

Community Life

A Challenging Incident.

Duddington Church has been transformed! Out has gone the dust and clutter; the weeds and the ivy. In has come new lighting, polished pews, lime washed walls and a new hope. How has this happened? Well, the short answer is community life: the contributions which each of you have made over a number of years but recently focussed and partly encouraged by tragic events. I hope it will go down in the history of the village as a resurgence, a new enthusiasm, a new beginning even....and you have done it yourselves. This is a 21st century example of a miracle.

Yesterday afternoon I called in to Morcott Church to drop some cards about Confirmation. The chancel was turned upside down. Some invisible person was doing the cleaning – and serious cleaning too! It reminded me of a corner of The Vatican where a 13th century bronze statue of St. Peter is to be found. It is a favourite destination of pilgrims who come to kiss the feet of St. Peter. The bronze toe glistens even brighter than your chancel floor yesterday. Such is the veneration of pilgrims and the dedication of those who regularly clean this church. Compare these signs of devotion to the shoddy story in our epistle today.

South Luffenham Church is one of the best organized churches I have ever met! Why is that? I can't quite put my finger on the precise reason but I think it is something to do with leadership by example including the example of generosity as well as an awareness of pulling together. South Luffenham may well have studied carefully the challenging threads of our first lesson this evening.

Our epistle today – from that racy history of the early church, the Acts of the Apostles - shines a light on a delicate moment in the history of the infant church. Ananias and Sapphira had sold some land and given some of the proceeds to the Infant Church in Jerusalem. The money was entirely theirs to do as they wished but Ananias lied to Peter about their promise to the Church. Ananias made a great show of giving the money to the Church. He claimed to make a great sacrifice but secretly kept some of the proceeds for himself. He and his wife had committed fraud against the Church and therefore against God. The results were startling. They read like a Brian Rix farce. He died and was carried out by some young men. When they returned, Sapphira – who had also lied – dropped down dead and was taken for burial by the same young men.

The Early Churches practised a system of voluntary sharing. It was not an early form of communism. The members were entirely free to contribute whatever they wished. They had no medieval church to support. The main purpose of any collection was to support the poor and there was good and bad practice illustrated in The Acts of the Apostles. It was written by Luke, who also wrote the gospel of his name. He was an educated man, probably a doctor. His Greek was precise and he reported both good and bad experiences of church life. Just a few verses before our epistle begins, Barnabas had also sold a field and gave the money to the apostles. But Ananias and Sapphira – members of the same church - were both fraudulent and hypocritical.

So why did Luke record this ugly story? Ananias and Sapphira were caught between greed and generosity, as indeed most of us are. Peter, the head of the Jerusalem Church, was severe in his criticism of them both because they couldn't see that they were defrauding not just the community but the poor and ultimately God. It was a blasphemy against the Holy Spirit and the punishment in those days for such a crime was death.

How much should we give?

Lent is a time to assess our commitment and generosity to Christ and his church as we prepare for God's sacrifice to the world at Easter. We are in the middle of a Stewardship campaign in this Benefice – an opportunity to consider how much we give in time, talents and treasure to Christ and his Church. We noted that Ananias and Sapphira contributed to the common purse of the Church in Jerusalem, as we do too in this parish. We do it in a variety of ways: cleaning, planning, fund-raising, prayer, worship and financial support. Our gifts on the plate are symbolized at The Offertory Procession when money is presented at the altar together with bread and wine. All are important to our common life; none is profane. It's often seen as embarrassing to talk about money in Church but without it, we wouldn't get very far. Our giving to the church needs to be reviewed regularly just as we re-calculate our energy bill or car tax.

The tricky thing is calculating how much we should give. Energy and tax come with a fixed price but our response to God's generosity does not. Earlier in this series of Lenten sermons we heard about the Jewish tithe – giving 10% of the income back to the Temple in gratitude. The Church of England has tried to keep in touch with this standard of generosity by encouraging us to give 5% of our disposable income to The Church and 5% to other charitable work. We have to work that out by ourselves. It is not so much a financial exercise as a spiritual exercise: taking our own temperature of generosity. No one can tell you how much to give. No one told Ananias and Sapphira how much to give but only that they should be honest in their giving. There is no limit, just as there is no limit to God's love for us.

We live in an area of relative affluence. We cannot deny that. The National average for Anglican stewardship donations is £11 a week; the diocesan average is £10.22 but the average in our benefice is just £6.40 a week. Are we being honest with God, with our community or the poor whom we try to help? These were the challenges to Ananias and Sapphira. It is our challenge too. If you are not yet a member of the Stewardship planned giving scheme then please join us today by asking your wardens for a form. For me, membership of this stewardship scheme has been both challenging and transformational. All we usually need is a nudge in the right direction.

Amen.