

# True church

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[ 0 : 00 ] Thank you, Kate. So with these verses open in front of us, a question this morning just! How do you tell the things that are true and authentic from the things that are false and fake?

! Meg's brother Alistair used to be a bit of a global traveller and adventurer and he came back from the South Pacific Islands one time with a gift for us. This four-pronged wooden fork and it's a kind of classic gift from my brother-in-law and we looked at it and we said what is it? What is it? He said it's an authentic old island instrument, forgive me if you're squeamish, that cannibals used to help them eat. Not the kind of gift you normally get so we looked at it, he's a bit of a strange man, Meg's brother, we looked at it and we said well is it? Is it really? Or is it just a little bit of tourist rubbish that's false and fake? You can say what you think. I imagine at the end of the day, living here in the UK, you're not particularly fussed either way about this little four-pronged fork that I'm going to put away. But telling the true and authentic from the false and fake is very, very important. It's really important when it comes to the things of God and religion and religious communities and the church. Think of this Christian faith that many of us here this morning are committed to. Think of this church family, St John's Orchard Park, with our chat on a Sunday about Jesus and salvation and following the apostles' teaching.

Amongst all the religious and spiritual options available in our world today and the stacks of them, how do you tell the true and authentic from the false and the fake? It's really important.

We've just read, we've just heard read Acts 4 and 5 open in front of us and in Jerusalem, which is where this is set, not two months after the death and resurrection of Jesus, we find in the book of Acts, the early church, the early moments here, we find two religious communities, two in Jerusalem, the first is old and traditional and established and powerful. It's the people of Israel with their scriptures and temple and rulers and elders. And now in Jerusalem, 2,000 years ago, amongst and from them, a little new community forms. They're a radical group. They're led by the apostles who claim that all the Jewish scriptures are now fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth, whom God raised from the dead, and that now is the time to turn to Jesus Christ and find forgiveness and be saved forever. So in Jerusalem, there are two religious communities, two gatherings, one old and established, the second small and new, the early church. And what Luke wants us to do in part at the start of Acts is he wants his first readers and he wants us to have absolute confidence that one of these communities is the real deal.

In one of these communities, you'll find true, authentic, real, life-changing relationship with the living God, just one of them. Back at the end of chapter 2, if you wanted to, you could flick back just two pages. Peter, having proclaimed that the risen Jesus is Lord and Messiah, there's 3,000 people who turn, they receive forgiveness and the gift of the Holy Spirit. And then straight away at the end of chapter 2 in verses 42 to 47, what Luke does is provides a beautiful little snapshot of God's new community of believers in Jesus of the church who, verse 42, devote themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer, and everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. Little snapshot. Introduction this is, in our verses today, 432 to 511, what Luke does is he takes that little end of chapter 2 snapshot and makes it bigger for us to say to say to us, look, look at these people, look at these first believers in Jesus gathered around the apostles and their teaching, because here is where God is at work and here is where the Holy Spirit acts in power. So do you want authentic religion? Do you want to be part of the true people of God,

[ 4 : 49 ] God at work amongst us? Well, says God through Acts here, we will see it back then and we'll find it in 21st century Britain, in the church of Jesus Christ, in a community like this, and a community like this.

So look at it with me, dive in with me to these verses. At the end of verse 31, the apostles and believers were all filled with the Holy Spirit and they spoke the word of God boldly. Now this morning, chapter 4 and verses 32 to 7, here's what I want us to see.

In the true Holy Spirit filled God at work here church, let's get it going. Adam, do you think you'd have a fiddle with that? While Adam's fiddling, just try and listen in.

Here's the point, in the true Holy Spirit filled church, what you see here in Acts 4 is generous care, generous care. That's the mark of God at work. So let me read verses 32 to 35 with this above behind us.

Look at this. All the believers were one in heart and mind and no one claimed that any of their possessions was their own but they shared everything they had. With great power, the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus and God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there was no needy person among them. For from time to time, those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet and it was distributed to anyone who had need. What do you think of that? Notice here from the top in these verses, verse 32, a deep unity in this community. All the believers were one in heart and mind, not a casual community club, not just happening to be in the same building once a week believing the same stuff. They were united in heart and mind. They were deeply committed to one another, committed to following Jesus as one, sisters and brothers together, one in heart and mind. This deep unity, just following through the text, shows itself next in a radical attitude. Look at this, verse 32. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own but they shared everything they had. Doesn't mean they lived in a commune without private possessions. Nor does it mean they had one shared bank account which everyone put their pay into. No, no. They lived in their own homes, they had their own private property but now, this is the change, none of them said anymore, this is all my stuff, it's mine, get off. Instead of holding on to their cash and their land and their goods, their hearts were softened. And they said, these possessions

[ 8 : 12 ] God has given me are for sharing. I'm happy, I'm ready to share all I have with my brothers and sisters who are in need. That's pretty radical. Like by nature, our hands grip on so very tightly to our cash and possessions, don't they? Can you imagine what kind of power is needed to bring about this kind of massive change? Verse 33, with great power, the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

This is the message at the heart of this community. He's the risen one, he'll restore all things, salvation is found in him and with the apostles teaching ringing in their ears, God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all. So God's favour, his Holy Spirit so powerfully at work in this community that this radical attitude led to generous action. God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that, verse 34, there was no needy person among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales, put it at the apostles' feet and it was distributed to anyone who had need. Isn't that wonderful? In this believing community, there is no one left without food or clothing or warmth or shelter. If you are ill or disabled, if you're an orphan or a widow, if for any reason you are not able to provide for yourself, your brothers and sisters will help. The state may help today. There are times when the state may not, your brothers and sisters will help. They will. So it means, say I'm a Christian believer and I've got possessions, seeing the need in my church family I belong to, I will sell my second car, sell my first car if I need to. I'll dive into my bank account. I'll take the money I would have spent on doing up the bathroom and I will make sure it is given to those who need it. Genuine, generous care.

And it's here because Luke would have us know, Luke the writer of Acts, that this is an absolute giveaway, it's an absolute standout mark of the true people of God. In the Old Testament, in Deuteronomy chapter 15, it might come up, it has.

Moses spoke in the Old Testament about how things would be for God's people in the promised land. Deuteronomy 15, verses 4 and 5. There will be no needy person among you, for in the land the Lord your God is giving you to possess as an inheritance, he will richly bless you, if only you fully obey the Lord your God and are careful to follow all these commands I've given you today.

That was the promise, that was the do this.

And yet when the people of Israel arrived in their land, they didn't obey their God. And with hard hearts and tight fists, they neglected the needy, just like the Pharisees and others in the gospel. But now in Acts 4, look, the promise of Deuteronomy is fulfilled.

[ 11 : 35 ] Not through the temple authorities, but in this community of Jesus followers. Verse 34, there was no needy person among them, because it is amongst those gathered around the apostles and their teaching that God is at work, bringing blessing and fulfilling his promises. In the true, Holy Spirit-filled, God at work here, church, you should see, you will see radical and generous care.

And what will we do with these verses? On the one hand, all of Luke and Acts, part one and part two of Luke's work, is here to give us confidence. Us now, who, like them, believe in and follow Jesus. The church, then and now, devoted to the apostles' teaching, is where you find true, authentic, life-changing relationship with God.

But more than that, this generous care, very straightforwardly, is here for us to gladly copy. Talk about what we do with our money and possessions can often lead to us looking away, or feeling glum and guilty, because the last piece of us so often to be touched by the gospel is so often our wallet or our banking app. But rather than making us feel guilty, seems to me, this picture of the early church is meant to very positively draw us in. Don't you think?

How good to live like this? How good to be so blessed by God and so touched by his powerful grace, that we're so united and so committed to one another, that with soft hearts and open hands, we are generous with the possessions he's blessed us with. That is how it should be.

No needy person among us. Not by enforced taxation, but by Holy Spirit brought about from the heart generosity.

[ 13 : 51 ] We're meant to read this, this picture of the early church, and we're meant to say, I'll be like, I want to be like this. In my better moments, I do want to be like this. So help me God.

That might not happen in exactly the same way. And for starters, there's no apostles anymore to whom you bring your money and put it at their feet. Later in the New Testament, Paul does speak of a church having a list of widows, 1 Timothy chapter 5, some kind of formal list of those who are really in need, whom the church no needs help.

At the least in a church our size, we should feel able to say if we're struggling to make ends meet. We should feel able to do that without shame. And we can begin to notice when others are in need. Grow to know one another significantly and deeply enough that we notice and we see.

And then just get on and help. I'm going to say we should do that. It happens. It does happen amongst us. So quietly in the background.

[ 15 : 05 ] It's so beautiful to see that happen. Money quietly given, clothes and food shared. It can happen. It does happen amongst us. And this kind of generous care, right down deep in us, it will, it should overflow to others as well.

Don't you think? I mean, Acts chapter 11, Christians in Antioch hear a famine is coming, and so they give a generous gift to brothers and sisters living 300 miles away.

Because that's what the church does, rightly, with the Holy Spirit in us. Maybe there's lots more to explore here, practically and organisationally.

But for starters today, in this next month, will you keep your eyes and ears open to the needs of others? And then with God's grace, powerfully at work in you, will you sell something on eBay or Gumtree, Gumtree's free, on eBay if you want.

Will you sell something? Or delve into your bank account and get money out and then generously give it? Because in the true Holy Spirit-filled church, you see generous care, that's what you see, and it's wonderful and gorgeous.

[ 16 : 24 ] But not just that. Here in the early church, there's a second mark of God at work. First, generous care. Second, more briefly in these verses, liars laid bare.

Read along with me. In chapter 4, verse 36, we meet one man who is full of the Holy Spirit. Look, Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas, it means son of encouragement, sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet.

That's good, that's really good. But now meet another man. Chapter 5, verse 1. Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property, which looks good.

And yet, verse 2, with his wife's full knowledge, he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet. Straight away, there's something not right here.

That sounds almost like Adam and Eve, husband and wife, acting together with full knowledge. And Peter sees right through what they do. Peter said, Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land?

[ 17 : 48 ] What's he done wrong? Instead of being full of the Holy Spirit, Satan has filled his heart and Ananias has lied. It's a bit tricky to put together all the details, but it looks as though he's come with his money and pretended he was giving everything from the sale, when in fact he was secretly keeping some for himself.

He's a believer, Ananias, yet he lies. He makes himself out to be much more generous and sacrificial than he really is. It is subtle. I mean, he was free to do what he wanted with his land. Peter says so in verse 4. Didn't the land belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? You can share what you want for sure. And so what made you think of doing such a thing?

Secretly keeping some money and pretending you're giving the full amount lying. To which someone might say, well, what's a little lie between you and me?

Except Peter says in verse 3, you have lied to the Holy Spirit. And, end of verse 4, you have not lied just to human beings, but to God.

[ 19 : 10 ] You know, a community of believers sitting on blue plastic chairs in a hall, it's not a human club where anything goes.

This is the church of God. We're the people in whom the Holy Spirit works actively and is present among us in awesome and holy power.

And Peter says here, to lie so blatantly like this in a church, to the church, is a lie to the Holy God himself. Which is wicked and satanic.

And so, in verse 5, when Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. That is the immediate judgment of a Holy God who will not have his church marred by lies. And great fear seized all who heard what happened.

You think, for sure. And then some young men came forward, wrapped up his body and carried him out and buried him. Because that is how it can be when you deal with the Holy God, the living God.

[ 20 : 20 ] You heard the rest of the story. In verse 7, about three hours later, his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. You think, Sapphira, don't lie. Please don't lie. Peter asked her, tell me, this amount of money here.

Is this the price you and Ananias got for the land? Yes, she said, this is the price. Peter said to her, how could you conspire to test the spirit of the Lord?

Listen, the feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door and they will carry you out also. And at that moment, she fell down at his feet and died. And then the young men came in and, finding her dead, carried her out and buried her beside her husband.

It's not make-believe. It's not olden times, this. I wonder if this incident here might not just jolt us this morning. We who are believers.

That is, with the Holy Spirit in and with us. We don't just believe that, this is true. We live today in the presence of Almighty God.

[ 21 : 26 ] And so we can't mess around with Christianity and church. We mustn't put on a show pretending to be pure when we're not.

Or pretending to be generous when we're not. And we can't bend the truth and we mustn't lie in his presence and think we'll be all safe and fine because we won't be.

He sees us and he knows us at St. John's. And our God can't stomach lies or hypocrisy. And he's absolutely committed to the purity of his people and the honour of his name.

And it is more than possible that right now today, were you to lie to him and test him like this, you could face his immediate judgment. And if not today, then unless we repent, one day we may be perishing.

We may perish. Because God won't be mocked. In the words of that old Johnny Cash song, go tell that long-tongued liar, sooner or later God will cut you down.

[ 22 : 35 ] And in verse 11, great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events. We asked at the beginning, how do you tell the true and authentic from the false and the fake, but not with that?

In the things of God, in religions and religious communities, how do you tell which is the real deal? How do you tell the people amongst whom God is truly at work? And here in Jerusalem, there's two religious communities gathered around the rulers and elders of Israel, in a soon-to-be-destroyed temple.

There is no life now. There's only hostility to Jesus. But in the early church amongst these believers in Jesus, gathered around the apostles, what do you see? You see the presence and grace and power of God, and a group of Holy Spirit-filled people who are united and generous and purified and gripped by fear and awe, living in the presence of a holy God.

Do you want to be part of the true people of God? Do you want to experience authentic relationship with the living God?

This is it. This is it. It should be. It is. As we together, in the 21st century, believe in Jesus and stick with Jesus and gather around the apostles' teaching and experience the Holy Spirit's powerful work, making us generous and bold and as we live in awe of our holy God.

[ 24 : 17 ] there is a do for this week and onwards concretely practically do give yourself in generous care of your church family because there should be no needy person among us there really shouldn't for sure there is a don't for this week and onwards like don't pretend to be more godly than you are and in your life do not lie to the god who won't be mocked together as a group of people with the holy spirit let's well we'll sing we'll share the lord's supper we'll talk and catch up and care for one another and eat and it will look so normal and natural but actually it will be a supernatural thing as we do that let's do that in the next hour and a quarter and then together as a church over these coming year that's love and trust and serve our gracious and holy god let me lead us in a prayer and then we're going to sing together all the believers were one in heart and mind almighty god help us this morning to believe and know what's true make us together please a group of people who believe in christ and stick with the apostles teaching and experience the power of your holy spirit in us please loosen our wallets make us full of generosity to one another and flowing out to those around us make us those who live in reverent awe before you save us from hypocrisy and impurity and lies we would please you we would live humbly and boldly and reverently before you and we pray that you would help us together to grow over this coming year may your holy spirit work in us we ask in jesus name amen you