

TFTD A11 Friday 24th April The *koinonia* challenge

Today's reading: Acts 5.1-16

Welcome to your new-look TFTD! And a huge thank-you to my technical support team (you're a star Mandy!) and to Wendy, Anna, Peter and Judy for circulating the messages. Seriously though, I'm on a steep learning curve here, and I've had a lot of help over the past few weeks. Sharing our technical problems and expertise is one of the ways we're learning to help each other as a community.

Through these first chapters of Acts, we've been watching the early church grow in numbers (5000 at the last count) and in *koinonia* or 'fellowship' – growing as a sharing community. Look back at 4.32: one heart and soul, no private ownership, everything held in common. Sounds scary – but what it seems to have meant was not an enforced communism, but a radical, active commitment to looking out for one another, matching the needs within the community to people who had resources to help (4.34). Balancing out the haves and have-nots, the needs and the surpluses (Paul talks about this in 2 Corinthians 8.13-15). Then (as often in Acts) the general principle is followed by two concrete examples. Barnabas the encourager (4.36-37) is a lovely example on the positive side – we shall meet him again. And then (note the ominous 'But' in 5.1) there's Ananias and Sapphira. There's always a 'But'!

Luke's picture of the church as a caring, sharing community is sometimes dismissed as too good to be true. It's a historical fact, though, that the theme of *koinonia*, costly, practical sharing and support, runs right through the New Testament and the early church. In a world without a welfare state, caring for the poor and the sick was a recognized fact about Christian community. It was one of the things that outsiders noticed ('How these Christians love one another!', as one of the emperors noted drily). The same principle inspired the early Christians in the many epidemics that decimated the cities of the Roman world. When everyone else ran away, Christians stayed to nurse the sick. Many died – but many more survived, and the church grew as a result. (If you're interested, you can read the story in Rodney Stark's book *The Rise of Christianity*.)

So what went wrong? If nothing else, the fact that Luke includes the story of Ananias and Sapphira tells us that he knew the church wasn't the perfect society: Christians have their failings like everyone else. But why does he take this particular failing so seriously? I think one reason is that there's something about money that always has the potential to corrupt and destabilize community – that's why there are warnings about the perils of wealth throughout the NT (look at 1 Timothy 6.6-10 for an example). But Ananias' problem wasn't really about money: as Peter says, his property was his own and he could use it as he wished (v.4). The problem is much more about *trust*: Ananias was trying to use his wealth to claim status within the community as a generous benefactor – a status based on a lie. This was a tiny, persecuted community, totally reliant on mutual trust between its members. It's not disagreement that destroys Christian community so much as untruthfulness: the greater the abuse of trust, the greater the damage.

Luke's story is a warning, reminding us that this tiny, sharing community of rich and poor, trying to build a new way of living together, is the dwelling-place of God's holy Spirit. It doesn't even have a building to call its own, but it demands the same kind of respect as the Temple and its treasures. Building a community of mutual sharing and trust is important – so important that it's under the special protection of God's holy Spirit (see what Paul says on this in Philippians 2.1-5). And maybe that's a message with a wider relevance for our world today. Last night's Big Clap was a great reminder of the caring and sharing that's going on across our society. Let's not betray that trust by letting down the people who depend on our support.

Let me close with some words from this morning's reading from Colossians 3.12-17 which struck me as good advice for living in lockdown: *As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other ... Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the same body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly ... and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs not God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God through him.*

God bless, Loveday