

Folks as I was reflecting on what to say today, it is impossible to escape the fact that we are in the most uncertain of times. I know that for me every day there's that thought about what the latest Executive statement will say, what next will happen as part of a lock down measure or a circuit breaker. Today as we celebrate the Lord of the Harvest, visually we see the impact that this virus has on things. Our churches are not ordained with loads of fruit and provision because our nursing homes aren't permitted to take stuff into the elderly. Families are now seeing loved ones in Nursing Homes by appointment only, Hospitals are beginning to restrict families from entering regularly. There is an incredible need out there for compassion, and yet I feel that a lot of society is moving back to a self centred approach again. It's back to the toilet roll issue. I went into Asda this past week to buy items for home, and was amazed that there wasn't a single toilet roll left. You see the challenge for us is to refocus back on the Lord's call – to take our eyes off ourselves, and put them back on what God has called us to be. There's definitely a real sense of need out there, and in this season as we consider the Lord of the Harvest, I believe that God is teaching us that he will always provide for us, but we have got to re-evaluate what he has called US to be.

Harvest helps us in our western context to appreciate that our perceived needs require evaluation. It's the irony of coming into the house after doing work in the garden and for me to say to Alison, I need a drink. We don't really need a drink. It's not as though our life depends on it at that very moment. And the truth is that we can reach over to the tap, or into the fridge and get ourselves a refreshing drink within seconds. But here is real need - do you know that according to UNICEF across our world there are 785 million people who don't have clean drinking water close to home. Or the World Health Organisation states that a newborn baby dies every minute from infection caused by the lack of safe clean water. Now that folks IS a need right there.

All of us can have our needs met very easily. And yet across the world there are needs that are going to take decades before they are properly dealt with. In fact at times I know I think to myself, how on earth will these real needs be ever met. The world is a mess.

However before we get into a place of despair on a day of celebration as we consider the Harvest God who does provide, then as a follower of Jesus we need to understand that we have been placed by God for this time to be a light of hope to a messed up world, to plant seeds in people's minds which the Holy Spirit can work through. So as people who proclaim the goodness of God, what can we do as society around us plunges into another wave?

Do we get out into the streets again as we did before and help people in our community? Yes, we do. Do we begin to pray? Yes, we do. Do we engage with political representatives to see what they can do? Yes, we do.

But actually the answer to the problems of the world are in our passage today. We don't have to guess how God would handle this. He has given us the answer.

Matthew 9:36 says 'When he [JESUS] saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."'

The answer to the problems of the world is to send out workers into his harvest field. And if you now move over to chapter 10 verse 1 we see what he does about it. Look what it says, 'Jesus called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out impure spirits and to heal every disease and sickness'. Jesus' solution to the problems is to send out the disciples.

Jesus doesn't say that he needs to work harder for us at getting round more people and heal them. He says, we need more disciples, to be sent out into the harvest, IN HIS NAME. He says that we, his disciples, are the solution.

And so as we've been studying the Book of Acts we have seen the life, the passion, the equipping of the Holy Spirit in these early believers. It's all great. They have been sent out. But over time, over centuries, that passion, that life in God's people gets lost. And so today, where is God's Church when it comes to being sent out into the harvest field? Where are you today? Because if you're a Christian, on this Harvest Sunday then you're a disciple who is called to go out into the harvest field. There's no getting away from that. If you were a disciple in Matthew 10:1 what would you do? Would you drive out impure spirits and heal every disease and sickness? I think most people who claim to be Christians would not have the foggiest notion what to do. Frankly, the easy answer when it comes to the issues of harvest are to put some fruit around our windows, because what I'm preaching for harvest seems just a bit too hard doesn't it.

In the world in which we live in today, we need more disciples that are true to the understanding of what they are here to do. If it's just about sitting in church on a Sunday then you've got this all wrong. And in order to get more disciples for the harvest, then today's disciples need to go out and make disciples. Remember the last thing that Jesus said before he ascended to his Father in heaven – Matthew 28:19, "Go and make disciples of all nations...." That's what he told us to do. Unfortunately the Church has lost that vision today. God continues to be faithful and provide for us, as we remember this harvest time, and yet his Church disobeys or ignores the true call he has placed on us.

These early disciples turned the world upside down. They made an amazing start, but then things happened in the history of the Church as people became more fixated in their church buildings or their church vestments or their church laws.

Folks, today as we face a crisis in our world, let's recognise that we are also in danger of living a crisis in our churches as we lose sight of what Jesus called us to be. Because at its heart if we are to be disciples sent out into the harvest field then we have got to understand clearly what that means. It doesn't mean more programmes. It doesn't mean simply going to church. It means becoming more like Christ in our daily lives and helping those around us become more like Christ. That's how we solve the issues of today in the eyes of Jesus.

So from our reading today, here's a couple of things to help us consider where we are at :

- Are we gathering to pray for the lost souls in our community that they would turn to Christ?

- Are we laying hands on people and seeking that God would heal them in Jesus' name?
- Are we sharing the Gospel with our neighbours that brings transformation to their lives?

As a Church we have to ask ourselves at this Harvest Time, are we “sending out workers into the Lord’s harvest field”? Are we helping people become more like Jesus everyday? It’s not to criticise folks, because I have to look at my own life and examine it, but I don’t believe the people of God are doing enough. I don’t believe we are honouring what Jesus has called us to go and do, especially in these days when we are in a crisis in our country. I don’t have my phone ringing regularly at the amount of calls from parishioners offering to get out there and share the gospel.

And so I think we need to challenge our attitudes to the harvest that God has called on each of us. If you are involved in a programme or an organisation within the parish but you haven’t gathered to pray for the lost souls of those who connect with you, if you don’t take the opportunity to lay hands and pray healing on those people, if you don’t share the Gospel and bring people to Christ, then can I seriously ask you to evaluate in this time what you are doing for Him. Jesus says, “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few”. That’s because many don’t have a right understanding of what being a disciple truly means. Our sole purpose has to be about becoming more like Christ in our daily lives and then helping those around us become more like Christ – and so what are you doing about that?.

So if we’ve got the point of this, then how do we do something about it today? Well the answer is that we’ve got to start being disciples ourselves. And again just in case we are not clear about what that means, it means we first must come to Jesus ourselves. In the earlier chapters of Matthew we see people coming to Jesus and they are healed, something happens to them when they encounter the Lord, and then at the start of chapter 10 we see Jesus sending them out. So it’s those who have come to Jesus who are then sent out. We can’t be sent out if we are not disciples.

And crucial to that is chapter 4:17 where Jesus charges the people to repent. It might not seem very harvest-like to ask this question, but have you repented? Have you recognised that you need to change direction and follow Jesus’ priorities and not your own? To be disciples who bring in the harvest we have got to be people who repent. We’ve also got to be people who believe in what Jesus says in his Word. It determines and forms who you are. You rely upon it for living. You put your faith in him. So do you believe and follow his Word in your life? And then finally being an disciple you learn how Jesus does things. An apprentice watches what the boss does and then follows it, taking guidance along the way from the master. That’s what we want disciples to be, they follow what Jesus does. Jesus becomes the model by which everything you do is done.

And that folks is what’s happening to the disciples from early on in Matthew through to chapter 9. Now in chapter 10 Jesus says ok, I’m sending you into the harvest. It’s over to you. That’s what disciples do, they do what Jesus does. And as Jesus has a heart for the broken people around him, he desires that his disciples develop that same heart of compassion. Do you have that heart of compassion in the way that Jesus does? When you

see people who are hurting and harassed does it affect you, or do you start putting your own limitations in the way? Jesus saw the need, and as we become more like Christ we start to see people in the way that Jesus does.

So as I come to a close, I'd like to ask you this question. If Jesus calls us as his disciples into the harvest field, then how does that make you feel? Does it make you feel uncomfortable? It should because it means relying on his Holy Spirit to direct you in everything. You can't do this on your own. And so in that call as a disciple to become more like Jesus, and helping those around us become more like Jesus, **where are you?** Today are you realising that you need to surrender your life to Jesus, that you stop following your goals and give everything over to him. If that is you don't do anything else, just surrender today to him. Or have you come to Jesus, but you are not being trained? Today can you begin to take that seriously. Because it's only then, like the difference between Chapter 9 and then the start of chapter 10 that you can be sent out into the harvest. I can share lots with you about what the harvest is like in Ballyclare, but first find that next step today. Everyone here today, whether online or at the services in church, can make a next step. Is it to come to Jesus, is it you being serious about getting trained, is it you getting disciplined, is it you discipling someone else, is it you serving? Folks this harvest, we have got to get serious. We have got to stop having church or going to church, and get serious about making disciples. The real needs of a community are there, but Jesus requires true disciples in order that they are sent out. We have given items today to the foodbank. How can you give yourself to him for his service?

Let me pray.

God help us to take this seriously this harvest. Help us to hear your call to make that next step. Lord I pray today that you would raise up in this place, workers for the harvest field. Equip us for what you would want to do at this time. May we take seriously what it means to be a disciple of you. And may we see the needs in the way that only you can. Bless you that you would use us for your mission, and may these folks today declare their obedience to your call. In Jesus' name. Amen.