

# **THE CALL TO REPENT AND BE SAVED**

**ACTS 5:1-42**

**<sup>1</sup>But a man named Ananias, with the consent of his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property; <sup>2</sup>with his wife's knowledge, he kept back some of the proceeds, and brought only a part and laid it at the apostles' feet. <sup>3</sup>'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? <sup>4</sup>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!' <sup>5</sup>Now when Ananias heard these words, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard of it. <sup>6</sup>The young men came and wrapped up his body, then carried him out and buried him.**

As noted in the commentary on Acts 1:9-11, there was, in the early church, an expectation that a new creation was imminent, a world which would recognise Jesus as the fulfilment of the promises made by God to Israel, a world in which God's will would be done 'on earth as in heaven'. The first Christians expected to see this world. There is evidence of this in Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians, composed c.50AD. The fact that Jesus had been raised to life, and that he was the first fruits of a new harvest was enough to give rise to such an expectation. For this reason, as the same letter of Paul demonstrates, some were shocked when members of the community died without seeing the new creation. The incidents recorded here by Luke seem to witness to the Jerusalem community's falling back to the traditional explanation of these sudden deaths as a punishment for sin. Why did Luke include the incidents here?

Let us turn to the Old Testament, and firstly to the story of Achan (Joshua 7). Again and again throughout the writings of the Old Testament we are reminded that the Promised Land is a gift from the Lord:

Not by their own sword did they win the land, nor did their own arm give them victory; but your right hand, and your arm, and the light of your countenance, for you delighted in them.

– Psalm 44:3

That the people might not forget this, they were forbidden to take any booty of war. All had to be destroyed, lest they attempt to build up their own power and fail to put their trust in God who would provide for them. Achan was the first to break the covenant. He was discovered and stoned to death in the valley of Achor.

Those who were welcomed into the community of Jesus' disciples were promised a full outpouring of the Holy Spirit, a share in the intimacy with God enjoyed by the risen Jesus. Luke has just shown us the fruit of this gift in the generosity shown in the community. Barnabas stands out as an example of this (see 5:37). However, though God's gifts are always unconditionally offered, they are conditionally received. People are free to welcome or to reject the gift. For this reason, Simeon, as he took to himself the infant Jesus, could say: 'This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel' (Luke 2:34). Barnabas is the first offered for our imitation. Ananias is the first offered as a warning. In breaking faith with the community, he is breaking faith with the risen Jesus.

Sapphira conspires with her husband to deceive the community. They are acting in the spirit, not of the Holy One, but of Satan. Giving in to temptation they ‘lie to the Holy Spirit’ (5:4). In doing so they cut themselves off from the life of the community. This can lead only to death. We are reminded of the words of Moses:

I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that  
I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses.  
Choose life so that you and your descendants may live

– Deuteronomy 30:19

Light is also thrown on Luke’s purpose by a reflection on the primeval sin. In its presentation of the garden of paradise, the Book of Genesis gives us a portrait of what life should be as intended by God. However, for paradise to be experienced, we must welcome it as a gift from God. The sin of Adam and Eve is typical of our human sinfulness. We give in to the temptation to want to grasp for ourselves what can come only as a grace. Hence the ambiguity and struggle of the human condition as we receive it and as we hand it on. Because of their sin, Adam and Eve find themselves excluded from the garden.

So it is with Ananias and Sapphira. As commonly in Luke, it is love of material riches that it their downfall: ‘Woe to you who are rich’ (Luke 6:24; see 16:19-31; 18:18-27). There is a link here also with the fate of Judas (see 1:18). Even within the community of the risen Jesus, we can fail to welcome his Spirit. We can try to save ourselves (see Luke 9:34). This sin must be named clearly from the outset.

If anyone secretly entices you — even if it is your brother, your father’s son or your mother’s son, or your own son or daughter, or the wife you embrace, or your most intimate friend — saying, ‘Let us go worship other gods,’ whom neither you nor your ancestors have known ... you must not yield to or heed any such persons. Show them no pity or compassion and do not shield them.

– Deuteronomy 13:6-8

For the first time, Luke calls the community ‘church’ (Greek: *ekklēsia*), a word which highlights the call of the risen Lord in response to which the community gathers to pray, to attend to the teaching of those who witness to Jesus, and to live together in his love. To accept this grace is to follow the example of Barnabas; to hold back in an attempt to secure one’s own advantage is to follow the example of Ananias and Sapphira.

**<sup>7</sup>After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened.**

**<sup>8</sup>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.’ <sup>9</sup>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.’ <sup>10</sup>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. <sup>11</sup>And great fear seized the whole church and all who heard of these things.**

**<sup>12</sup>Now many signs and wonders were done among the people through the apostles.**

**And they were all together in Solomon's Portico.**

**<sup>13</sup>None of the rest dared to join them, but the people held them in high esteem.**

**<sup>14</sup>Yet more than ever believers were added to the Lord, great numbers of both men and women,**

**<sup>15</sup>so that they even carried out the sick into the streets, and laid them on cots and mats, in order that Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he came by.**

**<sup>16</sup>A great number of people would also gather from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those tormented by unclean spirits, and they were all cured.**

'The apostles' teaching' (2:42) is about the life that God has chosen to give to Jesus, and through Jesus to all who welcome Jesus' Spirit. It should not be surprising that the fruit of this Spirit was experienced as something truly wonderful, which, for those who believed, was a sign of God's presence and action among them. Luke has already spoken of the 'awe that came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles' (2:43). Jesus was doing through them what he had done during his own ministry (see 2:22; 4:30).

The apostles are 'together' in the area of the temple where the lame man was cured (see 3:11). In spite of opposition and the fear it aroused, the community continues to grow (see 2:41,47; 4:4).

When John the Baptist sent his disciples to inquire of Jesus whether he was the promised Messiah, Jesus gave this response:

Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them.

– Luke 7:22

When he commissioned the twelve it was 'to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal' (Luke 9:2). Similarly with the seventy:

Cure the sick who are there, and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.'

– Luke 10:9

They want even Peter's shadow to fall on them. Mary was taken under the protective shadow of God's presence at the conception of Jesus (see Luke 1:34). Likewise Peter, James and John on the mountain of Jesus' transfiguration (see Luke 9:34). Jesus 'laid his hands on each of the sick and cured them' (Luke 4:40). The people are amazed: 'with authority and power he commands unclean spirits, and out they come!' (Luke 4:36). 'All in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them' (Luke 6:19). Luke is demonstrating here that Jesus is carrying on this same life-giving ministry through the apostles.

The apostles are arrested and imprisoned, but they are miraculously rescued by an 'angel of the Lord'. Again and again during their escape from Egypt, the Israelites are miraculously protected by an angel of the Lord. It was the same for Joshua, whose army was led by a divine messenger (see Joshua 5:13-15). It is clear from Judges 2:1-5, that the angel is the Lord himself, spoken of in this way out of respect for God's transcendent holiness.

Freed by God, the apostles are sent to the temple, the place where God is 'enthroned on the praises of Israel' (Psalm 22:3). There they are to proclaim to the people 'the whole message about this life'.

There are a number of links between the language used here to describe the discovery of the empty prison and the description of the discovery of the empty tomb in Luke's account of the resurrection of Jesus. Both are set at 'daybreak' (Greek: *orthros*; see Luke 24:1). In both situations those who come are unable to find what they are seeking (see Luke 24:2-3), and they return and report what they have experienced (see Luke 24:9). In both scenes people are 'perplexed' (see Luke 24:4). Jesus' disciples are experiencing his death and resurrection in their lives.

The authorities are afraid of being stoned by the people (compare Luke 20:6), and so they decide to act against the apostles without the crowd knowing (compare Luke 22:6). What happened to Jesus is happening again to those who are his witnesses.

**<sup>17</sup>Then the high priest took action; he and all who were with him (that is, the sect of the Sadducees), being filled with jealousy, <sup>18</sup>arrested the apostles and put them in the public prison. <sup>19</sup>But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors, brought them out, and said,**

**<sup>20</sup>'Go, stand in the temple and tell the people the whole message about this life.'<sup>21</sup>When they heard this, they entered the temple at daybreak and went on with their teaching.**

**When the high priest and those with him arrived, they called together the council and the whole body of the elders of Israel, and sent to the prison to have them brought. <sup>22</sup>But when the temple police went there, they did not find them in the prison; so they returned and reported, <sup>23</sup>'We found the prison securely locked and the guards standing at the doors, but when we opened them, we found no one inside.'**

**<sup>24</sup>Now when the captain of the temple and the chief priests heard these words, they were perplexed about them, wondering what might be going on.**

**<sup>25</sup>Then someone arrived and announced, 'Look, the men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people!'**

**<sup>26</sup>Then the captain went with the temple police and brought them, but without violence, for they were afraid of being stoned by the people.**

**<sup>27</sup>When they had brought them, they had them stand before the council. The high priest questioned them,**

**<sup>28</sup>saying, 'We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man's blood on us.'**

**<sup>29</sup>But Peter and the apostles answered, 'We must obey God rather than any human authority.**

**<sup>30</sup>The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree [Deuteronomy 21:23].**

**<sup>31</sup>God exalted him at his right hand [Psalm 118:16] as Leader and Saviour that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.**

**<sup>32</sup>And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him.'**

In this encounter between the apostles and the court, the focus is on the challenge posed to the religious authorities by the words and actions of the apostles.

The religious authorities are the ones mainly responsible for having Jesus killed (see 4:10). It was they who rejected Jesus (see 4:18). They are guilty of 'this man's blood'. Peter, however, has already recognised that they acted in ignorance (see 3:17). Now, together with the other apostles, he invites them to let Jesus' blood come upon them, the 'blood of the covenant' (Luke 22:20), to bring about a change of mind and heart, that they may experience salvation (compare 4:12). Earlier, Peter and John had said: 'we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard' (4:20). Now the apostles insist that they cannot obey human authority when it is in opposition to the authority of God (see 4:18-19).

The call to repentance and pardon (compare 2:38; also Luke 24:47) is phrased in terms of the Jewish feast of Atonement (Yom Kippur). Pardon can come only from God and the repentance which must be present for forgiveness to be effective is itself a gift of God. They need God to put his law within them and to write it on their hearts that they may learn to obey (see Jeremiah 31:33). God is offering them this gift through the one whom they rejected and crucified.

God has exalted his suffering servant (see Isaiah 52:13). He is at God's right hand, for God exercises his power to save through him. He is their Leader (Greek: archēgos), the one who is the source of the signs and wonders that have been happening in Jerusalem, the 'Initiator of life' (3:15). He is their Saviour (compare 4:12; also Luke 2:11), if they would have 'faith in his name' (3:16) and obey God. Only God can save (see Isaiah 43:3,11), and God has chosen to bring about salvation through Jesus, his Messiah.

The apostles are 'witnesses to these things' (see 1:8; 2:32; 3:15; and Luke 24:48). Therefore, they must remain open to the inspiration, direction and the surprise of the Holy Spirit.

Like Herod who moved from being perplexed (see Luke 9:7-9) to wanting to kill Jesus (see Luke 13:31), the council angrily proposes to treat the apostles just as they had treated Jesus, and have them killed. Gamaliel was Paul's teacher (see 22:3). As the spokesperson for the minority Pharisee party, he cautions against the action proposed by the Sadducees.

Josephus puts the uprising of Theudas during the governorship of Fadus (44-46AD), some ten years after the events being described here. If Josephus is correct, Luke has made a mistake here. The point which Luke is making is that not all the council was determinedly against the apostles, just as not all the council was against Jesus (see Joseph of Arimathea, Luke 23:50-53). Faithful to the teaching of Israel, Gamaliel advises the council to wait and see, following the advice of the Torah which, in answer to the question 'How can we recognize a word that the Lord has not spoken?', replies:

If a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord but the thing does not take place or prove true, it is a word that the Lord has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously.

– Deuteronomy 18:22

The reaction of the apostles to being flogged, like Jesus (Luke 22:63), recalls Jesus' words:

Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

– Luke 6:22-23

The authorities may try to stop the apostles. They cannot stop the word of God, either in the public life of the temple, or in the homes where Christians gathered to break bread (see 2:46).

<sup>33</sup>When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them.

<sup>34</sup>But a Pharisee in the council named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, respected by all the people, stood up and ordered the men to be put outside for a short time.

<sup>35</sup>Then he said to them, 'Fellow Israelites, consider carefully what you propose to do to these men.

<sup>36</sup>For some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a number of men, about four hundred, joined him; but he was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and disappeared.

<sup>37</sup>After him Judas the Galilean rose up at the time of the census and got people to follow him; he also perished, and all who followed him were scattered. <sup>38</sup>So in the present case, I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone; because if this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; <sup>39</sup>but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them — in that case you may even be found fighting against God!

They were convinced by him, <sup>40</sup>and when they had called in the apostles, they had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. <sup>41</sup>As they left the council, they rejoiced that they were considered worthy to suffer dishonour for the sake of the name. <sup>42</sup>And every day in the temple and at home they did not cease to teach and proclaim Jesus as the Messiah.