feet of the apostles, so that they could redistribute the wealth so that rich and poor would sit at the same table as equals, perhaps for the first time.

It’s worth noting that there is no indication that everyone who had property sold it, but many did.

One example is Joseph, given the name Barnabas by the apostles, ‘Son of encouragement.’ Barnabas will make a number of appearances later in the book of Acts, perhaps most notably as the person who championed Paul’s rehabilitation from persecutor of the Church to Preacher of the Gospel.

Barnabas, is clearly held up as a positive example. He is a man of some means, he sold a field that belonged to him and laid the proceeds at the feet of the disciples. We have no idea whether Barnabas owned other parcels of land or whether this was the only property he had. All we know is her sold this parcel of land and gave it so that the money could be distributed to each as any had need (4.35).

That phrase, ‘distributed to each as any had need’ is in itself interesting. It makes the point that not everyone had the same need. What makes a society harmonious is not so much equality of treatment, because we don’t all need the same things, but equity which seeks to achieve justice by treating people differently dependent on need.

In contrast to Barnabas are Ananias and Sapphira. They are also from a similar socio–economic background to Barnabas, i.e., wealthy enough to have a parcel of land that they could sell. Unlike him they are held up as an example of what NOT to do.

Ananias and Sapphira want the reputation of being sacrificial and generous, perhaps they’re hoping that just as Joseph gets renamed by the apostles in recognition of his action that they too will get the glory of a reputation for generosity, but without making the total sacrifice.

They obviously did some good. The poor will benefit from their generosity. But they lied about the level of their generosity. They intentionally gave the impression that they’d given everything when in fact that they had not.

The outcomes for them are harsh. Both husband and wife them die on the same day, as a consequence of their sin which is described as lying, not to men, but to the Holy Spirit.

Lots of unanswered questions emerge for me here. Where’s the opportunity for repentance? Is death not a disproportionate response? These people were seeking a reputation for generosity. Simply shaming them with the truth might have been enough of a punishment. Is this story meant to be understood as historical? Or is it a sort of parable designed to teach us truths, a bit like the Good Samaritan. Where is the mercy of God in this story?

Let’s first of all acknowledge that this story is highly unusual. This is not typical. Because it’s so nearly unique it’s difficult to extrapolate from this story principles which apply to everyday life.

Second, the story is clearly a warning at multiple levels. First, it’s a warning that even when, perhaps especially when, the Holy Spirit is at work the adversary is also at work. Notice the language of 5.3: ‘Why has Satan filled your heart, to lie to the Holy Spirit?’ That language is all the more striking because it comes at a point in Acts where we’ve been talking about the church being filled with the Holy Spirit, yet here are members of the Church whose heart appears to have been filled by Satan.

The story is also a warning against seeking to get a reputation without doing the work, or making the sacrifice. Some of the current furore about statues seems to me to fit into this category. People in the past have given very generously, whether that is Cecil Rhodes to Oriel College in Oxford University or Edward Colston to the city of Bristol. Their generosity is not in doubt. And there is no question that their generosity has been helpful. However, there is a background of dishonesty, when someone is literally placed on a pedestal for generosity without asking ‘What’s the true story behind that generosity?’ When you know the true story you may no longer wish to put them on a pedestal.

This warning against seeking a reputation without doing the work or making the sacrifice, is one we should heed in our social media generation where it’s all too easy to share a hashtag or jump on a bandwagon, or alternatively, seek to say something counterintuitive to signify we are independent thinkers all without doing the work or making the sacrifice.

Third, the story is a stark reminder of the fragility of life. Of course, we are right to ask where is the mercy of God? Where is the opportunity for repentance? However, we also ought to recognise that life can end for any of us at any point. And it’s not just lives than can end without warning. So can careers and livelihoods, relationships and housing. This pandemic has made that point so forcibly for us all. 40,000 people who were alive 4 months ago are no longer with us. 600,000 jobs have been lost. We don’t always get a second chance to do the right thing, as much as we might like to think we deserve it. So, what we do, and how we live the first-time round really matters.

**HYMN : You call me out upon the waters**

You call me out upon the waters

The great unknown where feet may fail  
And there I find You in the mystery  
In oceans deep my faith will stand

*And I will call upon Your name  
And keep my eyes above the waves  
When oceans rise, my soul will rest in Your embrace  
For I am Yours and You are mine*

Your grace abounds in deepest waters  
Your sovereign hand will be my guide  
Where feet may fail and fear surrounds me  
You've never failed and You won't start now

*So I will call upon Your name…..*

Spirit lead me where my trust is without borders  
Let me walk upon the waters Wherever You would call me  
Take me deeper than my feet could ever wander  
And my faith will be made stronger  
In the presence of my Saviour (x2)

*I will call upon Your name….*

*Joel Houston, Matt Crocker & Salomon Lighthelm*

**Prayers of Intercession**

Gracious God, whose Spirit helps us in our weakness

and guides us in our prayers,

we pray for the Church and for the world in the name of Jesus Christ.

Renew the life and faith of the Church;

strengthen our witness; and make us one in Christ.

Grant that we and all who confess that Christ is Lord

may be faithful in your service

and filled with the Spirit,

that the world may be turned to you.

Lord, in your mercy **hear our prayer.**

Guide the nations in the ways of justice, liberty

and peace; and help them to seek

the unity and welfare of all people.

As we implement an exit strategy for lockdown,

and confront systemic racism

give to all in authority wisdom to know

and strength to do what is right.

Lord, in your mercy **hear our prayer.**

Comfort those in sorrow;

heal the sick in body and mind

and deliver the oppressed.

Grant us compassion for all who suffer,

and help us so to carry one another’s burdens

that we may fulfil the law of Christ.

Lord, in your mercy **hear our prayer.**

Receive our thanks and praise

for all who have served you faithfully here on earth,

and especially those who have revealed to us

your grace in Christ….

May we and all your people

share the life and joy of your kingdom;

through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

*In silence we bring more personal intercessions to God….*

We draw all our prayers together in the prayer that Jesus gave us in its modern form. The words will appear on screen:

**Our Father in heaven,**

**hallowed be your Name,**

**your kingdom come, your will be done,**

**on earth as in heaven.**

**Give us today our daily bread.**

**Forgive us our sins,**

**as we forgive those who sin against us.**

**Save us from the time of trial**

**and deliver us from evil.**

**For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,**

**now and forever. Amen.**

Our Final hymn is a declaration I invite you to make over your lives, homes, workplaces and communities: Holy Spirit, you are welcome here.

**Hymn : There's nothing worth more**

There’s nothing worth more

That will ever come close, nothing can compare  
You're our living hope

Your presence Lord

I've tasted and seen, of the sweetest of loves  
Where my heart becomes free  
And my shame is undone  
Your Presence Lord

*Holy Spirit, you are welcome here  
Come flood this place and fill the atmosphere  
Your Glory God is what our hearts long for  
To be overcome by your presence, Lord*

There's nothing worth more…

I've tasted and seen, of the sweetest of loves…

*Holy Spirit, you are welcome here…*

Let us become more aware of your presence  
Let us experience the Glory of Your Goodness

*Holy Spirit, you are welcome here…*

*Katie Torwalt & Bryan Torwalt*

**THE BLESSING**

The Spirit of truth lead you into all truth,

give you grace to confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,

and strengthen you to proclaim the word and works of God;

and the blessing of God,

Spirit, Son and Father,

remain with you always. Amen.

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