

SERMON: 1 October 2017 (Harvest Thanksgiving) – Rev Dr Brenda Robson**Matthew 9:35–38****James 5:7–12****37/38 The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.**

We have now been in our house for almost a year and I have watched the changing seasons in the fields behind the house, four or five fields of barley. There was a lot of rain in August and September – the barley was ripe and ready for harvest for about a month but Tom the farmer couldn't get it in. There would be an occasional dry day, little windows of opportunity and the machines would come out and a few strips would be done but most lay untouched.

Then two weeks ago the sun shone and the harvest could be brought in – the combine, the tractor and trailer, the bailer – working non-stop with a sense of urgency, headlights going up and down the field in the dark. A sense of the waiting time being over, the harvest complete.

The ripe barley sitting in the field was such a clear illustration of what Jesus was referring to in our reading from Matthew – the harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. The majority of people in our community, in our country, have no faith in Jesus Christ, the harvest is certainly plentiful, and we are called to be the workers in the field, to bring in the harvest.

I read a few things about harvesting grain this week and there are parallels for our harvesting of lost souls.

The farmer needs to adjust the settings on the harvester to suit changing conditions.

And so we need to adjust our outreach, the things we do and say, to be relevant to the present age. I don't mean that we need to change our theology or water down our message or speak the words that people want to hear – but we need to speak the language of the present generations and understand the culture and social situations we find ourselves in.

I was standing with a Minister in his Church after a service last week, a beautiful building in terms of architecture and design. But he said quite despairingly, "I wish I could drag this place into the 21st century!" He was talking about the building and what went on in the building.

Another guideline for the farmer - over-threshing takes the skin off the grain and reduces the quality.

We need to be careful how we go about our mission, what we say and do. We do not reach people with harsh words or a bible thumping approach, we must always remember that Jesus loved people into the kingdom and we are to do the same. Over threshing takes the skin off the grain. We are not called to judge or condemn – we are just called to love.

The farmer is advised to use clean equipment to avoid contamination.

We carry with us the gospel of truth and we need to be honest and true in what we say and do. We cannot say one thing and do another. We need to be accountable and not hypocritical. We cannot make false promises. For example, becoming a Christian does not mean an easy, carefree life. Becoming a Christian will not necessarily bring health and wealth, the so called prosperity gospel that is alive and well in America.

What happens to the harvest if the grain is ripe and ready and there is a long dry spell and it is not harvested?

There are lots of interesting parallels here with the harvest of men and women for Jesus.

A lot of the grain will blow away in the wind – lost forever

The heads can bend over with the weight of the grain – a picture of weary, stooped people carrying heavy burdens, lives weighed down by lack of hope.

Wait too long and birds move in – There are other influences around waiting to swallow up vulnerable people and take them further away from God

Grain falls to the ground and mice devour it – again, destructive forces waiting to pounce and destroy

I found an interesting summary of a successful grain harvest –

Maintaining the quality of the grain that has been grown is all about the correct and timely harvesting of the grain and its management and storage once removed from the field.

Management and storage. How do we look after people who come to faith, come to church, once they are removed from the field and gathered into the barn?

Harvest is about going out and gathering in but it also about good storage and after care. Unlike the grain in the barn we want people to continue to grow and to flourish and to blossom.

Are we providing a flourishing and blossoming place to be, a place to grow? Probably not as much as we need to.

I think we are, on the whole, good at looking after each other in times of need. We are running activities that have been in place for a long time where people who are used to attending can feel comfortable and at home.

But we are not here just to serve ourselves. As one person said to me, when thinking about the declining church, “As long as it’s here to see me out” and that is a common statement, sadly, in the church.

We need to have a vision for the church of our children and grandchildren, as my minister friend said, we need to find ways to drag the church into the 21st century.

This is “back to church Sunday” and I wonder if someone came who hadn’t been in church for twenty years, would find anything be different? Many churches are no different from my early memories of church in the late 1950s.

Our reading from Matthew is a wake up call. Jesus gives the challenge and sets the example and provides the solution.

At verse 36 he identifies the need. Jesus has been teaching and preaching and healing every sickness and disease. He sees that the people are harassed and helpless and uncared for, like sheep without a shepherd.

Uncared for sheep wander and get lost, attacked by wild animals, starving, perhaps trapped on a ledge or in a bush. A sheep can simply roll over onto its back and with a heavy fleece be unable to get up again and would perish if someone didn’t come to lift it up – a lovely picture of Jesus’ ministry and indeed our Christian calling. Be lifted up!

People out there might not seem needy, they might not think they are needy, being self-sufficient and self-controlled and self-directed. But we need to see them through Christ’s eyes, wandering in a spiritual and emotional desert. Jesus sees them desperately needing a shepherd.

Ezekiel 34 speaks about God’s anger with the shepherds of Israel who are not looking after the sheep –

2 Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock?

4 You have not brought back the strays or cared for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally. So they were scattered because there was no shepherd.....and became food for all the wild animals

11 The sovereign Lord says “I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness.”

And Ezekiel goes on the prophesy about the coming of Jesus to be that shepherd and Jesus commissions us to be shepherds.

In our reading from Matthew, at verse 3, we are told that Jesus had compassion on the people. The word for compassion actually translates as "he was moved in his stomach with pity."

Remember a time when you felt real pity for someone. You might have been with someone experiencing great loss or suffering, you might have been moved by something on the news. Do we feel that kind of pity for our unbelieving friends, neighbours, colleagues?

Such compassion does not come naturally for us in the way that it came naturally for Jesus. To have that compassion and grace of Christ requires us to pray a lot, that is what Jesus tells us.

At verse 37 he changes the metaphor from sheep to wheat, from shepherding to harvesting.

We need the eyes of Christ to see the lost

We need to feel the compassion and pity that Christ has for the lost

We need the hopefulness and expectancy and commitment of Christ to believe that there will be a harvest, even here in Kirknewton and East Calder.

How long is it since you had the joy of bringing someone to Christ?

Will there ever be a time of fruitfulness in our lifetimes after fruitlessness?

We cannot bring in the harvest ourselves, we need God. He is the Lord of the harvest.

When Solomon had completed building the temple, God appeared to him in the night and spoke words that are still so important for us today. The Lord said –

I have heard your prayer and have chosen this place for myself as a temple.....if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land. Now my eyes will be open and my ears attentive to the prayers offered in this place....my eyes and my heart will always be there. (2 Chronicles 7)

That leads us to the fourth and final observation. Not only did Jesus see the poor and the weak and the helpless, and feel compassion, and see a potential harvest, he also commanded us to pray it in.

"The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few, therefore *pray* the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest" (verse 38).

“On your knees and pray for harvest hands” - The Message

This is a strange command. It is strange that the farm workers should be told to plead with the owner of the farm to send out more workers into *his* harvest. Surely Jesus doesn't mean to imply that God doesn't know there is a shortage of reapers and needs to be told! And surely he doesn't mean that God doesn't care about getting the harvest in! Why, then, are the farm hands told to beg the farmer to get more help?

There is only one possible answer. God has willed that his miraculous work of harvesting will follow on from prayer. He loves to bless the world. But even more, he loves to bless the world in answer to prayer. Therefore, the sign that God is going to bring in the harvest at Kirknewton and East Calder will be a widespread movement of prayer among us, his people.

We had our monthly prayer time last Sunday afternoon, a time when we pray for the church during the vacancy, for the nominations committee, for the minister who will be called here. It was an important time when two potential candidates had not progressed and there were no other applicants to be considered. Only five people came.

It is almost a year since the vacancy began. We are not going to have a new minister in 2017. Will we have a new minister in 2018? Will 2018 be the year of harvest, the year when new things will happen? Do you want to see new things happen or do you prefer things the way its aye been?

Put Sunday 29th October at 2.30 pm in your diary, it is the next prayer time for the vacancy. Give that date priority. We had to pray in the church last week because it was chilly in the prayer room. I hope that we need to pray in the church next time, not because it is too cold in the prayer room but because so many people come that we won't fit in!

Let us increase our prayer power. Choose a week and decide to pray for the church every day, for ten minutes, increase to 20 or 30 minutes.

Perhaps we will open the church for prayer one week, every day at a fixed time.

We might consider 24/7 prayer, taking turns to pray around the clock.

Then we can say God “Come and do it!” We are ready!

And what if prayer events appeared on our Facebook page and website and in our monthly magazine. A minister looking for a new charge might see and think “Wow! This is a spirit-filled, prayer-focused, God-alive congregation!

Pray to the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.

AMEN