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Withholding Proceeds: The Curious Case of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5: 1-11)

Easter 3

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The lectionary tends to avoid the passage we just had – for fairly obvious reasons. Read in one way, it seems almost like a piece of vaudeville – just ripe for a Monty Python skit. ‘Excuse me, Ananias – was that the full amount you got for selling your property?’ ‘Ah, yes, yes, that was about it – as I recall that was *in fact* what we got for it.’ Cue thunderbolt and sounds of smiting, followed by heavy booted young men carting out the corpse. Time passes – ‘an interval of about three hours’ to be precise. And then Sapphira comes onto the set. ‘Ah excuse me, Sapphira – was that ...’ and so on and so forth. It’s like a brilliant piece of scriptural comedy, except it doesn’t seem as though we’re supposed to find it funny.

But if you read it straight, it just seems repellent. As if, amidst all the heart-warming tales of forgiveness, healing and caring for the poor which pepper the Acts of the Apostles, we’re suddenly landed in the midst of an extremely unsubtle stewardship campaign. One that’s coercive, manipulative and finally violent. So – what are we to make of this story?

This passage follows immediately from our reading last week, and from the testimony that the whole community of those who believed in Christ ‘were of one heart and soul’. No one, we’re told, claimed private ownership of any possessions but they held everything in common. Those who owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds to the apostles, so that a distribution of wealth might be made ‘to each as had any need’ (Acts 4:35). And the example is given of Barnabas, who sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money and laid it at the apostles’ feet. But Ananias

and Sapphira have come up with a different approach. They too have sold a piece of property, but they've kept back some of the proceeds, and brought only a part to lay before the community. This is where the trouble starts. But it's also where we need to pay close attention to the text. Because what I want to suggest is that this is only secondarily about the money.

For a start, Ananias and Sapphira did not have to sell their land. Peter says: 'while it remained unsold, did it not remain your own?' And even after they'd sold it, what they did with the proceeds was up to them: 'were not the proceeds', asks Peter, 'at your disposal'?' But if the issue wasn't how much they gave or whether they gave all they could, what was it about? It seems to have been about the lie – the pretence that they were doing as Barnabas had done, when they weren't. We know they lied because Sapphira tells Peter that the amount they gave the community was the same as they had received: '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"'.

Well – it's not good. But being struck dead seems a lot to pay for that little deception, that little piece of withholding. That's where the sense of coercion seems to come into the text – as if the church is the kind of body that will arrange to have you smited if your tithing isn't up to scratch and you're too scared to admit it. Yet here, I think, is where we need to look closer still. Because, as it turns out, what's really significant in the text is the question of *who* they're lying to.

Peter does not ask Ananias: 'why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the community ...?' He says, rather, 'why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit ...?' Indeed, he goes on, 'you did not lie to us but to God'. Except, this seems impossible. We cannot 'lie' to God to whom 'all hearts are open and from whom no secrets are hidden'. So what's Peter getting at? What I'm beginning to wonder is whether this couple's lie to Holy Spirit did not concern the proceeds of the property, so much as the whole-heartedness of their conversion.

Think of it this way. Ananias and Sapphira are part of the first Christian community – presumably they were present at Pentecost or thereabouts, and they’ve received the gift of the Holy Spirit. They’ve said yes and begun to source their lives in the life of God. But now a little ‘no’ has crept in, a ‘no’ to God – which means that their previous ‘yes’ is being falsified. It’s becoming a lie. Once they opened their hearts, but now they’re turning back in on themselves, seeking to secure life on their own terms apart from dependence on God. They’re betraying trust and refusing responsiveness to the gift and call of Spirit. It’s as if they’re closing up the channel in themselves through which the breath of God’s Spirit may flow; the breath of life is being squeezed out of them. So what happens? They drop dead.

Who knows what actual events lie behind this curious story. But if what I’m suggesting is ‘on the money’ (so speak), then it seems to me that this story is essentially about how life closed to the life of the Spirit is death. It’s about how being half-hearted in our self-giving is a kind of lie – to ourselves, to our community, and to God. And it’s about how this half-heartedness is always going to show up as lack of generosity, as withholding. So much, then, for Ananias and Sapphira. What about us?

We’re reflecting over these few weeks on what it means to be a Christian community. We’ve heard that as the first communities experienced the abundance and freedom of life in the Spirit, they naturally began to share their lives and their possessions in common, so that there was not a ‘needy person among them’. And last week, I spoke of the various ways I see members of our community Benedictus living out of this same Spirit, seeking to ensure each other’s needs are met through such things as deep listening and hospitality, and a commitment to each other’s transformation and growth. I find it an extraordinary privilege to witness and be part of something like this.

What the story of Ananias and Sapphira raises, however, is the question of whole-heartedness and what seems to be a natural human tendency to keep something back, to withhold something of ourselves from God and the full extent of the adventure

of life in the Spirit. And it's about the impact of this withholding on our common life. There's something here I'd like us to reflect on together. But it's a fraught topic and difficult to know how to engage well. That's why I'm raising it with you – inviting you to reflect on it with me.

Here's the issue as I experience it. On the one hand, it matters to me enormously that Benedictus is a place where people experience freedom – the freedom to be, freedom to participate as we like and are ready to, freedom to be here or not. Many of you have said to me what a relief it is to feel like you can be away from church for a week or two or more, and not have to give an account, not feel subtly judged or like you 'should' have been here. I love that. It matters to me enormously that we see our ministry and life as extending far beyond our weekly gatherings – into our mid-week groups, into the other communities we all belong and contribute to, into our vocations in our families and the wider world. God is not enclosed in the church, the mission of God is not just what a church does, and we are a community extended as well as gathered, joined in the Spirit even as we are scattered abroad. This is fundamental to my sense of the spirit of Benedictus and our vocation as a contemplative church.

And yet, there's always a risk – perhaps heightened in a consumer culture like ours – that our participation remains solely on our terms, and what we call 'community' is more like a gathering of convenience – at *our* convenience. We know that to receive all that God would give us calls for wholeheartedness and radical availability. Prayer is at the root of this. But community matters too – for in community we receive from and give to each other, we're re-minded of our practice, and re-sourced in the life of faith. And for me, this isn't about whether everyone's here every week, or how much we give or what activities we're involved in – though these things do make a difference to the whole. But it is about whether we're 'in', whether we've really given ourselves permission to be 'insiders' and see ourselves as co-creators of this community, called together in all our different ways to expand the space of the possible in our world. And

it's about getting present to if and how we might be withholding ourselves, and the real cost of that.

Laurence Freeman says that meditation should never be associated with guilt, and the same goes for our participation in Benedictus. But I invite you to reflect on our common life and your part in it, and to be part of discerning together where *our* fullness of life really lies.