

Vision and commitment 2023- First Fruits

'Firstfruits'

Firstfruits is a phrase which occurs 33 times in our English scriptures together as 'firstfruits'. 20 times in the Jewish law, the first 5 books of the Bible and all regarding offerings

- It is also used in reference to those who are first born, who come first in a family
- Paul specifically says that Christ is the firstfruit of those who have fallen asleep ([1 Corinthians 15:20-30](#)) when he's talking about the resurrection of the body, Christ has gone before us and is the firstfruit and Paul also mentions believers ([Romans 8:23](#)), us, as the firstfruits of the Spirit of God
- So the firstfruits are obviously important, but what does it mean?

If you think about trees, the first fruit are a sign that the tree is growing, it's healthy, and also the first fruit give hope for the future of the tree, a hope for continued life as fruit hold seeds which bring new life.

In scripture, the firstfruits were a sacred offering to God, the best offered. Let's flick back to Cain and Abel for a moment. [Genesis 4](#)

- What was the difference between the offerings given before the Lord by each brother?
 - Cain collected some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the Lord. perhaps it's how we read it in English, but it feels like Cain has just grabbed the nearest fruit.
 - Abel however, chooses the choice lambs, fat lambs and in fact the firstborn of his flock. Notice, the firstborn, which is often used interchangeably with firstfruits, when speaking of offerings.
- The difference is that one offering was carefully chosen, it showed love and sacrifice. Not just giving something, but giving the best.

*⁶ Then the LORD said to Cain, 'Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast?
⁷ If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it.'* Genesis 4:6-7 NIV 2011

God looks with disfavour on Cain's offering because he hasn't had the right heart behind his offering. And he confronts Cain about it to see repentance and transformation in Cain's heart. The Lord identifies the sin and asks Cain to change. Instead we know Cain allowed his anger to grow and it led to him killing his brother who's heart had been right.

- So there's a warning here, both to give with the right heart, but sometimes confession is important as we bring our offering. Confession that we've got it wrong before. Perhaps we've given out of the wrong motives before, and now we want to give with the right heart.

Offering our first fruits, what we most value, by being attentive to the Lord, being ready to sacrifice what we have for him, shows the Lord the respect and honour which is due the creator of the universe, who stepped down from heaven to earth in Jesus, to show us the best way to live, who died a human death to destroy sin and rose again to give us eternal life with him.

When I think about his great sacrifice for us, for the way he chose me and called me out of sin and into his eternal light, my response has to be to give him my best. I have to give financially an amount which is my firstfruits, I find the classic tithe has always been a helpful guide which is 10% of my income.

Let's jump to Exodus where the Lord is establishing of the Passover.

² 'This month is to be for you the first month, the first month of your year.

³ Tell the whole community of Israel that on the tenth day of this month each man is to take a lamb for his family, one for each household.

⁴ If any household is too small for a whole lamb, they must share one with their nearest neighbour, having taken into account the number of people there are. You are to determine the amount of lamb needed in accordance with what each person will eat.

⁵ The animals you choose must be year-old males without defect, and you may take them from the sheep or the goats. Exodus 12:2-5 NIV 2011

Notice the first month, from now on the month of the Passover was called on to be the first month, to remember what God was doing at Passover.

- We also see the quality of lamb which must be chosen. a year-old male without defect. These lambs were to be the best lambs, the ones you'd kill for a celebration. And the death of these lambs was to prevent the death of the firstborns of the Israelites as the Lord sent an angel of death to take the firstborn sons of the Egyptians in his great deliverance of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt.
- Notice we have the firstborns, the signs of hope and future are both being offered as lambs to save the human firstborns.
- God is once again asking for the best of the Israelites so they can live in his favour and blessing.
- When we give to God, it's not so that we can receive in return. But when we honour God with our wealth of time, effort, attention and money, we come closer to the God who shows generous love, blessing, peace, joy and fulfilment.

And there is a proverb which I'd like us to remember. Don't forget that Proverbs are not promises, but they are principles to live by.

⁹ Honour the LORD with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops;

¹⁰ then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine.

Proverbs 3:9-10 NIV 2011

God's vision for St Mark's

We start with the vision we've been living under

Our mission statement is to be:

- Knowing Jesus, Loving Each Other & Caring for our community

Achieved through our values of:

- All Involved
- Becoming Disciples
- Creating Community
- Doing Evangelism
- Encountering God

We are committed as personal disciples and as a church to:

- Pray (speaking to God daily)
- Read the Bible (daily)
- Learn (specifically through connect groups)
- Tell others about Jesus (introducing people to Jesus)
- Serve (our community of St Mark's Church and Haydock)
- Give (to our local church community and live generously)

(Find out more on our [Growing Disciples leaflet](#))

We are sitting under a vision of God calling us to

Prepare for a wave of God's Spirit which we believe the first wave hit our shores after the pandemic as we reached out to our local community in new ways.

- Two ways we prepared were in
 - employing Josh our Pioneer Youth Worker and
 - in getting ready to open a Food Pantry.
- At the New Wine Leadership Conference this year, Bishop Jill Duff spoke of surfers needing to become skilled at riding waves, and that of course there are lots of waves sent.
 - It spoke to a number of us of continuing to be watching out for the next big wave, ready with our surfboards to ride them, and not topple off.
 - The waves for us we believe are waves of people who need to be shown the love of Jesus through
 - loving kindness, providing for their physical needs and inviting them into a relationship with Jesus.
 - The Lord continues to send these waves and we are a church that need to be continually prepared for the next wave of his Spirit.

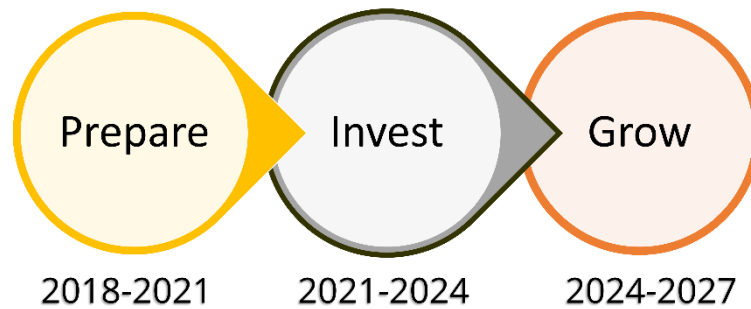
Invest - I felt the Lord clearly share with me that the summer of 2021 was the start of a 6 year journey for our church, with the first 3 years of specific investment.

- Investing in leaders, in new ministries and in our community.
 - In this phase we have established a Wednesday night youth group, a food pantry and the latest, a well-being ministry called 'Brew and renew' started last Wednesday.
 - I believe we have yet another year of investment in leaders, our buildings, and particularly in reaching our community.

Grow - I do not believe the Lord is speaking a dirty word over us. A word which is deterministic and self-fulfilling. It's a word which has been spoken over the Church of England by the Church of England itself, and it's people have believed it and allowed it to happen.

- It's such a dirty word that I will share it with you once, so that you know this word has no place in the life of St Mark's. The word is 'decline'. It's a dirty word because it has become a stronghold of Satan in the hearts and lives of churches across the world.

- The Lord was clear with me 2 years ago that He is speaking growth over us. If we are faithful in investing in this season, I believe God has said that we will reap the harvest which he is growing. The growth is dependent on our partnership and faithfulness to Him. That's our collective faithfulness as a Church, but also our personal and individual faithfulness to Him.



Most importantly, God's vision for us as disciples

- I believe God's vision for us as St Mark's is Passionate disciples prioritising time with Him everyday
- I believe it's Christians so on fire with love for Him, that we can't help but speak of Him to all who we encounter
- I believe it's a church which is deeply compassionate to those we meet, loving them into a relationship with Jesus, the God who loves them
- I believe it's a church which is growing because of our faithfulness to Him
- I believe it's a church where
 - all are involved,
 - all are becoming disciples who make disciples,
 - all are creating community,
 - all are doing evangelism
 - and all are encountering God

Friends, at St Mark's, you are a part of a Church community which is reaching people in a way many others struggle to do so.

- We have Youth work to youth in our community who don't yet know Jesus
- We have an outreach project providing affordable clothing, furniture and food to our community, and all of those things free to those in desperate need
- When I share about what we're doing with ministers around the country, or when you speak with other Christians about what we're doing, we are regularly surprised at just how special this place is. Often we take this Church for granted, because it's what we know, it's where we're invested in.
- Friends this vision of being passionate disciples set on fire to bring others to know Jesus is happening, but I believe the Lord is turning up the temperature, he's asking for more of us, and he's wanting to take us deeper.
- Are you ready to get your hands dirty, to join us on the front line of ministry here at St Mark's. To commit your time and money and to see God's kingdom grow here in Haydock as it is in Heaven?

Here are just some of what God has done among us this year.

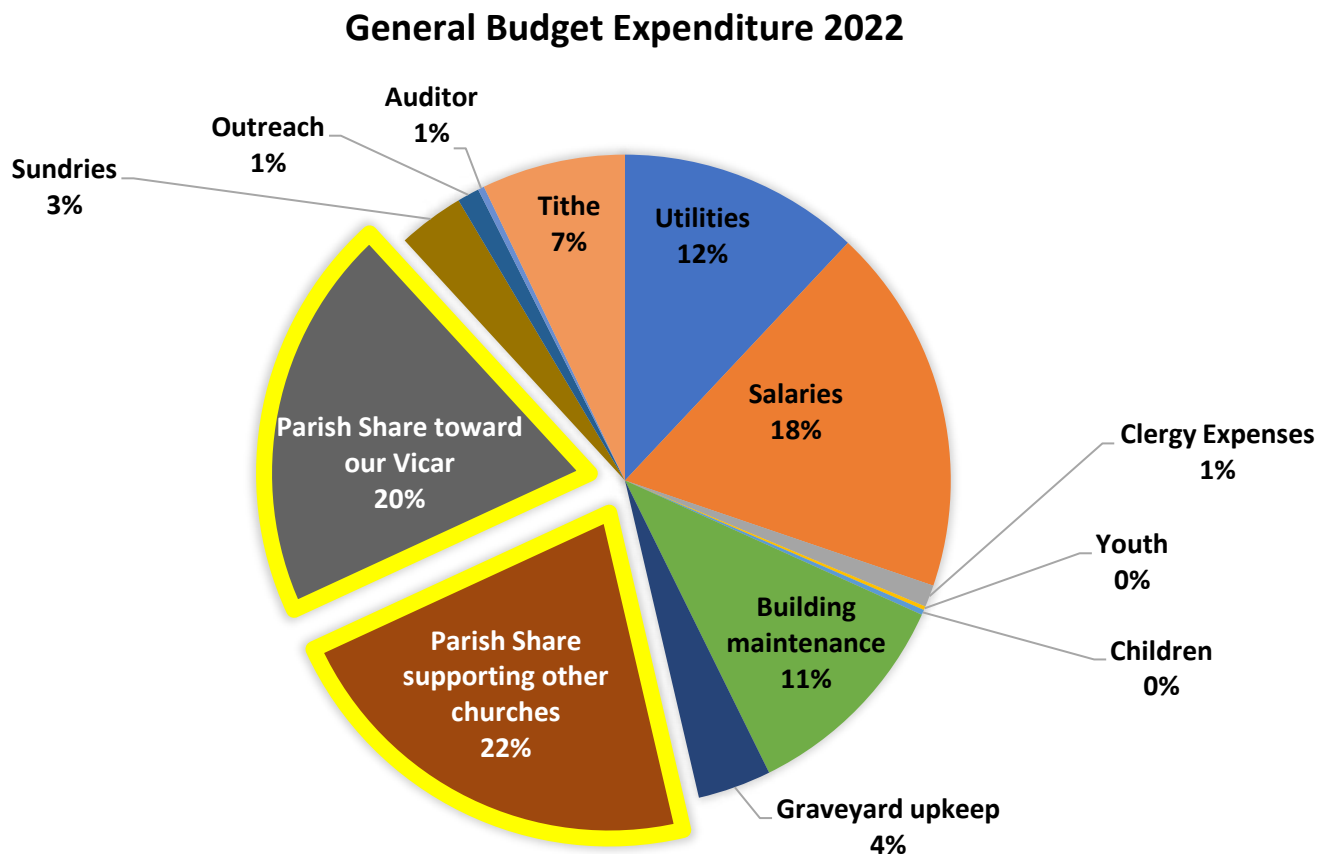
(We watched a video celebrating the year which can be viewed on our [website on the 'I'm new page'](#))

Giving our firstfruits in time, energy, effort and money

As we move to the third and shortest part of my talk this morning, we talk about our commitment to Jesus in light of the vision you've heard and His call to bring our firstfruits.

I will talk first about commitment in financial giving, and secondly in service.

For a breakdown of our expenditure, you can watch the video [online on our giving page](#) which explains it in better detail, but the basic pie chart is here



Now for the big headline takeaways.

- The cost of ministry last year was £260,347
 - And we did end the year with a deficit £31, 587 which has halved our reserves due to the cost of living crisis and both the pinch to our own pockets and the increase in all goods.
- The cost of ministry this year is £261,179
 - If we assume there are 170 people who regularly give and worship with St Mark's across the month, that will make the personal cost of ministry at St Mark's £29 per adult per week.
 - Basically, if every member of St Mark's were able to give £29 per week, we would break even by the end of 2023. The reason it's risen significantly from last year is we are expecting the utility bills to increase by £20,000 this year.
 - Because we don't include a guesstimate figure for our vision and commitment gift day, there is a projected deficit of £59,741.

- It's a sobering figure and I want to assure you that PCC and Standing Committee are keeping a close eye on this.
- But we are not despairing. We need your support to help us reduce the deficit, and we believe God is leading us into growth, which is why we're not panicking. We seek to be wise stewards of God's finance here and completely faithful in our trust in Him.

Friends, I ask you, today please consider what you give to the life and work of St Mark's, in time, energy, effort but particularly today, the finance you offer to God by giving to your Church family, St Mark's Haydock.

- Everyone has tightened the belt and we know that some of our church family are really struggling financially, and won't be able to change their giving. It's essential that what we give is given freely, cheerfully, sacrificially and decided prayerfully between you and the Lord.
- I'm asking every adult in St Mark's family to complete and return the gift day pledge on your seat by the 14th May, which will really help us in the right stewarding of our money.

Before I close, I want to say that when I had a gym membership of £37 per month, I was far more committed to going than when I moved to a £10 a month subscription, and I was more motivated get friends to join me in my workouts. I also know that when I feel the Lord tell me to give a figure, even if it's bigger than I think I can afford, I go with that figure and he's never let me down. Yes, I feel the pinch, but he asked me to feel that pinch. I've always found I've grown in faith when I've stepped out with Him.

So if you haven't given to St Mark's before, today is the day to start, whatever the figure big or small. I also believe that if we're all giving the figure the Lord tells us to give, we'll be more committed to joining the Lord in becoming disciples who make disciples here at St Mark's.

Jesus said

³⁴ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.
Luke 12:34 NIV 2011

Let's join together in asking the Holy Spirit of Jesus, how He wants us to respond and commit to His vision for us in 2023.