

If I'm really honest this morning I actually find the Harvest Services to be one of the more difficult services to preach at. And the reason for this is down to what harvest has become. I don't know whether you were aware of how Harvest thanksgivings came to be? There was a rather eccentric rector of a church in Morwenstow, Cornwall called Rev Robert Hawker. It was in 1843 that he invited parishioners to a special thanksgiving service for the harvest. On September 13, 1843, he put up a notice in the church for his new service: "Let us gather together in the chancel of our church, and there receive, in the bread of the new corn, that blessed sacrament which was ordained to strengthen and refresh our souls." Victorian hymns such as "We plough the fields and scatter", "Come ye thankful people, come" and "All things bright and beautiful" helped popularise his idea and spread the annual custom of decorating churches with home-grown produce for the Harvest Festival service.

And where I think we have lost this idea slightly, is that if you were to ask many young people where their food comes from today, they wouldn't quite know beyond an answer like McDonalds, or Asda. Take this phone for example – I can with a few buttons order fast food from any of the shops in Ballyclare and have it delivered within half an hour. Today's convenience has taken away any sense of what is involved in the harvest. But in 1843, Rev Hawker could look out from his window and see the men in the fields ploughing and sowing. That same field would then go to provide food for the community surrounding it. And therefore they had much to be thankful for. We however have become so accustomed to things that many don't care where the food comes from or even consider being thankful.

When I was in Nairobi earlier this year, I was very aware of the many young children that received I meal each day, and that meal came from the school the children attended – the children's parents had no means to provide a regular meal for them. A queue of 300 children each Saturday gather at our good friend Antony Njoroge's More than Just a Meal programme to be fed rice and beans, and then if any is left it goes to the parents who wait back to ensure their children have received. It really puts to shame our attitude when we complain through the effects of Brexit that our shelves don't have the same range of items that there used to be.

So I think it's a good time to focus our perspective on being thankful for what we have, because before we know it we will quickly move into the season of Christmas where once again people become fixated on the things that they want.

And western society today spends more time ungrateful for the things it doesn't have, rather than being thankful for the things it does have. For example, I complain when an Amazon delivery takes more than 3 days to arrive with me. I complained on Thursday when the Vet kept me waiting 25 mins to see them. But the well from which we as Christians should draw from should be an attitude of thankfulness. And more than anything, it should be reflected in our worship today.

So on a day where we should be thankful, we are going to look at this familiar passage from Mark 14 as it helps us to grasp how our character should be when we live in a society filled more with ungrateful self-centred people.

So the first thing I want you to think about at this Harvest time is that **GRATEFUL PEOPLE GIVE PROFUSELY.**

So what great thing did this woman do? What was it that so impressed Jesus? Was it a great sermon? Was it an incredible prayer of faith? No. It wasn't even necessarily a practical thing that she did. As a matter of fact, we're going to see that some of the disciples even thought that it was a waste. You see it may not have seemed very practical, and yet it was heartfelt – and that's what made all the difference. So what about us? Well, the thing that God looks for the most is our hearts and what our hearts want to do. Even the outward appearance of doing things for the Lord, if our heart is not

right, God looks at the heart, not the action. And this thing that the woman did was a heartfelt act of thanks and love.

We're told in John's account of the same story that the woman was Mary who carried out this act, and what she gave was worth 300 denarii, which means nothing to most of us today. But one denarii in biblical times was equal to an entire day's wage. So if you want to calculate what this gift was worth, calculate your entire year's salary. What do you make in a year? That's the value of this gift that Mary selflessly and with abandon breaks before the feet of Jesus like it's nothing.

She does this thing for the Lord, that's because grateful people give profusely. And they do it because they have in their heart this thanks for who God is. That's what Harvest should be about. It's not about decorating the church to make us understand all that we have. It should draw us to declare who God is. So what we should offer at harvest is a reflection on what all God has given us – it's not limited to the fruit and flowers we see around us. Like the woman in the story, we should give everything to show our thankfulness for what he's giving to you and me. But so as I'm not misunderstood, it doesn't just mean our finances. This isn't just about money. It isn't about things. What this gift was for Mary-- it was a heartfelt gift. --it was signifying of her life. She was willing to give her all to the master. And so for us this Harvest as we stand in thankfulness amongst people in society who may appear ungrateful, the things that are most important to our heart, we give to the Lord. The oil was just a reflection of her heart, because her heart and her life was completely devoted to God.

So when we come to God, we give him our lives. We give him our time. We give him our resources. We give him our energy. We give him our wisdom. We're serving God. We're volunteering. We're doing everything we can, because we're showing Jesus, Lord, my heart is entirely for you. All I have. Everything I have. And I want to give it all to you Lord and to the service of those you put in my path.

Many people, like the dutiful Pharisees, will only give what they believe is required by God. They will give with the bare minimum thinking that's enough. And yet if Jesus paid everything for us so that we could have eternal life, should we not give our all in return? Our thankfulness should overflow from our heart, so that others can see where true thankfulness comes from.

And that leads me to the second thing. **PEOPLE WHO ARE GRATEFUL A LOT OF THE TIME ARE TYPICALLY PEOPLE WHO WALK CLOSELY IN DEPENDENCE OF THE SAVIOUR** because they understand nothing else will provide that total security.

You see heartfelt thanks of being close to the Saviour drives our desire to live differently. It shouldn't be an obligation. It shouldn't be a checklist or some repetitious act. It shouldn't be fear or shame. But it comes from walking close to Him who made us and who is a light on to my path. The early church followers had such a reliance on God. It was the same heart that declared, "Lord, whatever you ask of me, anything, I'll do it. Why? Because I'm thankful. Because I'm dependent on you".

This Harvest should make us reflect on whether we have been close to God in this past year. Because as we draw close to him in the way that the woman did, it should change how we act. It should change how we treat people. It should change how we parent. It should change how we love our spouses. It should change how we work. It should change our entire life.

But walking closely to the Lord can be so easily distracted in a western world that seems to make everything so easy to attain and get. Why walk close to God when I have everything, some will say? But once you realise that this world leaves you either empty or greedy for more, and you realise what Jesus does as you walk with him, then your dependency on him brings blessing, it makes your walk with him a joy. I wonder for some of you, has walking with God become a burden for you

rather than a joy? Has coming to Church on Sunday morning become a burden rather than a joy? Has reading the word of God become so tedious rather than a joy? Has serving God become a burden of commitment rather than one of joy? Has giving become more restrictive rather than joyful giving? Mary gave the most precious thing she had with joy, and the joy she had came from being close to Jesus.

Mary had a willingness to give Jesus everything. A willingness to not simply be practical, but to be close. A willingness to stop what she was doing and choose the better part. A willingness to simply sit at his feet. And whilst there were many indignant about what she was doing, it was the right thing to do.

Choose this to be a harvest unlike others, where we all take some time to reflect on how we know what to be thankful for. So how do we know what to be thankful for, well draw close to God who through his word will remind you of the promises that he declares over your life. Draw near to the God who the psalmist says in Psalm 145:18 'The LORD is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth'.

So remember firstly that in our gratitude we give profusely back to God. Secondly, drawing closer to him we understand his provision and our dependency. And then thirdly, and finally, remember that **TO MANY WHAT WE ARE AS CHRISTIANS WORSHIPPING AND SERVING OUR GOD IS A COMPLETE WASTE OF TIME.**

Our reading, verse 4 says '4 Some of those present were saying indignantly to one another, "Why this waste of perfume? 5 It could have been sold for more than a year's wages and the money given to the poor." And they rebuked her harshly'.

The idea of giving over something so valuable in her worship to the Lord was seen as an incredible waste by those present. She was willing to give up the thing that to many in her community would have seemed so precious, but she knew the only one who should benefit from it was Jesus. She knew that the worldly cost of the perfume was worth nothing in comparison to the eternal blessing of her worship and adoration to her saviour.

In John's Gospel for this story, we find out that the person who considered it to be a waste was in fact Judas. He tried to justify his objections by stating that the money from the sale of the perfume could have went on to feed the poor. And yet John makes it clear that Judas wasn't in any way thinking about the poor – he was thinking about the money that could be made. He was a thief. Shortly after this, Jesus would call Judas the son of perdition, which literally means the son of waste. So Judas said, it's a waste, yet in a few hours, Jesus would call Judas the son of waste. Maybe Judas was sitting there when this was happening with his first century calculator. That's 300 denarii. That's a year's worth of wages – what a waste now that you've poured it over Jesus.

But you know something. It will always happen to God's people. The more we devote to the worship and service of God in our lives, many will come after us saying that it just doesn't make sense. We're wasting our time. But right throughout the history of the bible, the faithful followers of God did things that to the world didn't make sense. Serving God will not always make sense, but is it the wise thing to do? It sure is. It's the best thing you could do. To the world, this act didn't make sense, but Mary had had a glimpse of what Jesus had come to do. You see, the perfume was a symbol that Jesus had come ultimately to die, with the perfume being used as fragrance over a dead body. And so Mary did what she felt in that place of worship and intimacy she had to do – a real prophetic sign of what was soon to come. And in the same way, the more we know of what God has done for us, the more we will want to do for him, even if society considers it as madness.

For some people they might say to us as a Church, are you mad, you took last year's income and gave a portion away to others. What about paying the bills? My response, God blessed us with the

finances to pay our bills. Others might say, so you fill your storage to overflowing with school uniforms and baby clothes and food – that's a lot of effort. My response, look how many people in our community have been blessed and know of a God who provides for them.

Many people will say, what a waste. God says, well done, good and faithful servant. Remember that all the time we invest in the kingdom of God, all the time we give to serving God, all the time we as a church commit to faithful worship, all the time we have to working in the vineyard that God has placed us in, not one second of this time is wasted in God's eyes.

So we have much to be thankful for today. And as we look around us today, we are deeply thankful of God's provision, but more than anything today we should in worship be thankful for what Jesus Christ has done for us. I hope that means something very personal in your life. Recognise that grateful people give profusely from the abundance of their heart. Draw close to him so that you see all that he gives and our need of him. And even when it doesn't make sense to the world, know that what God calls worship, the world's going to call waste. So today as we celebrate the harvest, as we say thank you to God for all he gives us, may EVERY DAY of our Christian witness, not just Harvest Sunday, be a statement to a self-centred world of our gratitude to him, and let us examine whether we like Mary in our story are willing to lay down all that this world considers costly and give it to him as our act of thanksgiving.

Let's pray

Father God we thank you for your provisions in our lives. Today we bow in humble worship to what you have done in love through your son Jesus for each one of us. So as an act of recommitment today, we ask that you will provoke our hearts to give our all to you in the way that Mary did. We recommit our lives to you. We recommit our finances to you. We recommit our time to you. We commit our service to you. We recognize that each and every one of us will stand before you one day and give account to what we've done with what you've given us. And Lord, we long for the day when we can hear well done, good and faithful servant. In Jesus name, Amen.