



MANNA matters

Newsletter of MANNA GUM.

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News from Long Gully

Manna Gum's big news is that for the first time ever, we have more than one employee! I mentioned in the previous edition that there had been a generous response to the annual appeal and we found ourselves in the strange position of having a surplus. Since that time, we also received, completely unlooked for, a further \$9,000 through the government's pandemic splash. It was very strange to experience such abundance while reading every day about so many businesses going to the wall.

However, the timing proved providential. As the demands of my thesis work escalate in the coming 18 months, it was looking like some editions of *Manna Matters* would have to be missed. But now we have been able to employ a *Manna Matters* editor 1 day a week, until late next year, which will not only allow Manna Gum's flagship communication to continue and my thesis work to increase, it will bring some fresh ideas and energy into Manna Gum's stale and conservative culture!

The first choice for the job was Matt Anslow, and we were thrilled he agreed to it.

Matt and his wife, Ashlee, embody much of the ideas and ethos that Manna Gum promotes. Together with their three young children, they live at Milk and Honey Farm, on the edge of the Blue Mountains and the Central West in NSW. For the past two years they've been building a sustainable family farm and retreat place there.

Matt earned his PhD in theology (New Testament) in 2017, and currently works at Morling College in Sydney where he co-directs Plunge, a one-year discipleship program for people aged 18–23. Matt has worked in pastoral ministry, the aid and development sector (with TEAR Australia), church-based community development, community gardening, and refugee advocacy/activism. Matt was a co-founder of Love Makes a Way, and he also serves as the Vice-President of the Anabaptist Association of Australia & New Zealand. So you can see, he was quite a catch.

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MANNACAST
by MANNA GUM
Coming Soon

A podcast going deeper into the
issues raised in the latest edition
of *Manna Matters*

Featuring Jonathan Cornford
and Matt Anslow

The Moral Ecology of Judgement

Part 2

by Jonathan Cornford

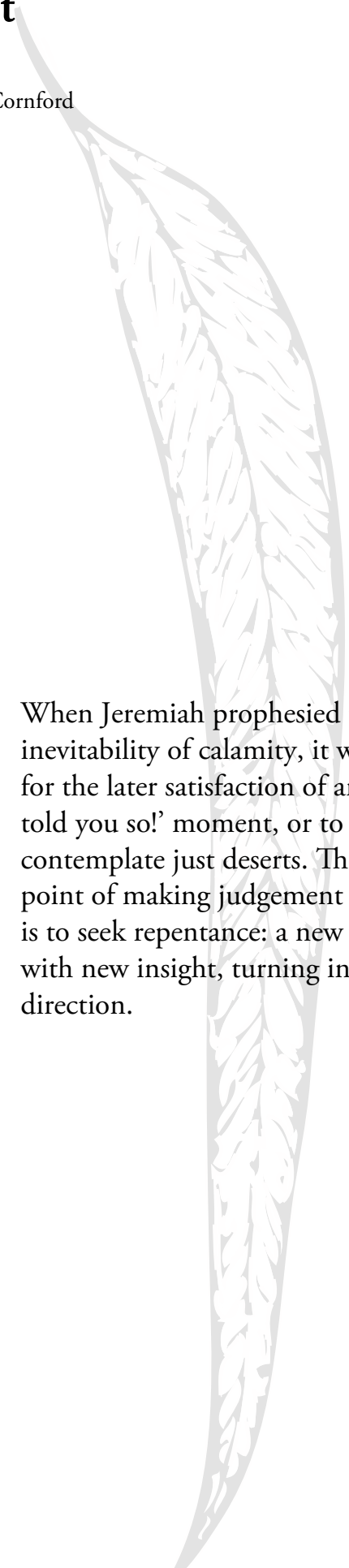
‘Take your Money Later! bugger off of my fb page ! ☹☹☹☹☹☹☹’

So advised one prospective reader of my previous article when it landed on his Facebook page in May. It is pertinent advice which I will endeavour to follow, but it also nicely illustrates the highly combustible nature of the topic I am rather foolishly trying to open up.

In that first article, I predicted that choosing to write about judgement during a time of pandemic meant that there was a higher-than-usual chance that I would be misunderstood. Right on cue, once posted on Facebook, there was a rapid stream of abuse and ridicule in the comments section. This was, in part, a just judgement upon my incompetent use of Facebook, but, on the whole, it seems that most of the angry respondents assumed I was suggesting that those who suffered from the bushfires or coronavirus were being punished by God. One of them pertinently summed up the core anxiety in discussing the subject matter of judgement in relation to issues such as climate change and pandemic: ‘What sort of a kind loving god would subject his people to all these calamities? Why would he do this and for what reason?’. This has long been a question that has worried many who have read the Bible and it is a question we must address.

In my previous article, I raised the possibility that the difficult concept of ‘judgement’, rightly understood, may offer a powerful resource for understanding and even negotiating our difficult times. However, acknowledging that this is a term with a very negative historical baggage, I opted (perhaps unwisely) to come at the topic sideways rather than head-on, by drawing attention to more ordinary forms of ‘judgement’ going on around us continually. I observed that although everyone decries being ‘judgemental’, we are all necessarily involved in making moral judgements all the time. The question that is asked too little is, what do we base such moral judgements upon? Where do they come from? The two opposing caricatured positions are that, (i) morality merely describes the sovereign (and somewhat arbitrary) will of a God who at the beginning of time drew up a list of ‘dos’ and ‘don’ts’; or (ii) morality is simply a construct of ‘values’ that each human culture imposes upon ‘facts’. More recently, in the age of hyper-individualism, I think it is increasingly true to say that morality is increasingly self-referential: ‘Only I know what is right for me’.

The main purpose of that article was to propose another moral worldview, which I take to be the moral worldview of the Bible. Such a view of morality is indeed rooted in God, but it is not arbitrary; it in fact has a coherence that is written into the very fabric of the universe. Indeed, there is a certain sort of ecology to the biblical moral worldview, in which ‘ecology’ is meant in two senses. The first is simply that the biblical view of the moral cosmos is intimately concerned with the natural world and its health. The second sense is more profound: just as the science of ecology is the study of the interrelationship and interdependence of the great web of life, so the biblical idea of morality is



When Jeremiah prophesied the inevitability of calamity, it was not for the later satisfaction of an ‘I told you so!’ moment, or to smugly contemplate just deserts. The whole point of making judgement known is to seek repentance: a new mind, with new insight, turning in a new direction.

predicated on the interrelationship and interdependence of all things. That is, the Bible reveals morality – what is ‘right’ and what is ‘wrong’ – as something that describes *the relational structure of goodness* that constitutes the created order. We never act as morally independent beings, but always as creatures defined by relationships, whether we recognise them or not. To put it another way, morality describes the shape of love that seeks to hold all things within its purview.

In this article, I will attempt to be more explicit about what this means for the concept of judgement as found in the Old Testament. How should we understand and interpret this difficult biblical terrain and how can it be constructively and responsibly applied today? (I had originally hoped to cover the whole Bible in this article, but, alas, that also was poor judgement.)

Judgement in the Old Testament

There is no way of getting around it, the language of Old Testament is very difficult for people with our postmodern Western sensibilities, especially with respect to the texts on judgement. In particular, the prominence of the language of ‘punishment’ and ‘vengeance’ clashes discordantly with our image of a loving God. These are texts from a very different time, culture, and worldview, so if we are not merely to dismiss them based on what C.S. Lewis called ‘chronological snobbery’ (in which ‘the modern’ view of things is always superior), then our challenge is to try to get behind the cultural packaging of language and images in these texts to find the wisdom that may be present.

There are a few things we need to get over. The first is simply that, in the ancient world, there was almost universal agreement that wrongdoing required punishment and ancient civilisations tended to have a very severe view of punishment. Our modern embarrassment about the seeming crudity of this morality is a surprisingly recent phenomenon. An interesting digression might be to explore where our modern embarrassment comes from and examine its positive and negative aspects, but there is no space for that here. We do not need to either endorse or sanitise the difficult language of these ancients to nevertheless concede that they may have understood some truths to which we would do well to listen.

Secondly, not only are we a world away from the more brutal morality of the ancients, we have a more specific difficulty with the literary form of the ancient Hebrew writers. Unlike the coolly rational dialogues found in Plato, with which we share a much stronger cultural affinity, the writings of the Hebrews are characterised by far wilder passions. We are shocked by the flaming hot anger that is frequently attributed to God, accompanied by those terrifying vows of retribution; but we completely miss the point if we don’t hold these texts together with all the equally frequent references to God’s grief at his people’s suffering, his yearning for reconciliation, and the extreme tenderness of his promises to heal and restore.



There is a relationship between morality and the natural world; the fertility and habitability of the earth is an indicator of our morality. (Photo: Hunter Valley, NSW; credit: Max Phillips)

As someone trained in Western rationalism, I long found it difficult to relate to this literature of passion; however, as I have grown older and more aware of the wild storms of emotions that sit beneath my own rationalisations, I have grown to appreciate this passion more and more. Although discomfiting, I find it more honest. Once again, the challenge for us is to try to see behind this very foreign mode of expression and grasp the deeper message.

Thirdly, at the heart of the Old Testament texts of judgement is a view of causality that has drawn the ridicule of we better-informed moderns. It is not too short of the truth to say that outside the choices of the main characters, almost everything that happens in the Old Testament happens because God did it. If Pharaoh’s heart was hard, it was because God made it so. If the rains did not fall, it was because God held them back. If the Assyrians invade, it is because God sent them. In the Old Testament view of the moral order, it makes complete sense that the failure to keep Sabbath might bring about a drought and worshipping idols might result in conquest by a foreign power, whereas to us this seems a laughable superstition: we know that drought is a meteorological phenomenon with physical causes in the earth’s climatic system. In their view of causality, they saw moral action (failure to keep Sabbath) lead to moral judgement (drought). We see physical causes (increasing CO₂ in the atmosphere) and physical effect (increasing incidence of drought), and then we make value judgements about these ‘facts’. But what if these two perspectives are not

contradictory? What if each only describes a *partial aspect* of the created order? Might it be that the ancient Hebrews saw more clearly the beginning and end points of cause and effect in a moral universe, while we moderns have grasped more strongly the middle aspects of causality in a physical universe, and that these *together* represent a single chain of effect in a created order that is characterised by relationality?

What is striking about the Old Testament narratives is the extent to which the human world and natural world are bound inextricably into one moral cosmos. The essence of this world view is succinctly captured in Moses' instruction in Deuteronomy 11:

If you will only heed [God's] every commandment that I am commanding you today – loving the LORD your God, and serving him with all your heart and with all your soul – then he will give the rain for your land in its season, the early rain and the later rain, and you will gather in your grain, your wine, and your oil; and he will give grass in your fields for your livestock, and you will eat your fill. (13–15)

At the superficial level, this just looks like so much ancient religious superstition: keep the gods happy and they will reward you. But what was so distinctive about the religious faith of Israel was that it was not just a cultic practice, but an ethical way of life. Heeding God's commandments, loving the Lord and serving him is shorthand here for referring to the whole integrated vision of life that is outlined in the Torah (the first five books of the Bible). One way of summing up the fairly extensive instructions about economic life in the Torah is that they are a call to observe limits for the sake of a neighbourly community amongst humans and with non-human creatures (see *Manna Matters*, Nov 2018). When humans persist in ignoring the limits of health, then there is inevitably a kickback, as the Deuteronomy passage goes on to warn:

Take care, or you will be seduced into turning away, serving other gods and worshipping them, for then the anger of the LORD will be kindled against you and he will shut up the heavens, so that there will be no rain and the land will yield no fruit; then you will perish quickly off the good land that the LORD is giving you. (16–17)

Here, there is a direct link being made between where worship is directed – literally, what we ascribe worth to – and ecological health. When humans begin to systematically ascribe worth to things that do not deserve it, such as wealth and power (other gods!), then they begin to pursue a course of action which leads to damage in the human community and to the earth. Ellen Davis, a Hebrew Bible scholar, has observed that if we take the scriptures as a whole, the best indicator of the faithfulness

of the people to YHWH's way is 'the sustained fertility and habitability of the earth'.

As I stated in the previous article, it is now scientists who are beginning to make the connection between the orientation of the human soul and ecological crisis. Let me quote again Gus Speth, a US climate advisor:

I used to think that the top environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse and climate change. I thought that thirty years of good science could address these problems. I was wrong. The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed and apathy and to deal with these we need a cultural and spiritual transformation.

Jeremiah as a voice of judgement

There is no better case study of judgement in the Old Testament than the book of Jeremiah. It is full of passion and white-hot anger. Perhaps one reason we struggle to identify with the anger that the Old Testament attributes to God's judgement (or as Paul would put it, his 'wrath'), is because we have such a petty view of what was going on: coming from a religiously plural society, we feel it is a bit harsh of God to punish people just because they choose a different faith or religious practice. But when the Hebrew writers talk about 'idolatry', they are never just talking about people's 'private spirituality' (as if such a thing actually exists!). Reading through Jeremiah, complaints about foreign gods cannot be disentangled from complaints about exploitation of the weak and vulnerable, the corruption of the courts, and the silencing of truth by the powerful. We also get glimpses in Jeremiah that a society that is characterised by exploitation, corruption, and falsehood is one that inevitably abuses the land on which she depends. At one point, commenting

on the failure of the rains and subsequent failure of the harvest, he cries out: 'Your wrongdoing has upset nature's order. Your sins have kept back her bounty!'. Jeremiah is saying the same thing as Gus Speth.

Perhaps, in the final analysis, this is what judgement is: it is merely the word of truth that uncovers the full nature of reality.

Yet the expression of God's anger is only one movement in Jeremiah's prophesying. We do not have to read retrospectively with New Testament eyes to see that, in Jeremiah, the anger of God is entirely a product of his love. It is the only proper response when God sees that which he cares about so deeply being treated so *worthlessly*. It would be a distant God indeed who was not angry about the Atlantic slave trade, or the genocide of Australia's indigenous peoples, or the Nazi concentration camps, or the clear-felling of the Amazon. But it is an anger that is at one and the same time a profound expression of grief – an outpouring of emotion that threatens to overthrow the human vessel giving it voice. 'My anguish! I am writhing in pain, my heart bursting.' The grief is two-fold: it is firstly a grief about the turning



Michelangelo's depiction of Jeremiah, Sistine Chapel.

away from what is good, and, secondly, a grief about the calamity that such a turning away inevitably brings. 'Your ways and your doings have brought this upon you. This is your doom; how bitter it is! It has reached your very heart.'

Jeremiah saw that the trajectory of his society was ultimately to bring destruction upon itself. In his prophetic imagination, he saw a connection between the internal corruption of his own people and the geopolitical stirrings of the Babylonian Empire. We cannot necessarily follow his logic, but that should not lead us to deny its existence. Once again, this is couched in the language that it is YHWH's doing, but the sense of inevitable cause and effect is strongly present.

What of Jeremiah's role? What of the human vessel who is the voice of God's judgement? More than anything, the prophet is someone who has been gifted with clarity of sight. Jeremiah has seen the conduct of his people and he can trace the inevitable progression of cause and effect like a series of ricocheting snooker balls. Perhaps he can see so clearly because he, too, has been drawn into God's love, and therefore also into his grief and anger. The end result is that, seeing reality, Jeremiah must speak of it: 'it is like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in and I cannot'. Perhaps, in the final analysis, this is what judgement is: it is merely the word of truth that uncovers the full nature of reality and communicates it, no matter how overwhelming or terrifying such knowledge is.

This brings us to the final, and perhaps the most important, point about the judgement that is spoken in Jeremiah, and which holds true for the whole Bible. When Jeremiah prophesied the inevitability of calamity, it was not for the later satisfaction of an 'I told you so!' moment, or to smugly contemplate just deserts. The whole point of making judgement known is to seek repentance: a new mind, with new insight, turning in a new direction. We have always tended to imagine that judgement is a final word, when throughout most of the Bible the function of judgement is to offer the chance

of a new beginning, a new hope. What God, through the prophet, is seeking to call forth in the people is not the self-flagellation of self-loathing, but rather the sober assumption of responsibility for one's actions, which is ultimately an empowering responsibility to bring forth a new future.

The core insight of the Hebrew lawmakers and prophets was that human action, and especially corporate human actions (the shape of social, economic and political arrangements), all of which are undergirded by religious outlook (that to which we give worth), abound with multiple and surprising consequences, whether positive or negative. These, if they persist over time, cannot be avoided. Thus, practices such as predatory lending or failure to rest the land are not simply 'immoral' because God has thus ordained it, but rather, in a profoundly interconnected cosmos, they represent ruptures in relationship, and such ruptures produce cascading effects beyond anything anyone envisaged, and which can ultimately only be judged 'bad'. Likewise, sustained practices of hospitality and care for the land also produce cascading effects whose healthful impacts ('blessings') extend well beyond what was envisaged.

As we enter a century of dangerous climate change, and as we begin to uncover the human causes of pandemic (more on that next article), perhaps one of the hardest things to face is that things must inevitably get worse – the train of events we have set in motion within the biosphere is now beyond our control. But that is not the same thing as saying that we cannot influence the outcomes. The lesson of the Bible is that such moments of judgement are moments of new possibility. Judgement and good news are not two separate things in some strange tension; they are each a necessary condition of the other. The deep truth of the gospel is that there must always be a kind of dying for there to be new life. It is to this New Testament message and our present predicament that we will turn in the next article.



Consuming Desire

Self-Mastery as Alternative to Consumer Culture

by Matthew Anslow

You can see those mighty kings sitting in state on their thrones,
 robed in luxurious purple, surrounded by glittering armour, ...
 but only take away their raiment of vain splendour
 and you will discern the festoons of heavy chains that bind them.
 See the lust in their hearts, and observe their poisonous greed. ...
 Their sorrows gnaw within them,
 and their boundless hopes torment them,
 helpless and wretched victims.
 The kings are overthrown; the rulers are ruled by these masters.

— Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, IV.2

On the morning of Friday November 28, 2008, over 2000 people were gathered outside the doors of a Wal-Mart store in Long Island, New York, awaiting its opening. Many had been there since the previous morning, lining up for the annual Black Friday sales.

A 34-year-old Wal-Mart employee, Jdimytai Damour, was tasked with opening the doors of the department store. As he did, the horde of shoppers surged inside, breaking the doors and, according to a witness, leaving the metal part of the door-frame crumpled like an accordion.

As they poured through the entrance, the shoppers knocked Damour to the ground, walking over him as he lay there. Other workers attempted to rescue the man, but they were trampled. Several of them were injured in the scrimmage. Damour was killed.

When Wal-Mart officials informed customers that they were closing the store on account of Damour's death, shoppers complained—many of them in a vitriolic fashion—that they had lined up for a long time for the Black Friday sales. The vast majority continued to go about their shopping.

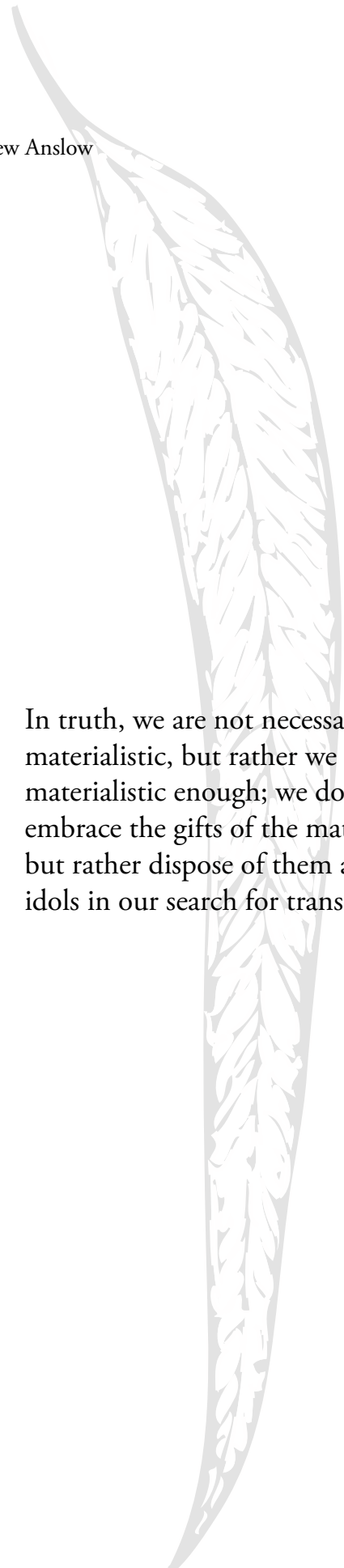
What might explain this kind of frenzied and barbarous behaviour, the ravenous and irrational striving for luxury material goods? What might account for the senselessness of a young man being sacrificed in the pursuit of discounts on televisions and toasters?

This kind of behaviour isn't innate. It's something that is learned, absorbed from some cultural context. That context, I would suggest, is consumer culture.

Consumer culture as our context

It is no exaggeration, I think, to say that consumer culture has shaped us into a people who have almost no limits on our desires. Those of us in the West—and increasingly in the rest of the world—have imbibed the idea that nothing we want is bad, so long as it doesn't harm another person (or, at least, so long as we aren't aware of that harm).

In truth, we are not necessarily too materialistic, but rather we are not materialistic enough; we don't truly embrace the gifts of the material world, but rather dispose of them as failed idols in our search for transcendence.





When I say ‘consumer culture’, I’m talking about the culture formed within the context of consumerism. Consumerism is distinct from, say, mere consumption, the necessary act of using resources. Instead, consumerism refers to our current economic and social order that incites the endless acquisition and accumulation of material goods. For champions of this order, a person’s well-being and happiness depend on such accumulation.

‘Consumer culture’ is what results from this economic and social order: the culture—the particular beliefs, values, norms, and behaviours—in which the meaning of our lives is mediated through markets, such that we become known primarily as ‘consumers’.

Desire: The engine of consumer culture

At the heart of consumer culture is desire. Desire is complex and varied, but can be defined, in simple terms, as a disposition toward something. A central and crucial driver towards the constant accumulation of goods in consumer society is the creation and moulding of people’s desires, the turning of our dispositions toward certain things. Such is achieved in a variety of ways, both technical (so-called ‘planned obsolescence’, for example), as well as social and cultural (such as advertising and ‘perceived/continual obsolescence’).

The notion of ‘creating’ desires might seem odd to some in our current age. After all, we live in a time when, according to philosopher Charles Taylor, people think,

Everyone has a right to develop their own form of life, grounded on their own sense of what is really important or of value. People are called to be true to themselves and to seek their own self-fulfilment. ... No one else can or should try to dictate this content’ (Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, p.14).

We might assume that we are in control of what we desire, that it’s a matter of our own choices and freedom. But what we come to value isn’t manufactured in a vacuum. What we think is important, and much of what we desire, is developed in a social and cultural context. In other words, we aren’t as free or as in control as we assume we are.

The organised creation of dissatisfaction

Certain desires are obviously triggered by biological and physiological cues—hunger, thirst, etc.—but others arise contextually. If this weren’t the case, advertising would be fairly pointless. Advertising has, however, been hugely successful in shaping what it is that people desire.

Early advertising was rather simple, often outlining the benefits of a product in the hope that people might see its value and be convinced to purchase it. By the 1930s, however, things had shifted; advertising executive Rosser Reeves introduced the ‘unique selling proposition’, where



An example of Rosser Reeves' 'unique selling proposition'.

the focus was on how a product might solve a customer’s problems. In 1935, George Gallup pioneered market research, the gathering of information about people in order to more effectively advertise to them. Things have only escalated from there, with digital superpowers like Facebook and Google having many dozens of data points on each of their users.

The logic of contemporary advertising is simple: what Charles Kettering of General Motors called, ‘the organised creation of dissatisfaction’. One of the more recent results of this logic is the phenomenon of ‘pornification’. While, strictly speaking, pornification refers to the mainstreaming of porn culture (consider how this is altering the desires of young people, especially boys, making them feel dissatisfied with ‘normal’ sex), pornification can also be applied to other forms of consumption. Whole trends and careers have sprung up around ‘food porn’, ‘travel porn’, and ‘exercise porn’, whose provocative and hyper-real images are ubiquitous on social media platforms such as Instagram.

One of the achievements of such a ‘pornified’ lens on the world, a lens through which the world is pictured in unrealistic terms, is the creation of dissatisfaction. Our lives, after all, do not look like *that*. Such dissatisfaction inevitably leads to a desire for such idealistic things—things that transcend the apparent drudgery of daily, embodied life.



Pornification: food, travel, exercise, sex.

An unbearably delectable culinary dish. A painfully beautiful Mediterranean sunset. An inhumanly chiselled torso. An unachievably erotic sex act.

We rarely notice the dissatisfaction this system creates. After all, consumer culture thrives on the façade of fulfilling our desires; if we could see through its smoke and mirrors, we would hardly be hypnotised by it. But the contradiction is that this system, which promises to satisfy our desires, only ever produces dissatisfaction. And regardless of how much we consume in this system, our desires are never gratified. This is entirely intentional, since our satisfaction would mean consumer culture's demise.

And so, this consumerist system rolls on, leaving a trail of greenhouse emissions, devastated landscapes, ocean garbage patches, starving mouths, broken bodies, and hungry souls.

Looking for God in all the wrong places

We should, however, be cautious before too readily condemning people for buying into consumer culture. This is true for at least two reasons. First, we are all implicated, albeit to varying degrees. Second, it is entirely natural for people to get caught up in consumer culture.

Why on earth would I make this second claim? Surely consumer culture is *anything* but natural.

Here we would do well to recall St. Augustine's words in the opening to his *Confessions*: 'You (God) have made us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in Thee'. For Augustine, all of our desire, all of our longing, is ultimately for God, the source of all goodness. Sometimes, however, our desires go awry, and we end up pursuing lower things. But even then, in the midst of this or that form of idolatry—in the worship of things lower than God—we are ultimately seeking to satisfy our desire for the Creator by way of created things.

Created things, as Augustine said, contain traces of the Creator. When seen in their proper, ordered place, created things can become the means through which we enjoy God. Creation is, after all, 'good' (Genesis 1) and through it we can enjoy the Source of all goodness. When seen out of place, however, created things can become an end

in themselves, through which we seek to placate our existential yearning for God.

This is why capitulating to consumer culture is entirely natural, insofar as doing so is to attempt to reach the transcendent, the very thing for which we were created. In a sense, consumerism is a form of spirituality. But, by seeking the transcendent in the material, we end up constantly disposing of the material since it never lives up to our desires.

The result, as William Cavanaugh notes, is not attachment to things, but *detachment*. We constantly purchase new things, but our attachment is only ever being short-lived before we sense our own dissatisfaction and move to the next thing. In truth, we are not necessarily too materialistic, but rather we are not materialistic enough; we don't truly embrace the gifts of the material world, but rather dispose of them as failed idols in our search for transcendence.

The gospel alternative to consumer culture

We don't really need climate change to exist in order to know that consumer culture is harmful and anti-Christian. If we had properly recognised the state of our desires and their proper ends, the Church may have embodied an alternative to consumer culture long before the urgency of global environmental ruin forced itself on us.

What, then, might be the imperative of the gospel in light of consumer culture?

The contradiction is that this system, which promises to satisfy our desires, only ever produces dissatisfaction.

If I'm correct that consumer culture constitutes a form of worship directed at things other than God, we must disentangle ourselves from it. This is, however, easier said than done. Participating in our extrication from consumer culture is, as I have argued,

not simply a matter of rational decision-making. The genius of modern marketing is such that our rationality and autonomy are overridden (see Crisp, 'Persuasive Advertising, Autonomy, and the Creation of Desire'). We have formed deep-seated habits—patterns of thought and behaviour that direct countless of our daily decisions—and much of the time we are not overtly aware of them. What, then, can be done?



Playing around the edges of the problem, changing a few odd behaviours, will not be sufficient to revive the witness of the Church in the midst of consumer culture. Consumer culture has taught us to desire without limit. There needs to be change at the level of our desires, at the very core of who we are. Daunting as this may seem, the Church has always had the resources to do this.

One starting point might be to recover the practice of fasting. It used to be that fasting was a regular part of the Church calendar, even a weekly or bi-weekly occurrence in some traditions. Why was this the case? Is fasting a way to earn spiritual merit? By no means. Fasting was—and is—an expression of the fact that learning to become more like Jesus is not a matter of good intentions, nor automatic sanctification. To become more like Jesus, and to embody the gospel in our lives, requires training.

Fasting is a form of training. It is an act of learning to overcome our self-centredness. Fasting is the act of abstaining from the object of some desire—food, comfort, whatever—so that we refuse to let that desire control us, learning to master it rather than allowing it to master us. It teaches us detachment, though not from the world, as Thomas Merton said:

We do not detach ourselves from things in order to attach ourselves to God, but rather we become detached from ourselves in order to see and use all things in and for God (*New Seeds of Contemplation*)

In other words, those who fast learn to detach themselves from their selfish desires, so that they may be attached to God. Moreover, those who fast learn to control their desire for simple things, like food and comfort, so that they can learn to master their higher, spiritual passions—

When seen in their proper, ordered place, created things can become the means through which we enjoy God. Creation is, after all, 'good'.

greed, list, envy, anger, and so forth.

Jesus in the wilderness in Matthew 4 and Luke 4 is a helpful model here. In this story, we see that even Jesus needed to fast; fully human, he needed to master his desires. When the Tempter, the *Satanas*, finally confronted him after forty days, offering the means to satisfy his desires (provision of food, public legitimisation, rule over the kingdoms of the world), spiritual strength gained from fasting meant Jesus could assert that the devil's word was not God's word, that the devil's way was not the way of the kingdom.

The presence of 'the Tempter' takes many forms in our time, and it may be that fasting and praying, as well as humble gratitude for what we have, are the practices of which the Church is most in need in order that we might resist consumer culture and offer an alternative to it.

Another necessary practice to help us overcome our detachment might be, as Cavanaugh notes, 'to turn our homes into sites of production, not just consumption'. This imperative of reviving the 'home economy' has been a staple message of Manna Gum for a long time, so I won't wade too deeply into it at present.

It is worth saying, though, that we desperately need to see through the veil created by consumer culture whereby the human, animal, and environmental costs of our economic system are separated from us. Indeed, they are quarantined away so we may consume without guilt or responsibility. Reclaiming our home economies constitutes part of our being awakened to the truth, since it involves recognising the effort and the cost that goes into many of the things we take for granted. Such may help us jam a stick into the spokes of our more thoughtless desires and habits, and may also reshape how we interact with the material world.

There are, of course, many other gospel-inspired imperatives in the face of consumer culture, from rethinking work to political action. I am convinced, however, that the most pressing issue is the formation of a people—the Church—who will learn to desire differently and, in doing so, will together become a living alternative to consumer culture.

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The Temptations of Christ, 12th century mosaic at St Mark's Basilica, Venice.

Our Co-Housing Journey

An Unfinished Story

by Claire Harvey Dawson

I share this story with some reluctance, knowing how tremendously 'unfinished' it is. But much of life seems tainted with a similar hue at the moment: we now live with a strange mix of anticipation and hope and dread - not knowing what the future holds, other than more change. These are anxious times.

Over a decade ago I began a journey with church friends Andy and Lyndel McGorlick, centred around the idea of establishing some sort of 'communal living' arrangement. While we'd first connected at Langwarrin Vineyard Church in 2007, I'd been inspired years earlier by a model proposed by Tom Sine in his book *Mustard Seed vs. McWorld* (1999). Sine comments:

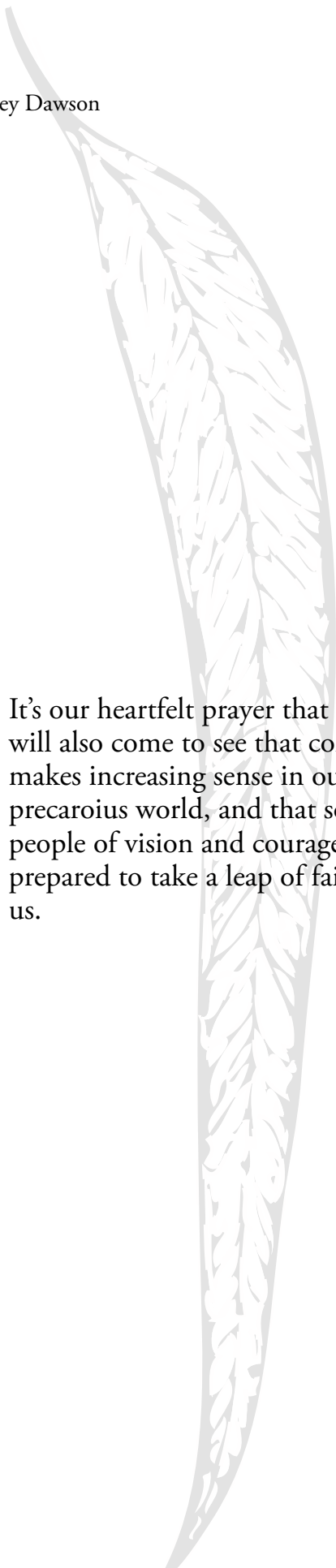
I am not for a minute suggesting that we all become Hutterites. But I think we can learn from their co-operative stewardship model of ways we can in community, be better stewards of the time and money God has entrusted to us. I am certain we could all find ways to be more a part of God's loving response to the growing needs of tomorrow's world (p.298-9).

There was an echo in my spirit: surely there were better ways to structure our lives and households, to reduce our levels of indebtedness and to free up personal and collective capacity for generosity and service? The concept stuck in my mind. Whether the overflow was in the form of surplus time or money or emotional energy, the essentialist in me was inspired by the Gandhian idea of living more simply in order that others might simply live.

Meanwhile the 'frustrated evangelist' in me was convinced that those outside the church struggled to find much good news in our many words, when the actual shape of our lives varied very little from their own. I was not preoccupied with looking different per se, but instead keen to create appropriate scaffolding to enable lives of greater faithfulness to the wide-ranging implications of the gospel. Justice, creation care, love of our neighbours both near and far: these are things we know we're called to, but yet we so often struggle to keep them at the centre of our lives in our frenetic, consumerist and individualist culture.

We took a step forward and roughly a decade ago attended a co-housing information session run by the neighbouring Mornington Peninsula Shire. There were some inspiring models in the pipeline, though none were local to us. It all looked great, on paper. The years passed, and the idea would resurface occasionally in conversation.

There were feeble attempts to take steps in the right direction. As a church, for example, we tried to establish a network for sharing stuff that we had, whether it was lawnmowers or trailers or surplus seeds. Then one day I asked the all-important question: 'Are we going to keep talking about this, or do we actually want to make it happen?' Co-housing was an easy enough concept to throw around; certainly inspiring as an idea. Bringing it to reality has proven much, much harder.



It's our heartfelt prayer that others will also come to see that cohousing makes increasing sense in our rather precarious world, and that some people of vision and courage will be prepared to take a leap of faith with us.



Villa St. Clare

Attempt one involved drafting up a concept document and trying to get traction for the idea, within our church circles and beyond. Being in Frankston, we were generally met with lots of questions—and some perplexed stares—about where exactly it would be, what it would look like, how it would all work. We faced a ‘chicken and egg’ dilemma: join us, and together we’ll figure it all out! However this was too much of a leap of faith for folk. We realised we couldn’t put anything other than a very generic concept design in front of people without the land on which we’d build this dream. So we doubled down and started looking for a site. Andy and Lyndel had already rented previously on High Street, so when a block came up for sale right nearby, home to the rather run-down reception centre ‘Villa St Clare’, the possibilities opened up by the dual-frontage, central location were too good to pass up. In a complete and rather gut-wrenching leap of faith we sold our homes and bought the land!

My thinking at the time was shaped by two central ideas, which at least in part explains why someone so cautious and risk-averse would even think to do something so radical! First, the pursuit of the Kingdom of God is shaped by such an intensity of focus that Jesus employed imagery of a man who sells everything he has in order to gain sought-after treasure, with an almost reckless abandonment (Matthew 13:44–45). Second, having just co-authored a book on climate change, I felt deeply convinced that if we didn’t act radically and soon, all the wealth in the world would eventually become worthless as any kind of ‘security’ for life: in line with the wisdom of the Cree Indian proverb, *when the environment has been destroyed, only then will we discover we can’t eat (or breathe, or drink) money.*

As the auction day had approached, I remember commenting that I had absolutely no qualms whatsoever about co-housing as a concept, and that if there was a local development underway and I could buy off the plan I would in a flash. What was most daunting to me was the fact that we had to actually bring this thing into being. Not being particularly entrepreneurial in nature, this was a huge personal hurdle.

But, at another level, I felt almost like I was without choice. My deep and heart-felt commitment to live sustainably meant that I often came home from a grocery shop feeling a profound malaise. Did doing the right

thing have to be this hard? Whether it was buying organic or fair trade or locally made or packaging-free or low carbon-footprint, I struggled to reconcile how I could continue to prioritise these things while also being a mum to two young kids, juggling work and ministry, while also carving out some time to remain sane. I needed there to be another way, as I felt cornered into a life of constant compromise—a reluctant participant in structural sin. Following the sale of our homes, we rented together with the McGorlicks, which facilitated regular meetings, enabled us to reduce our living costs and, of course, kick-started us on the journey of sharing life more closely. We moved in thinking it would only be for a couple of years - two families sharing as a household of seven. We were seriously wrong.

We engaged an architect, and sustainable design consultants, and arranged for arborist reports and soil tests. Meetings. More meetings. And even more meetings. Then legal consultation, to begin work on the structural stuff of an owners’ corporation and residents’ association. Deliberations around how to preserve the DNA of the community, while also providing freedom for people to buy and sell, while ensuring we weren’t at risk of being accused of religious discrimination. Should it be a specifically faith-based community? How could we ensure a continuity of vision and values, over time, without being too prescriptive?

We prepared an explanatory video for Frankston Council since, under planning laws, it was the type of development that triggered escalation to that level. Few of the Councillors engaged meaningfully and it quickly became apparent that some neighbours were not at all happy about our plans. There were many frustrating delays, but finally we had a date for our plans to go before Council, with the support of Council planners who commended it for approval. Without much discussion, a decision was made to defer discussion and decision, which was devastating. More of a wait. More time for neighbours to rally together in opposition. Then when it did finally go before Council again, it was the last meeting before local government elections. Tensions were rather high. We were commended for being ‘gutsy’ by one Councillor and accused of building ‘rooming houses’ by another. It was unanimously opposed. Inadequate car parking and visual bulk were among the issues of concern. This process catalysed a deep weariness of soul.

We pressed on, amidst more delays, to take the plans to VCAT and appeal the Council’s decision. While we did eventually receive approval, it was not long after this that I went through separation and divorce. By this stage my emotional, psychological and financial buffers were gone, along with my capacity to embrace risk. But by then we’d also gathered in a number of interested parties and we were almost at a stage where all but one unit were ‘allocated’—despite not being legally sold. But then some upward revisions were made to building costs and, consequently, unit prices. Rather suddenly we were on our own: timing and finance and stage of life had meant that others chose to move on. Despite our approved plans, it



Artist's impression: Frankston Sustainable Cohousing Initiative.

felt like we were all the way back at the beginning. And I was spent.

By this stage we'd been sharing a house (not ideally designed for communal living) for four years. This too had taken a toll, yet it was hard to separate out the challenges of the co-housing dream and the challenges of renting that particular house in that particularly difficult season. The support of caring, adult company within the home had certainly helped me weather the storms of the unexpected breakdown of my marriage and the transition to being a single mum. Still, we collectively sensed that it was time to go it on our own. After separating our homes and stuff, still conveniently located in rental properties just minutes away from each other, we faced the hard decision of whether to let the dream go altogether.

When we announced to our Facebook 'followers' in June of 2019 that we'd be pulling the pin, there was a resounding echo of disappointment. However, while people had caught the vision, for a range of reasons they remained on the sidelines. We tried unsuccessfully, through auction, and then private sale, to divest ourselves of this expensive block.

And then COVID happened.

While an inevitable consequence of a pandemic - and the associated financial fallout - is an aversion to risk, we also now sense a new and rare window of opportunity. Like perhaps no other time in our lives, we have received a stark reminder of the central place of the home and the need to be good neighbours to one another. And coming off the back of Australia's devastating summer bushfires more and more Australians seem to agree that a 'business as usual' trajectory is just not viable for a flourishing and habitable

creation. There is so much about our plans that seems so good and right and even necessary, in these troubling times. So we've picked the project back up and are trying once again to see if it will all come to fruition.

We remain vulnerable, both financially and emotionally. But also hopeful. And determined. We do know that we really need each other. We know we can't do this on our own. It's our heartfelt prayer that others will also come to see that co-housing makes increasing sense in our rather precarious world, and that some people of vision and courage will be prepared to take a leap of faith with us.

Perhaps you could pray? Perhaps you know someone who'd love to be a part of leaving a legacy and helping bring a fresh sign of kingdom love and justice to life in this dark world?

Or perhaps you have a dormant dream of your own that you feel called to pursue again, right at a time when people need to see faith and hope and love enacted in their neighbourhood?

How else might we respond, as households and communities, to the prayer of Jesus - that God's Kingdom would come on earth, as it is in heaven?

Claire Harvey Dawson is part of The Village (Uniting) Church in Mount Eliza and works as HR Manager and Careers Coordinator at Bayside Christian College. Mother to Sarah (age 11) and Micah (age 7). Claire shares Manna Gum's interest in a Christian discipleship that takes economic and environmental stewardship seriously.

Find out more about The Digs at

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Imagining Alternatives to Normalised Destruction

by Jacob Garrett

It appears as if men had deliberately chosen the common mode of living because they preferred it to any other. Yet they honestly think there is no choice left.

— Henry David Thoreau

It's Friday night, you're snuggled up on the couch with your housemates, family, or close companion watching David Attenborough and Co.'s latest exhibition of the beauty and wonder of the natural world. The episode is wrapping up and the montage shots begin: there's a Blue Whale mother and calf gliding effortlessly beneath the surface of the deep, a thick black mass of penguins noisily crowding the Antarctic coast, enchanting aerial vistas of the Amazon veiled in mist, the shadow-pocked expanse of a thousand sandy crags hidden deep in the heart of the desert. As the music swells, you barely register Sir David's closing remarks:

All across our planet, crucial connections are being disrupted. The stability that we and all life relies upon is being lost. What we do in the next twenty years will determine the future for all life on Earth. (*Our Planet*, Netflix)

You release a satisfied yawn as the screen fades to black and the credits roll.

"Well, that was nice, wasn't it? I think it might be time for bed."

Attenborough's warning is a bit familiar; a bit abstract. It can feel almost inevitable: we have lived for some years beneath the shadow of these kinds of pronouncements and many of us, if still uneasy at times, have grown used to life in their shade. Yet with more than three-quarters of Australians reporting being concerned about the impacts of climate change (The Australia Institute, 'Climate of the Nation Report', 2019), we are as convinced as ever of our need to act. Despite our misgivings, though, on the whole we remain—both as a society and as individuals—notably reluctant and faltering in our response. It can just seem too big, too intangible, too far off.

But the sorts of issues Attenborough and others allude to are not only challenges for the future, but crises in our present. In the last forty years, for example, we have reduced vertebrate populations worldwide by 60% (WWF Living Planet Report, 2018). Far from being allowed to be fruitful and increase in number, in less than half a century more than half of the beasts of the earth, the creatures that

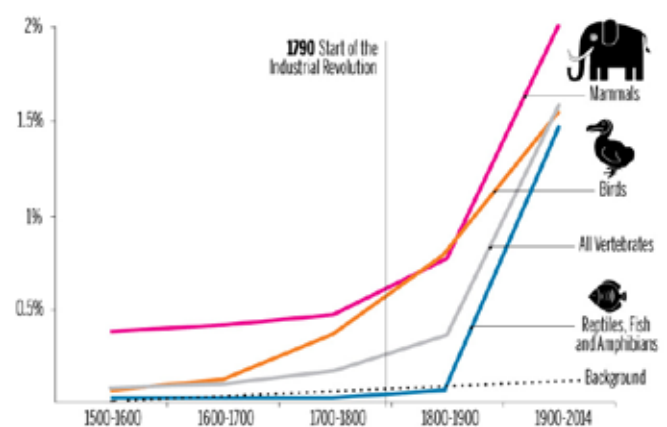
move along the ground, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea have disappeared. To call this reality 'startling' would surely be an understatement, but we have become a culture almost inured to hyperbole, even when it is anything but. The announcement that we have, by our own hand, brought about the sixth great mass extinction event is more commonly met with a shrug of resignation than with sackcloth and ashes.

Most of us are aware that this kind of thing is part of a larger story, too. Predictions of displacement of human communities due to sea-level rise or desert expansion, and warnings about potential food shortages or extreme weather events, have become part of the background noise of our lives. But, for the most part, these macro-fears remain secondary to the concerns and stresses of daily life.

Ah yes, daily life. And here we come to it. Why do we find it so difficult to change? I believe a key reason is that for all our awareness, our data, and our concern, we feel ourselves to be almost inescapably locked into patterns of life which create and fuel crisis.

A key word here is consumption. There is now little doubt that we are over-consuming the world's resources. Since 1970, our ecological footprint (a chief measure of consumption) has grown by 190%. Globally, our present rate of consumption requires more than one and a half times the resources our Earth can actually provide. For those of us in the wealthiest nations, the extent of our ecological overreach is significantly higher still.

VERTEBRATE SPECIES EXTINCTION RATES
Cumulative, recorded as "extinct" or "extinct in the wild"



SOURCE: Chahuis et al. Sci Adv. 2015;1:e1400253 | GRAPHIC: Amanda Shendrik

MACLEAN'S



But all too quickly we arrive at a dissonance point. It can be extremely difficult to see that what is normal to us is so dramatically amiss. How could simply going about my daily life be so closely bound up with such issues? Practically, it is hard to believe that the type of lifestyle that most of us, our neighbours, our friends, our families habitually lead—for many of us the only lifestyle we have ever known—is lived over the edge of an ecological precipice. What's more, the idea that we may have to *forego* or *limit* the consumption to which we are so accustomed runs counter to our lifelong economic training; our prevailing paradigm tutoring from birth that the only thing keeping us from fulfilling our desires should be our means of doing so. If we want it, and can afford it, we should have it.

Consider air travel. In terms of personal carbon footprint, travelling in planes is likely the third most impactful activity in our lives (Wynes & Nicholas, 2017), yet most Australians consider overseas holidays to be almost a 21st Century rite, as well as an important rite of passage for many young people. We casually accept that, while almost unimaginable a century ago, travelling interstate and internationally in planes is often the requirement of doing business in the modern world. What was only a few years ago a rare and thrilling opportunity is seen as a tiresome necessity and our complaints have become as prosaic as discussing the weather: 'How was the flight?' 'Oh, awful! We were delayed for an hour!'

I sometimes think of a conversation I once had with some of the most devoutly eco-conscious, organic-loving, Fairtrade-purchasing people I know. We were waxing lyrical on our dream destinations, Prague, New York, Northern India, the Andes... when I cautiously suggested that—given the known impact of air travel—maybe we shouldn't fly so much. Even among such avowedly 'green' folks as these, I was met mostly with blank looks and hasty justifications.



The attitudes of consumer society may be deeply rooted in our psyche, but it is important to remember that there is nothing wrong with consumption as such: the many fruits and wondrous opportunities of our earth are the good gift of God to all his creatures and the use and enjoyment of all these is, in dry economic terms, 'consumption.' Truly, our planet is possessed of astonishing bounty and, if stewarded wisely, there is comfortably enough for all. Yet biblical authors have always known that the delight and value of material goods has a profound spiritual power over us, one which directs and controls much of our modern consumer culture (*see Matt's piece in this edition*). It is a power God's people have always been warned against.

It is unsurprising for the Christian, then, that recent research has confirmed what the sages of the Old Testament and Jesus himself said: that no matter how much we gain and do with material goods, above the threshold of our true needs, they cannot bring us more life. Psychological data repeatedly demonstrate that there is no significant correlation between increased material means and either reported happiness or emotional well-being. Some studies even indicate that the more oriented we are toward material possessions and their associated status, the less happy and healthy we become (e.g., Kasser, 2002).

In some ways, this news makes our situation all the more perverse: we are not only consuming in ways which endanger our planet's ecological stability, but we are also mal-consuming against even our own interest. But in another, vitally important sense, this news is liberation. It means the desperate need of our age to *consume* less is in no way a call to be less. Moreover, Christians know that the one who calls us to turn from our path of destruction is the same one who holds out to us life itself, and assures us it is life to the full (John 10:10). Therefore, the more we are freed from the pressure to conform our lives to the pattern of this world, the more we will be able to look our present challenges in the eye, to meet them safe in the knowledge that our 'life does not consist in the abundance of possessions' (Luke 12:15).

While addressing the overlapping crises before us certainly goes beyond our personal actions and habits, it must begin with them, for the pattern and character of our lives forms our primary witness of the reality to which we hold. Our unwillingness to attempt dramatic change in the next twenty years, or the next ten, has been variously diagnosed as a crisis of faith—that we do not trust the warnings; or of the heart—we simply do not care enough about the rainforest, the animals, our children's futures, or our global neighbours, to act decisively; or a crisis of politics—that we lack strong leadership; or economics—that that we demand limitless growth from a finite system. But among and within these crises lives a deeper crisis: of imagination. In my experience, when confronted with the issues, the vast majority of us simply have no vision of life beyond



consumer culture and socio-economic business-as-usual. Even those of us seeking to turn *from* our present mode of life may still struggle to picture a new normal *toward* which we can turn.

Much of Manna Gum's work is dedicated to filling in parts of this picture: to show what is possible and, importantly, *better*—fuller, more true and whole—beyond the frame of the familiar. This has always been an activity central to Christian mission as, in the words of missiologist Lesslie Newbigin, 'the coming of the gospel ... introduces the vision of a new world, a world for which it is legitimate to hope'. Our Christian witness therefore includes patterning our lives according to the world we hope for: it is the world we speak of and live for now as we seek to speed its coming. We are to embody the good news that salvation has come. All things are being made new; from our sick hearts that know not how to say 'Enough! God is sufficient', to the world God made and loves and would not see despoiled.

How might you press further into this life of imaginative hope? What new forms could this transformed life take? What assumptions of our present culture could you interrogate?

Less than a year ago I embarked on such an experiment: to test if giving up our corporate captivity to air travel really meant giving up on life, joy, freedom, or even travel itself. I live in Melbourne, but I wanted to spend Christmas in Sydney with my Dad. Of course, I could have taken a train, bus, or driven, but I'd made those journeys before.

Besides, what I really wanted was to see the world—to feel it: to experience God's creation all the way between my doorstep and my destination. I wanted to get to know my home country a little better too: 1000 kilometres is a long way, but you don't get much of a sense of the land from the Hume Highway or from 35,000 feet. I also wanted adventure, something that sitting in a plane or a car or a train just can't provide.

So I decided to walk. Through this choice, I discovered that low-carbon travel can be far more than an environmental imperative: it can be a delight. I now question why I ever felt a need to explore countries halfway across the globe when the part of the world I have at my feet is already so varied, vast, and beautiful. I gained so much from the act of walking too: some days were pure meditation and, regularly, I found my spirit welling up with songs of praise to the Creator of such wide, good lands. Danger and difficulty along the way caused me to take new soundings of the depths of my dependence on God and the simplicity of life on the road, carrying only my true needs, fostered a new appreciation for my daily bread.

This is unlikely to be everyone's idea of a compelling alternative, but for me, it exposed one of the many lies driving our culture of casual over-consumption. It stands as incarnate proof that there are other ways: we are not as



Images taken during Jacob's walk / experiment from Melbourne to Sydney.

locked into this mode of life as we might suppose; nor by turning from our destructive habits should we expect only sacrifice without also gaining from the loss.

With our world order disrupted by a global pandemic, we have each been compelled to reconsider our normal lives. How could you use this lull in the momentum of the familiar to further imagine a better way?

Jacob Garrett lives in Melbourne, where he studies theology and works with young people and communities in the inner city. In his spare time he designs and makes all-natural hiking equipment for the next time he gets itchy feet.



Matt, Ashlee, and the family.

(News cont. from front page)


Matt coming on board has proved doubly providential as no longer had he started than I found myself plunged into a family crisis, so he has been able to keep things ticking over where I couldn't have. This has been a very difficult time for our family (not COVID related), but we have had a very deep sense of being held by the community of faith: both our local Seeds Community here in Long Gully and


the broader Manna Gum community. It is just one more reminder that 'the economy of God' is not pie-in-the-sky but an urgent and practical reality.

Jonathan Cornford

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MANNA GUM seeks to live within the economy of God – frugally, ethically and through the generous sharing of abundance within the community of faith. If our work resonates with you, please consider becoming a monthly financial supporter or making a one-off donation.

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About Manna Gum

Manna Gum is an independent non-profit organisation that seeks to:

1. *Help Christians reclaim and practise Biblical teaching on material life; and*
2. *Promote understanding of the ways our economic lives impact upon ourselves, others and the earth.*

Manna Gum is motivated by a vision of renewal of the Church in Australia as an alternative community that witnesses to the Kingdom of God.

Please contact us if you would like us to speak to your church, group or organisation; or if you would like more information about our work; or to discuss how we could support you and your church/group/organisation to explore some of these issues.

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