



# MANNA matters

Quarterly of MANNA GUM.



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# All Things in Common

## Property in the Bible

### *A Christian Ethic of Property (Part 1)*

by Jonathan Cornford

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. ... There was not a needy person among them.

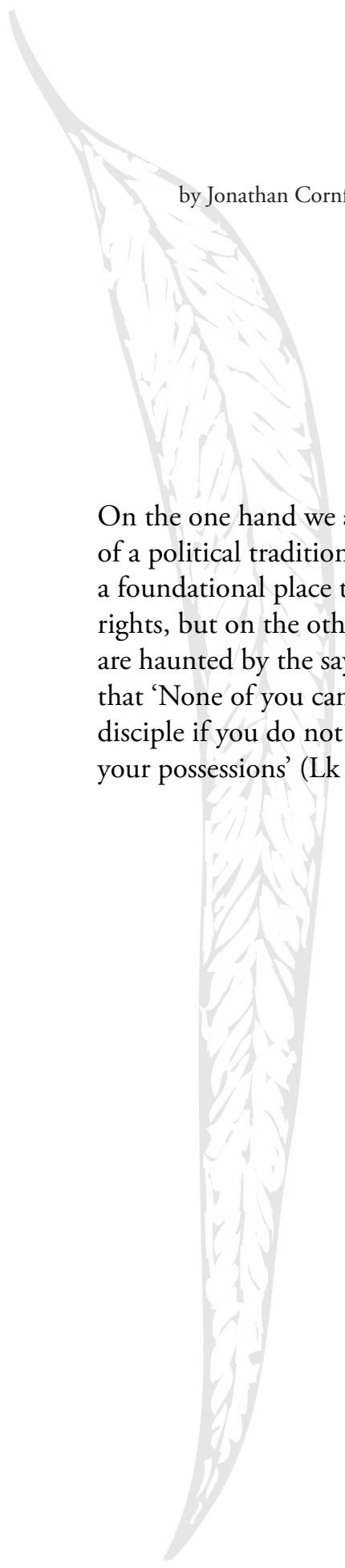
(Acts 4:32-34)

Australia is currently in the midst of a terrible housing crisis. As we all know, and as the media continually laments, the crisis is rooted in the stratospheric price of property. Yet whenever it looks like house prices might start falling, there is widespread alarm throughout the same media outlets. The Gordian Knot at the heart of Australia's housing problem is the sacrosanct nature of rising property prices to a large (and disproportionately influential) segment of the electorate.

In the recent referendum, social media dis-information campaigns claimed that the Indigenous Voice to Parliament would result in a land-grab for people's backyards. Despite the absurdity of the proposition, such claims got a disturbing amount of traction. History shows that, when people feel their property rights are threatened, politics becomes shrill and irrational. In Australia, this fear is perhaps sharpened by the subconscious recognition of (though unwillingness to admit) the fact that all freehold property is, by definition, founded on the arbitrary erasure of the 'native title' (to use the legal term) of the original inhabitants of this continent: that is, a massive act of theft.

What does all of this mean for how followers of Jesus think about and conduct ourselves toward property? On the one hand we are inheritors of a political tradition that gives a foundational place to property rights, but on the other hand we are haunted by the saying of Jesus that 'None of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions' (Lk 14:33). In the first Christian community, shaped by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, we read that 'no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but they held all things in common' (Acts 4:32). Is this what all Christians should do? And, in a settler colony like Australia, what does justice for indigenous peoples mean for how we think about property rights?

In this article, I will begin the process of unpacking a Christian ethic of property. Here I will survey how the Bible discusses property rights, particularly noting the large transition between Old and New Testaments. The underlying claim is that, although these texts come from economic contexts which are radically different to our own, they nevertheless contain *foundational dispositions* to property, the importance of which continue to resonate down through time. In the article to follow this one, I



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will survey Christian attitudes to property over the last two thousand years, and especially the *political ethic* they derived from it. In the final article, I will attempt to draw these threads together to ask what it means for us here and now in twenty-first century Australia.

## Property in the Old Testament

In the seventeenth century, commercially-minded Puritans often cited the Eighth Commandment—‘Thou shalt not steal’—as a divine institution of exclusive rights in property, thus allowing them to acquire, use, and dispose of property in whatever way they pleased (that is, whichever way was most profitable). They were right to identify the recognition of property rights in the Old Testament, but quite wrong in the character they attributed to such rights.

To catch the proper meaning of ‘property’ in the laws and commandments of the Old Testament, we need to see them against the luminous background of the divine vocation of Israel. As I have argued elsewhere (*MM* Nov 2018), Israel was called to be a people—a community, an economy, a nation—who communicated the character of God to the world through their redeemed relationships with each other, with the Earth, and with God. Central to this witness was its call to be an *alternative economic community* in which the land is kept bountiful, and there is enough for all.

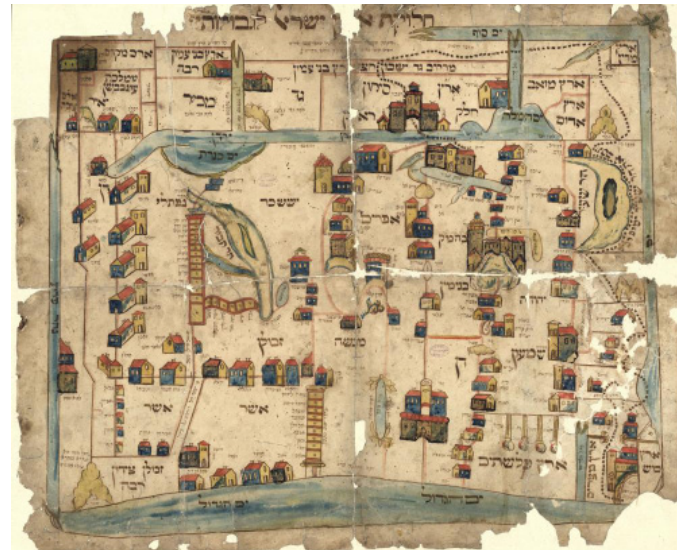
It is towards this vision that the law codes of Israel instituted rights in property, but also placed limits on the rights of property. When we are talking about ‘property’ in the Old Testament, what is primarily in view are the things that were most valuable to an agricultural society: first and foremost, land; but also things such as livestock, millstones, and cloaks. The right of possession of such things is taken seriously: stolen property must be paid back double, and there is provision for accidental damage to property done by others. This all seems fairly normal, however, when we look a bit deeper, the Hebrew conception of property rights becomes much less familiar.

The foundational principle underpinning all of Israel’s property rights is the insistence that ‘The Earth is the Lord’s, and all that is in it’ (Ps 24:1). More particularly, ‘the Promised Land’ is that parcel of the Earth that belongs to Israel as a *gift* from God. In Deuteronomy 8 the Israelites are warned not to say to themselves that the land and its wealth is theirs because they *deserve it*, nor because they have *earned it*, and even less because they are *entitled*

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A nineteenth century copy of Rabbi Elijah of Vilna’s (1720-97) *Division of the Land of Israel Within its Borders*, U.S. Library of Congress.

*to it* (the three central claims our culture continually tries to make about wealth and property), but to always remember that it is God’s *sheer gift*. In Leviticus 25, this notion is stated more forcefully: ‘the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants’ (v.24). Israel’s tenancy and heritage in the land are secure, *but*—and it is a very big ‘but’—there are conditions placed on it.

The foundation of Israel’s architecture of property rights lies in one of the most tedious and skipped-over bits of the Bible: the allocation of land to all the clans in the twelve tribes of Israel (see Num 26 and 34; Josh 13-19). Unlike the Canaanite cities that surrounded them, where all land was owned by the king and/or an urban aristocracy, Israel was to have a broad distribution of property such that every family group had a stake in the land. Even more remarkably, the connection of families to land was to be *inalienable*: while families could make arrangements to lease their land to others, it could not be *sold* out from their possession. This is enshrined in the remarkable Jubilee laws of Leviticus 25 which instituted that every fiftieth year—after seven Sabbaths of Sabbath years—all land that had passed via commercial arrangements into the hands of others, had to return to its original heritors.

The purpose of the Jubilee laws was clear: in an agrarian society land is the basis of economic livelihood, and the foundational concern of Israel was that every family had a livelihood. In the words of Deuteronomy 15, ‘There shall be no poor among you’. There is much debate about to what extent, or if, these remarkable laws were

actually followed in Israel, however, what is clear is that for the writers and compilers of the Bible, the Jubilee laws represent the pinnacle of *the social and economic vision* that God's people were being called to. In this context, property rights are harnessed to a *social vision*; they do not float free from the social purpose they are meant to serve.

Rights in property were further attenuated in the Hebrew law by placing limits on what you could do with your property. The harvest laws in Leviticus 19:9-10 forbade harvesting a field of grain or olive grove right up to the edges, or going back to gather grain and olives that had been missed. Rather, these 'gleanings' were to be left for 'the poor and the alien' to gather. In effect, this law stipulates two principles that would be shocking to contemporary Australians: (i) you do not have a right to extract 100% productive efficiency from your own property, and; (ii) others in the community—in this case, the economically disenfranchised—also have some rights to your property. These principles are extended in the Jubilee Sabbath fallow laws: land can be under production for six years, but every seventh year it must be given a 'complete rest'. Once again, the productive capacity of property is placed under limits for the sake of others who have a claim on it, in this case, the soil itself and even 'the wild animals' (see Lev 25:1-10).

Finally, Israel's possession of (or, more accurately, tenancy in) the Promised Land was *conditional* on its following

the Torah vision that it was given. Leviticus 26 gives a dire warning that failure to follow the Jubilee vision will result in disaster and dispossession for Israel. There is no divine entitlement to the land, only a promise linked to a practice of faithfulness, demonstrated by social and economic justice. (As I write this I am acutely conscious of the ongoing tragedy of Palestine and the modern state of Israel, a conflict that is rooted in a sense of divine entitlement that overrides any sense of justice.)

In summary, the Old Testament envisages property rights as having a key role in shaping its social vision. However, they are a particular kind of property right: the Old Testament does not recognise any form of *absolute property rights*, but rather places limits on the ways in which property can be used and the extent to which property can be accumulated.

### The New Testament and property

To properly understand how property is discussed in the New Testament, we need to situate it against the backdrop discussed above, as well as see how this vision is being renewed, fulfilled and expanded in Christ. Also, we need to understand the New Testament teaching about property against the radically different socio-political context in which it is written: whereas the Old Testament envisages a legal-economic structure for an agrarian society overseen by a coherent political community, the New Testament is appealing to tiny, marginal communities (mostly urban) scattered around the Roman Empire.

Therefore, the New Testament does not offer any substantive teaching on property *rights*, as such. Rather, the general ethic of property espoused in the Old Testament is simply assumed by the writers of the New Testament. Of much more concern to the New Testament, and especially in the teachings of Jesus, is the *attitude* and *practice* of the Christian community in relation to property.

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus famously initiates his ministry in Nazareth by reading a prophecy from Isaiah which finishes with a proclamation of the year of Jubilee ('the year of the Lord's favour'). He states that the prophecy has been fulfilled that day. Clearly, Jesus has no expectation of a major land restoration as envisaged in Leviticus 25: the social, economic, and political structures that would be necessary for that had long-since been erased. Rather, Jesus is taking up the *theological and ethical meanings* of Jubilee and breathing them into a radically new conception of the people of God in the world. In this new covenant, the role of the land in supplying both economic security and membership of the covenant community will



Gleaning, by Arthur Hughes (1832-1915).



Early Christian fresco of an agape (love) feast, a communal fellowship meal shared among believers, Catacombs of Domitila, Rome.

be replaced by the community (*koinonia*) of those who are ‘in Christ’. This work of building this new community is central to Jesus’ ministry and the key to understanding what he has to say on property.

In the teachings of Jesus, the subject of property is subsumed within discussions of wealth and possessions.

And there is just no way of getting around the fact that most of what Jesus has to say on wealth and possessions is about giving them up:

Sell your possessions and give alms. [...] For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Lk 12:33-34)

None of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions (Lk 14:33)

Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me. [...] How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! (Lk 18:22-24)

The teachings of Jesus are so challenging that they are mostly ignored within the church. To properly unpack all that is going in these texts would take more space than I have here, however, I will try to cut to the chase. Essentially, I think there are two key messages:

1. Jesus understands that possessions tend to possess us. The act of accumulating things over which we can say, ‘These are mine’, also amounts to an accumulation of spiritual transactions in which we

have defined an element of our personhood *against* the rest of humanity. The statement, ‘These are *mine*’, by definition means, ‘They are no one else’s’. The larger the sphere of our lives that is defined this way, the larger our alienation from other people, and *therefore*, the larger our alienation from God. Behind

this lies the suspicion that many of the practices by which property is accumulated involve mistreatment of people in some form or another. This explains the urgency behind Jesus’ calls for the renunciation of wealth and possessions: he sees them as concealing social injustice and risking spiritual death.

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Distributing wealth and possessions is an act of social fellowship (*koinonia*) that is central to what Jesus means by ‘the kingdom of God’.

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2. The converse of this is that distributing wealth and possessions (‘alms’ literally means ‘mercy’) is an act of social fellowship (*koinonia*) that is central to what Jesus means by ‘the kingdom of God’. Underpinning this is the insight that the strongest forms of human community are not those founded on voluntary friendships, but those of mutual material dependence.

The main concern of Jesus’ teaching regarding property is therefore not to establish the basis for, and extent of property *rights*, but rather to point us towards those dispositions and practices that transcend claims to rights and move us towards the loving relations that are the primary quality of the kingdom of God. This overall approach is maintained throughout the New Testament, but is perhaps most powerfully evident in Luke’s account of the Jerusalem Community after Pentecost.

## A community of distribution

In Acts 2 we read about the dramatic events that give birth to that thing we now know as ‘the church’. At the beginning of this passage, the Holy Spirit is ‘distributed’ (this is the best translation of the Greek word *diamerizo*, often translated as ‘divided’ or ‘separated’) amongst the gathered believers and immediately releases *communication* that transcends barriers. At the end of the chapter we read about how this spirit-filled community began selling their possessions and *distributing* (*diamerizo* again) their goods ‘as anyone might have need’ (v.43). The story that recounts the birth of the church begins with a distribution of spirit and ends with a distribution of possessions. ‘All the believers were together and had everything in common.’ (v.44)

In Acts 4, this aspect of the Jerusalem community is revisited again with extra emphasis:

‘Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.’ (v.32-35)

It is clear that the Jerusalem Community was an *economic community*, however it was not constituted by a new ordering of property rights. Rather, as Luke stresses, ‘no one *claimed* private ownership’. People still had the perfect right to retain private possession, they just didn’t care. This was not a product of a code of membership, but rather an instinctive response to living in the powerful presence of Christ’s resurrection and grace among them.

This point is made even more forcefully in the following story of Ananias and Sapphira (5:1-11), who lied to Peter about their contribution to the community. Peter makes clear to them, ‘While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, were not the proceeds at your disposal?’ There was no obligation for them to share. (The fatal consequences of their actions came instead because they lied in the presence of the Holy Spirit.)

Luke’s picture of the Jerusalem Community is a striking example of what economic anthropologist David Graeber

calls ‘informal communism’. This has nothing to do with Marx or Lenin, but rather it is the term used to describe any social relationship that operates to the principle of, ‘from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs’. The primary instance of informal communism is the family unit: often those least able to contribute, young children, are the ones who receive most care. The informal communism of the Jerusalem

community arose from *internal motivation* and not a codified set of economic arrangements. There is evidence from the New Testament and early church that lower-key versions of this sort of behaviour were widespread throughout the church.

As the Jerusalem Community grew in size and complexity, there was a felt need to put more structure around these economic sharing arrangements, and seven deacons were appointed to oversee things (see Acts 6). At this point, the church itself became a trustee of property for the sake of its members and of the poor, a position that it holds (in theory) to this day. But once again, these more organised forms of sharing did nothing to alter the conception of people’s underlying *rights* to property, but remained entirely dependent on voluntary participation. The primary characteristic of this economic community was not its structure of property rights, but the fact that members no longer *claimed* those rights. Over two thousand years of history, the strength of Christian economic community has waxed and waned precisely to the extent which this has continued to be the case, or not.

## Conclusion

In this article, I hope I have demonstrated that the Old Testament provides a strong basis for recognising rights in property as a foundational human good, but it is a rather different kind of property right from what we are used to. In particular, the Old Testament repudiates any conception of *absolute* rights in property—the right to ‘To do with mine what I will’—and instead subordinates property rights to a broader social vision. The New Testament does nothing to alter this conception of property, but rather turns a laser-like focus on our attitudes and behaviours with regard to property, and the effects this has upon us and upon our neighbours. The early Christian communities continued to affirm property rights, but their defining move was ultimately to *transcend* them.

In the next article in this series, I will look at how this legacy has echoed down through the long history of the church, and how Christian thinkers continued to wrestle particularly with the political implications of property.



**Burning Down the House**, by Hannah Tingman.

*'This painting is my reflection on the recent catastrophic fires on Maui, Hawaii. Having grown up in Hawaii myself, I felt the pain of this place and its people close to my heart. In the aftermath of these fires Kama'aina (residents of Hawaii), and many Kanaka (Indigenous Hawaiians) who had just lost their homes were harassed by the wealthy, the famous, and non-residents to purchase their land. We are greedy and careless and the world is burning. In Acts 2 the fire of the Holy Spirit leads people to an entirely different perspective on property, one that might avert such tragedies.'*

For more of Hannah's work, you can find her on Instagram (@\_hrt\_art\_) or visit her website (<https://hannahringman.wixsite.com/hrtart>).



# God's "Yes" to all Peoples

## Grief and hope after the October referendum

by Bianca Manning

No... After a year of saying Yes, typing Yes, advocating for Yes, and finally writing "Yes" on the 14<sup>th</sup> of October, I am now having to grapple with No.

Australia has said no.

Grief is probably the best word to describe what I, and many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, have been feeling. I battle with the temptation to lean into deep feelings of rejection, despair, and anger. I also battle with the pressure to totally dismiss those feelings and replace them with hope, positivity, and an urgency to keep moving forward.

Where I have landed is somewhere between: a place of grace, of lament, of rest, of grief, of community, and bringing all of these things to God.

In this article, I aim to analyse my post-processing of the referendum result, and see if I can try to place my finger on Australia's pulse, and the pulse of Australian Christians post-referendum.

### A place for grief, a history of resilience

The first place I wanted to go after realising the referendum result (after I had sobbed through the initial wave of grief and disappointment) was Musgrave Park.

For those unfamiliar with the Aboriginal significance of Musgrave Park in Meanjin (Brisbane), it has historically been a gathering place for Aboriginal community, culture, resistance, meetings, and

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Musgrave Park, Brisbane.





*Common Grace staff team at the Christians for Voice and Justice training event in Sydney.*

protest. It has been home of ‘The Aboriginal Sovereign Embassy Brisbane’ since 2012, and is the site of frequent community meetings, as well as annual NAIDOC Week and Invasion Day events every year. After moving to Brisbane five years ago, I even found out that my mum used to live at Musgrave Park, camping there with her family and other Aboriginal community members when she was a child.

So, in the midst of my early processing of the “No” result, my partner and I went to Musgrave Park. We walked barefoot across the grass, leaves, and tree roots. We walked past basketball players, displaced folks in tents, and late-night romancers whose worlds seemed not to have stopped like mine had. We sat in the middle of the park and prayed.

As we prayed and cried, I was overwhelmed by images of all that this place had seen through the eyes of the “Brisbane Blacks” here on Jagera and Turrbal Country. The societal rejection, the racism and abuse, the arrests and

removal from Country experienced by these people have, tragically, also been experienced by the wider Aboriginal community, including my Gomeroi ancestors. The cries and chants of my people often fell on deaf ears.

Yet they still gathered. They still chanted. They still stood up and spoke up for justice.

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Today, we stand on the shoulders of our ancestors, we gain inspiration from their lives, we lament their sufferings, and we are driven to honour and serve our elders and community leaders today who are leading us on this collective journey.

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Many were compelled by their faith in Jesus, including the incredible Pastor Don Brady here in Brisbane (read more about Pastor Don Brady and other Aboriginal Christian leaders of the past at [commongrace.org.au/past\\_aboriginal\\_christian\\_leaders](http://commongrace.org.au/past_aboriginal_christian_leaders)).

Today, we stand on the shoulders of our ancestors, we gain inspiration from their lives, we lament their sufferings, and we are driven to honour and serve our elders and community leaders today who are leading us on this collective journey. There at Musgrave Park, God was drawing my attention to the bigger story, the bigger struggle, and was leading me slowly and gently into hope.



## Seeing, hearing, kneeling

In the months leading up to the referendum, I often had a particular Bible story come to mind. For a long time, I struggled to make sense of what God may have been trying to say to me through it. It was the story of the woman with the issue of blood (Mark 5:25-34), who had courageously faced the crowds with the hope that if she could even just touch the edge of Jesus' cloak she would be healed.

A couple of weeks before the referendum, I realised that, at times, I felt that Aboriginal people were unfortunately like the woman in the story. Too often our mob have felt like Jesus is the only one who listens, the only one who will pause, the only one who will give up power to help and heal us. And the crowd of people around us, including the Church, are not even noticing us in our suffering.

Before reading on, please sit for a moment in this story. Will you be one in the crowd who sees, hears, and kneels before Jesus with us?

## Truth and redemption

In the week before the referendum, I feared that if our nation voted "No", these negative feelings would persist. As I wrote at the start of this article, this has certainly been a temptation, but an even stronger feeling has emerged: the feeling of deep gratitude for the millions of non-

Indigenous people who voted and advocated for "Yes". These people included non-Indigenous members of my Common Grace team and the Common Grace movement, Christians across all denominations, Yes campaign volunteers, multicultural and other faith communities, and so many others.

I have been encouraged by the time, energy and passion so much of the population put in, often placing themselves in uncomfortable situations to have difficult conversations with their friends and families, often grappling with the truth of our shared history and the reality of racism, injustice, and misinformation. Now, these folk are grieving with us.

At church on the morning after the referendum, I was moved by the Old Testament reading from Isaiah 25:

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples  
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-matured wines,  
of rich food filled with marrow, of well-matured  
wines strained clear.

And he will destroy on this mountain  
the shroud that is cast over all peoples,  
the sheet that is spread over all nations;  
He will swallow up death forever.

Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from  
all faces,



Bianca in Boggabilla, NSW at a Voice community yarning event.



and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth,  
for the Lord has spoken.

This reading reminded me of the ending: the ending which will culminate in God's "Yes" for people of every tribe, every tongue, every nation. The grief and the tears will be over, the truth will have set us free and the healing will have come. This is what keeps me going—what gives me hope.

As Christians, we sit in the in-between space. As we actively await the fullness of God's Kingdom to be made manifest on earth, we are called to imitate Christ, through the Holy Spirit: living in humility, deeply listening to God and each other, and laying down our lives for others. We cling onto the fact that God chooses to weep with us, enters into the pain with us, and promises that one day all things, all relationships, all of creation, will be redeemed. Our biblical call is then to help demonstrate and work for that redemptive vision even now.

I believe this year has brought to the surface a lot of Australia's unaddressed issues. I've heard people speak about it like a mirror being put up to our country, showing our not so pretty reflection, or like a thermometer revealing the temperature and the long journey ahead.

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This year has brought to the surface a lot of Australia's unaddressed issues... So what's the next step?

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So what's the next step? Firstly, I echo the call of senior Aboriginal Christian leader Aunty Jean Phillips, who I am blessed to sit under, who tells us that unless we deal with the true history of this country, we will never move forward: there will never be revival. Amen.

Across this referendum campaign, millions of people, many of whom have never engaged in Aboriginal justice before, have been mobilised into action. In my opinion, the biggest hope and challenge now is keeping these people on the long journey of relationship, deep listening, truth-telling, and justice.

My prayer and hope is that the Church would lead this movement.

*Bianca Manning is a Gomerai woman and an emerging Aboriginal Christian leader. She currently lives in Logan, South East Queensland, on the lands of the Yuggera and Yugambah peoples, working closely with senior Aboriginal Christian leader Aunty Jean Phillips. Bianca has a Social Work degree, and works as the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Justice Coordinator at Common Grace, a movement of Christians pursuing Jesus and justice together. To find out more and to join, visit [www.commongrace.org.au](http://www.commongrace.org.au).*



"Yes" painted rocks.



Bianca at the "Walk for Yes" event in Brisbane.



# William Cooper, Pastor Sir Doug Nicholls, and the Failed Referendum

by Chris Marshall

As I write, it is three weeks since the Australian nation voted not to recognise its First Peoples in the Constitution by establishing an Indigenous Voice to Parliament and to Executive Government.

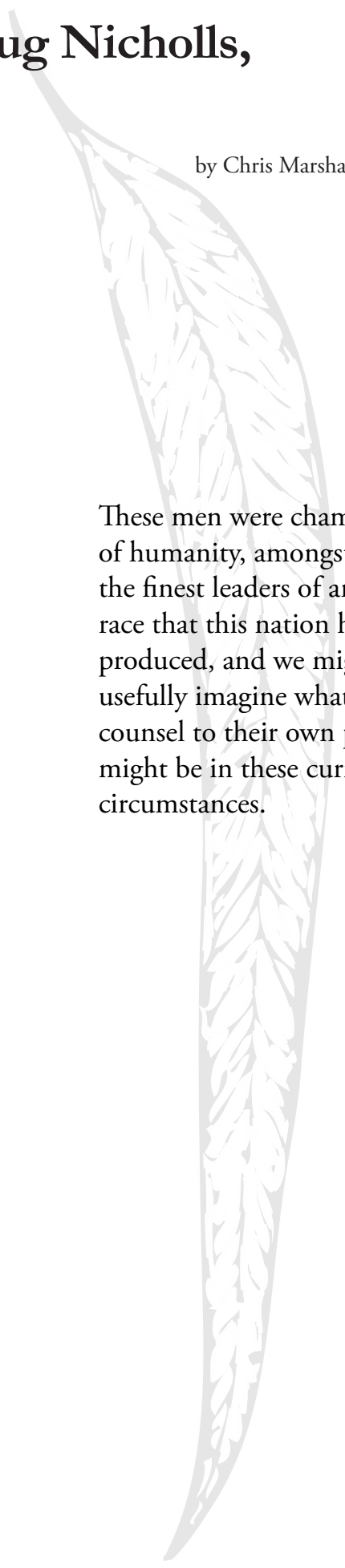
There has been a plethora of opinion on the matter, both in the weeks leading up to the vote, and subsequently, as the nation has sought to come to terms with the result. When on Saturday 14 October every Australian on the electoral roll was confronted with that brutal binary—Yes or No—it is now apparent that our essential conservatism in relation to the Constitution kicked in and No became the favoured response. By and large, any doubt or uncertainty about the operation of the Voice was sufficient to prompt retreat to the safety of No.

For much of the nation, the matter is resolved and one's attention can now turn to other matters—the cost of living, the challenges of climate, the geopolitical uncertainties, or just the day-to-day business of living. But for many Indigenous Australians, the referendum result is not so readily forgotten and the emotional impact of the rejection must still be processed and a way found to avoid a feeling of having been diminished as a people.

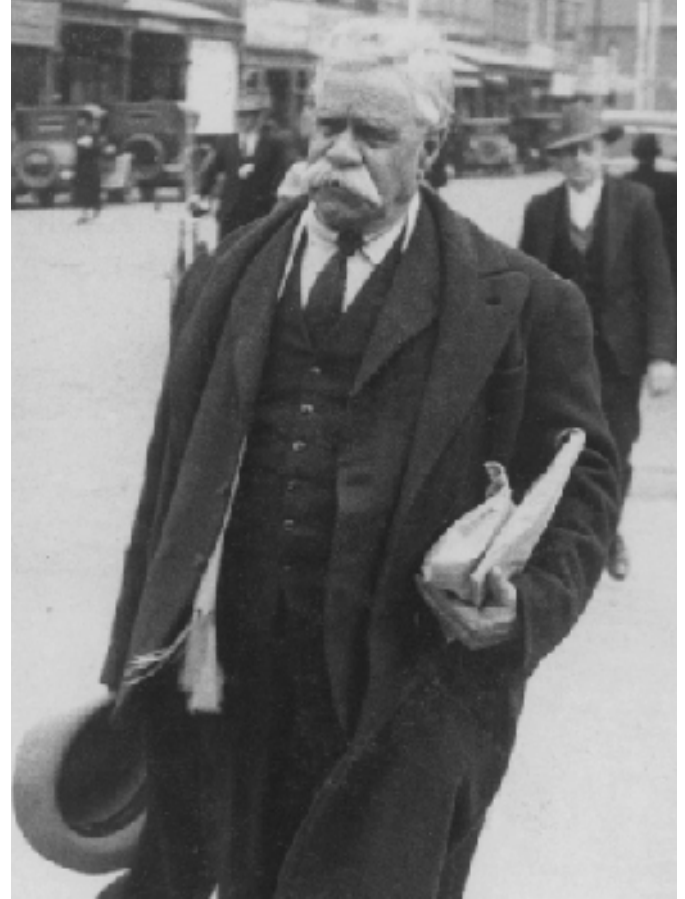
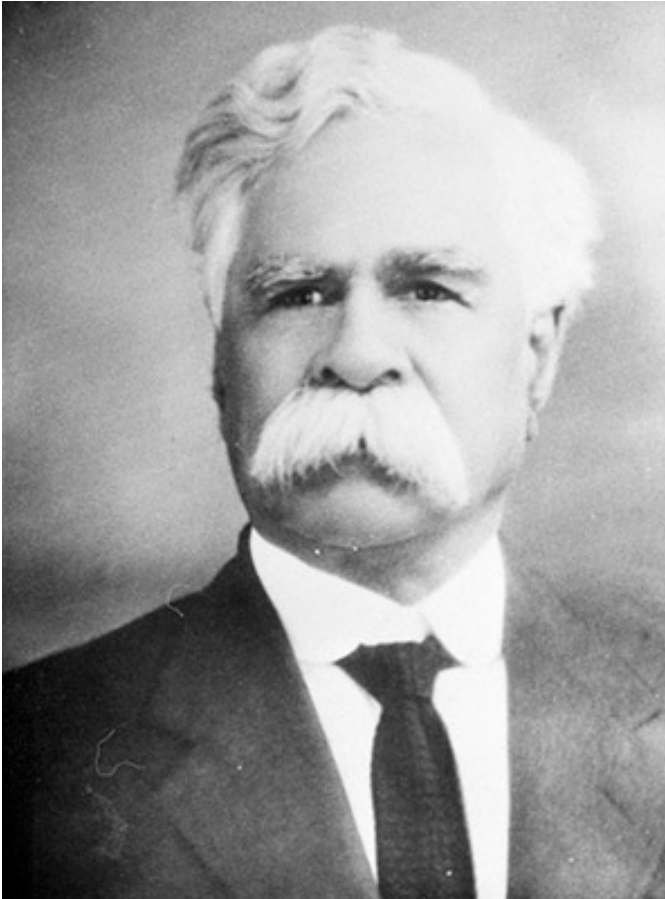
This article seeks to consider the referendum in retrospect by looking at the lives, words, and experience of two outstanding Aboriginal heroes from the past—William Cooper and Douglas Nicholls—Christian men who advocated for their people in times of immense marginalisation and oppression, and who stood against the overwhelming tide of settler discrimination. These men were champions of humanity, amongst the finest leaders of any race that this nation has produced, and we might usefully imagine what their counsel to their own people might be in these current circumstances.

But first we consider their lives. They were both from the same area of northern Victoria where the Murray River and the Goulburn River meet—William Cooper being born in 1860 in Echuca and Doug Nicholls in nearby Cummeragunja in 1906. Both were Yorta Yorta men, both embraced Christianity as young men, and both moved to Melbourne and became leaders who spoke out against injustice and outlined a Christian vision of a better, fairer society.

The much older Cooper mentored his young Yorta Yorta relative Nicholls, urging him to use the public profile he had acquired through his sporting achievements on the footy field and the running track to advocate for political change that would allow Aboriginal people to participate as equals in the life of the nation.



These men were champions of humanity, amongst the finest leaders of any race that this nation has produced, and we might usefully imagine what their counsel to their own people might be in these current circumstances.



## William Cooper

As a young man, William moved to join his family at the Maloga mission on the banks of the Murray where, in January 1884, he embraced Christianity following a church service, when he told the missionary, Daniel Matthews, that “I must give my heart to God”. He was taken under the wing of Matthews and his wife, Janet, who saw in him exceptional abilities. From Matthews he acquired a powerful conviction that black lives matter—that God’s love encompassed all people, and that God would provide salvation to the Yorta Yorta people just as he had to the Israelites, as set out in the Book of Exodus. These convictions were fundamental to the political activism Cooper would later undertake.

He was part of the relocation of most of the Maloga people to Cummeragunja in 1888 and thereafter used Cummeragunja as his base, travelling widely to find work wherever he could, spending much of his life working as a shearer, drover, horse-breaker and general rural labourer. It was not until he was in his early seventies that, denied entitlement to an age pension if he remained at Cummeragunja, he moved to Melbourne in 1933 and immediately began a remarkable political campaign.

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William Cooper was not only a hero of social justice—he was a hero of the faith.

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Through all those early years, his thinking had been formed by his experience of constant poverty, by his observation of the decimation of his people, by the repressive policies of the NSW Board for the Protection of Aborigines (and similarly oppressive Victorian Government policies), and by his reading in the Scriptures of a God of love and justice. He had attended adult literacy classes, had read widely, and now set about writing letters, drafting petitions, and organising Aboriginal resistance. He maintained all these activities, despite constant disappointment and setbacks, until in November 1940 when he retired to Barmah, back on Yorta Yorta country, and died a few months later, in March 1941, age 80.

William Cooper’s life and work still inspire and motivate us today. Following another government refusal to listen to his pleas for his people, he lamented in 1937, echoing Matthew 7:9, that “We asked for bread. We scarcely seem likely to get a stone.” But his legacy is great. He is sometimes best remembered for leading a delegation to the German Consulate in Melbourne in 1938 to condemn the Jewish people’s loss, pain, and suffering at the hands of the Nazis—an action undertaken partly to draw attention to his own people’s loss, pain, and suffering. But his political activism went way beyond that, and his biographer, Bain



Attwood, writes that ‘Cooper is remembered above all else for his prescient call for an Aboriginal voice to Parliament’.

In his successful advocacy for the establishment of a National Aborigines Day, Cooper made the following request of all churches:

We request that sermons be preached on this day dealing with the Aboriginal people and their need of the gospel and response to it ... and we ask that special prayer be invoked for all missionary and other effort for the uplift of the dark people.

William Cooper was not only a hero of social justice—he was a hero of the faith. He might have been crushed by the disappointments and great sadnesses in his life, but he pressed on, as if seeing him who is invisible.

He had to bury his first wife, and then his second. His beloved first son, Daniel, named after Daniel Matthews, died in Belgium in the first World War, in the service of a nation by which he and his people were generally despised and rejected. He invested significant effort over several years in collecting 1814 signatures from Aboriginal people all over Australia for a petition to King George VI seeking Aboriginal representation in Federal Parliament, only to have the Commonwealth Government refuse to submit the petition to the King.

But in the face of these and other setbacks he persevered, and God made him fruitful in the land of his suffering (Genesis 41:52b). Not only did he inspire the next generation of Aboriginal activists through his nephew and protégé Douglas Nicholls, but his greatness is widely recognised, including by the Jewish community who, in 2018, organised a walk in remembrance of the man and his leading of the 1938 walk to the German Consulate in Melbourne.

### Doug Nicholls

Douglas Nicholls was the grandson of William Cooper’s brother. William was 46 when Doug was born, and would, as a Yorta Yorta man of high degree, no doubt have mentored him to some extent over the years before moving to Melbourne in 1933. Doug had already been there for some five years, having relocated in order to play Australian Rules Football, at which he excelled. Doug had committed himself to following Christ one evening at the Northcote Church of Christ in 1932—so William Cooper arrived in Melbourne to find that his young relative was a celebrity for his football prowess and newly embarked on Christian pilgrimage. William sought now to enlist Douglas in the political struggle for Aboriginal justice.

And the young Nicholls did not resist, even if initially he was somewhat reluctant to use his sporting status as a



*A young Doug Nicholls: consummate athlete.*



*Above: Nicholls and others lead a march from Lake Tyers (Bung Yarnda) to Parliament House in Melbourne, protesting the government's plans to close Lake Tyers, 23 May 1963.*

platform to bring Aboriginal suffering to public attention. He played six seasons for Fitzroy in the VFL and was the first Aboriginal player to be selected for the Victorian interstate team—a spectacularly athletic 5ft 2inch wingman. He won both the Nyah and Warracknabeal Gifts as a sprinter and was a boxer in Jimmy Sharman's Boxing Troupe. But he now joined his great-uncle in Aboriginal advocacy, both in the political bearpit, and later, following Cooper's death and his own ordination, from the pulpit.

He became secretary of the Australian Aborigines League and was involved in lobbying members of the Federal Parliament for constitutional change that would give the Commonwealth responsibility for making laws for Aboriginal people, and this eventually led to the hugely successful 1967 referendum. In 1957 he formed the Victorian Aboriginal Advancement League, which continued to advocate on a range of fronts, including for the constitutional change, and he was at the forefront of the movement that became known as the "Yes" campaign.

He went on to do great community work and other public service, in partnership with his wife Gladys, and was eventually appointed Governor of South Australia, knighted by the Queen, and honoured with a State funeral following his death in 1988. A hero of his people and a hero of his faith, having lived an extraordinary life.

His biographer, Mavis Thorpe Clark, tells us that Pastor Doug believed that life was meaningless without faith, and

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**We as a nation must ensure that we do not ever again render First Peoples inconsequential and invisible—the essence of dehumanisation.**

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that he would often speak in his sermons of Jesus being close to the earth, just as his ancestors had been. She quotes him:

Jesus himself was close to nature. Many of his parables are concerned with the earth, the mustard seed, the lilies of the field, the birds of the air. When he talked with God (he was) in the open field, on the mountain top, in the wilderness ... Our people—our great people—were really close to God... We must hark back to our spirit strength—but now it is in Christ.

As we reflect on the dismal result of the 14 October 2023 referendum, we as a nation must ensure that we do not ever again render First Peoples inconsequential and invisible—the essence of dehumanisation. The zeitgeist that Cooper and Nicholls endured is not that which generally prevails in our times, and ways will be found to bring social repair through structures of active listening and empowerment. And I think those two great men would counsel their own people across the nation not to become embittered and calloused over by anger or hurt, but instead to hang onto hope in an imperfect world, and to work for a better accommodation with the dominant society, when bigotry will be swallowed up by love, and difference celebrated.

*Chris Marshall has worked with Aboriginal people and their organisations for over five decades. It has been a vocation gifted by the Almighty, for which he is deeply grateful.*

# Common Threads

## My Integral Ecology Journey with the Sisters of Mercy

by Claire Harvey

The world is on fire;  
It is simply just too hot.  
Gasp: wilting, burning.

My heart is heavy;  
These burdens can feel weighty.  
What is one to do?

And yet there is love:  
In stillness and tenderness...  
Fresh hope emerges.

As Richard Rohr is known for saying, “transformation is often more about unlearning than learning”, and my own life attests to this rather loudly! Perhaps this year more than most, as I have been fortunate to take part in an ‘Integral Ecology Fellowship’ with the Sisters of Mercy of Australia and Papua New Guinea. Upon reflection, this decision was a natural development along a long journey of “recovery” from conservative, middle-class evangelicalism, through which I have been learning to connect my faith with love of creation and desire for urgent political action to safeguard the earth. Along the way, I have slowly been discovering a form of Christian discipleship which is far more integrative, expansive, engaging, relevant, hopeful, and liberating. The path is certainly not a linear one—of going directly from A to B to C, or from the valley straight to the mountain top. It has been more of a cycle, or a circle, of revisiting things again and again, in new ways, with an ever-deepening sense of conviction and awareness.

The path is certainly not a linear one—of going directly from A to B to C, or from the valley straight to the mountain top. It has been more of a cycle, or a circle, of revisiting things again and again, in new ways, with an ever-deepening sense of conviction and awareness.



*Turtle constructed from coastal rubbish, Fitzroy Island, QLD.*



## An opportunity beckons

The Sisters of Mercy is a Catholic religious institute founded in Dublin, Ireland, by Catherine McAuley in 1831. Women who join this intentional community vow to serve those suffering from poverty, sickness, and a lack of education, with a particular focus on women and children. Their ministry model is one of deep engagement in the surrounding community, including teaching, provision of medical care, lobbying, and even politics. Despite numbering more than 6000 sisters across the world, I'd hardly heard of them until a year ago, when I first become aware of—and intrigued by—their fellowship program. The stated aim of the Integral Ecology Fellowship (which I also realised is not just for women, and not just for Roman Catholics) is to “animate efforts for Gospel justice to care for and protect our common home”, and to “equip leaders for a future which presents many unknown challenges in light of the climate crisis and other related existential threats”.

The most crucial and transformative aspects, for me, were the three place-based immersive experiences. The first was in the Blue Mountains (March), the second in Queenscliff (June) and the third was in Cairns (August). Each location was beautiful in its own unique way. As someone who has chosen to severely restrict travel by air for more than a decade, I'll confess up front that the necessary air travel was one of the most vexing and difficult aspects of this experience. But beyond that particular wrestle, I received this unique opportunity as a sheer gift and with deep gratitude. Despite the time commitment and logistics, this was in no way yet-another-thing-on-my-plate, but rather a very timely and necessary refilling of my tank and expansion of my horizons!

My fifteen fellow companions on this journey were mostly women, and mostly teachers from the Catholic sector. We engaged in awe-filled silence, opting-in to greet the dawn each day by sitting and watching the sun rise, and then joining quietly together for an embodiment prayer. We learnt about the lands we were on, including listening as traditional custodians shared ancient, indigenous wisdom. Our vegetarian meals were often prepared using locally-sourced and organic fresh produce. Our leaders, Sally and Margie, led us through a range of practices which enabled us to grow in trust and connection. Though some aspects were challenging, none of it felt burdensome or in any way like work. There was a strong sense of everything being timely and rather sacred. A beautiful sense of attentive patience characterised our

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time together, along with an invitation to engage openly and trustingly, curious as to what might emerge among us and through us.

As much as some of our days were quite full, including excursions, incursions, learning, and sharing, I think the key take-away for me was feeling deeply reassured and buoyed by the sense of no longer being so alone on this creation care journey, especially in naming and holding shared pain. To be an attentive, empathic, compassionate human being, one who loves one's neighbours—both near and far—in this year that is 2023, is a journey that inevitably opens us up to the pain of struggle and of loss. Add non-human creatures to the mix, and add flora to the fauna, and then entire ecosystems too, and there is much distress that quite rightly causes grief. The groaning of creation, referred to in Romans chapter 8, comes to mind. We are part of creation too, and sometimes we need places for our groaning to be more fully expressed. My first experience of the ‘council

of all beings' communal practice was just that: for a short time we all embraced the identity of one different part of our created world, and spoke to one another "in character" of various perils and pains, be it exploitation, extraction, violence, neglect, or the very real threat of our extinction and consequent non-existence as a species or landform (we had a donkey, a bat, a turtle, bees, worms, a river and the atmosphere represented in the room, to name a few).

**Interconnection**

As just one example of the many threads that have been woven together so wonderfully in this recent season, on the March retreat I'd taken along my current reading, which just happened to be *Ecological and Climate Conscious Coaching* (2023), very hot off the press. While at the Blue Mountains, where we were literally up in the clouds some mornings, I read about the Deep Time Walk, which maps a 4.6km guided walk against the 4.6 billion years of Earth's history. This equates to one million years for every metre, and accordingly the final 20cm of this walk represents the 200 000 years during which *Homo sapiens* has been on Earth. The very same day, Margie Abbott, one of our wonderful Sisters of Mercy leaders, introduced us to this same deep time concept! It can be incredibly powerful in re-shaping one's perspective in terms of our unique and precious place in what is far more than mere human history, but rather the emergence of conscious life itself within an ever-expanding cosmos. I would not have expected this focus on cutting-edge scientific thinking, but ours is a God of quarks and black holes, of things more wonderful and mysterious than we

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Ours is a God of quarks and black holes, of things more wonderful and mysterious than we could ever imagine.

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could ever imagine. And somehow, in this vast universe, everything is interconnected.

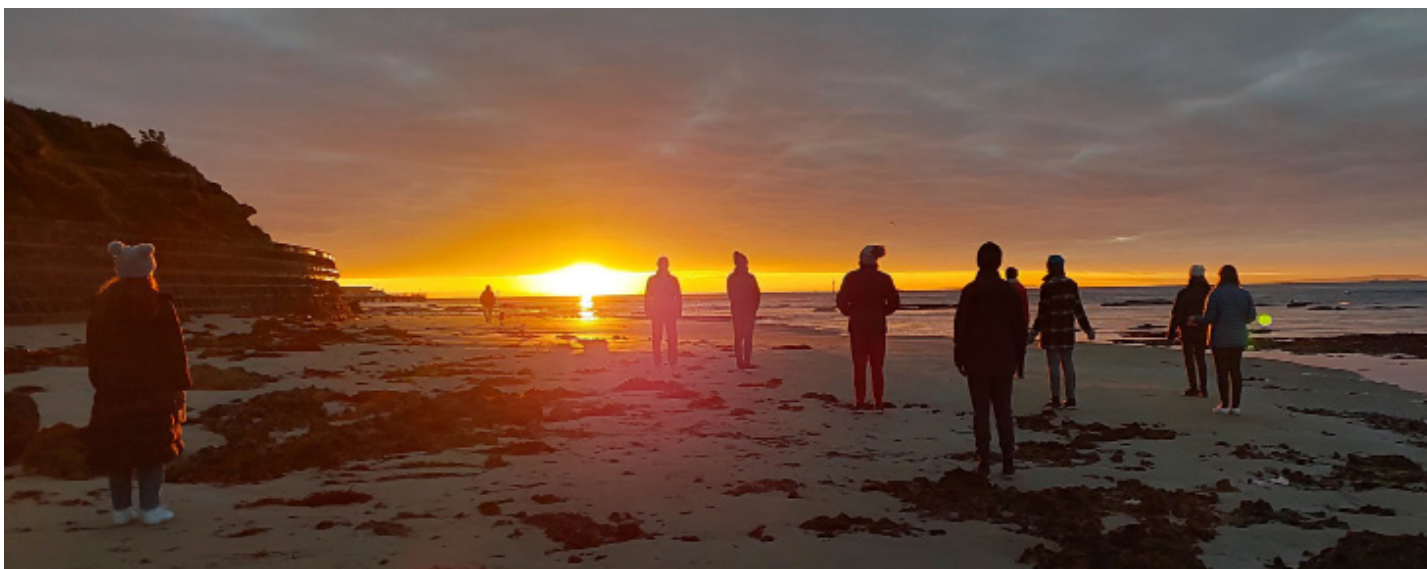
This idea is another one of the key threads that has been emerging for me, and now that my eyes are open to it, I see interconnection everywhere. I also see its opposite: the language that "others" people, and omits and ostracises—that delights in drawing harsh dividing lines. Our rampant individualism, and our arrogant and deluded sense that we can make it on our own, our own way, on our own terms, seems ubiquitous. Pope Francis confronts this head-on in paragraph 19 of his recent letter, *Laudate Deum*, where he reiterates two of his core convictions: that "Everything is connected" and "No one is saved

alone". He calls out countries that put their national interest above the common good (paragraph 52), and his phrase "homicidal pragmatism" has stuck with me. He commends the life of authentic faith, recognising that it "not only gives strength to the human heart, but also transforms life,

transfigures our goals, and sheds light on our relationships to others and with creation as a whole" (paragraph 70). These are timely words for all of us today, Catholic or not.

**Extending the invitation**

Other important components of the fellowship program included monthly mentoring sessions; materials to read, watch, or listen to each month; a group Zoom where we reflected on what we were learning and experiencing; and a personal project where we seek to engage with a pressing ecological issue in a way that educates, moves, and informs others. Late last year, while up at Gembrook Retreat, I reconnected with an old friend and it quickly became



Greeting the dawn, Queenscliff, VIC.



apparent that we were walking similar paths toward a more integrated, inclusive, expansive Christian spirituality. Out of this reconnection, the idea of a mini-retreat day of our own was birthed. We called it a *Guling Gathering*, as it was held in early August, within a short indigenous season that sits between deep winter and spring. It's a season of new life breaking through cold earth: the emergence of orchids, the first signs of golden wattle. It's a season of fresh and fragile hopefulness, which seemed fitting.

The Guling Gathering invited ten participants to come and rest in quiet, reflective, shared space. We read poetry and spoke in small groups of our deep hopes and our deep fears. We exercised creativity in courageously responding using pictures or words. We reflected on the idea of us all being called to be a part of something bigger and quite beautiful, just like an orchestra with many musicians all playing their own part, together contributing to a majestic symphony.

We also connected less formally over morning cuppas and a simple lunch of soup and rolls. Some participants had no experience of church or faith, whereas others came as weary veterans seeking a space for a different kind of faith expression. There was a common consensus around there being a deep need for more opportunities like these, to carve out sacred space to come and simply be, together with others, in the midst of our noisy, frantic, and often fragmented lives; to practise stillness and silence, but also to find the courage to lean into the kind of deep and honest connection that ultimately we all crave.

## Love in action

There are so many more threads, more than can be mentioned here. Other important ones were the growing and deepening sense that everything is indeed not just connected, but spiritual. I deeply identify with the words of Fr. Richard Rohr, a Franciscan from the Centre for Action and Contemplation, who speaks of “prophets who live on the very edge of the inside”. I resonate deeply with this sense of still swimming within the stream of the broader Christian tradition, but some days *only just*. In response to those who would decouple faith from material concerns, emerging church leaders like Brian McLaren have recently called for a Franciscan Renaissance: an expression of faith that is deeply grounded in ecology, nonviolence, economics, and inclusive solidarity; something thoroughly earthy in its focus, rather than exclusively heavenly.

I have come to sense a similar call so deeply, and I take deep encouragement that others do too. I feel that the challenge for many of us now is to get on with living

it, and to eschew the comfortable temptation to keep merely reading, thinking, and even writing. I'm a curious person, and a lifelong learner, and reading and thinking and writing have been crucial and transformative parts of my own journey. But in our content-rich and noisy world, so full of words and images and ideas, it would be easy simply to add more of our own ideas and words, and ultimately to just add more noise. What the world needs now, it seems, is *love in action*: love of neighbour *and* love of creation, expressed in courageous and sacrificial deeds which flow from a present and trusting sense of God's gracious abundance.

Through my time with the Sisters of Mercy and my fellowship companions, I have been encouraged to show up fully, holding in tension the fact that in these precarious times we have everything to fear, and simultaneously nothing to fear. I've also felt the call to rest in quiet trust that God holds the whole world in strong, kind, and trustworthy hands, mindful that—rather paradoxically—we are sacred co-creators who are being beckoned to actively and urgently play our own unique part in this unfolding symphony.

This is the path.

Goodness, together with love, justice and solidarity,  
are not achieved once and for all;  
they have to be realised each day.

(Pope Francis, 2023, *Laudato Deum*, para. 34).

*Claire Harvey has been involved in various circles over the past three decades, and is now a part of The Village Church in Mt Eliza. She currently serves on Frankston City Council, the boards of Ethos and CoPower, as well as being Vice-Chair of the South East Councils Climate Change Alliance. Claire is a registered career practitioner and is launching out as a solopreneur with her rather niche vocational/ecological coaching practice, Echo Coaching (echocoaching.org).*



## News from Long Gully

As I write this I am just preparing to head to Canberra for the annual conference of the New Economy Network Australia (NENA - check out the website at [neweconomy.org.au](http://neweconomy.org.au)). This year the theme of the conference is 'Life After Capitalism' with major themes such as 'a wellbeing economy' and 'degrowth'. I will be presenting on the post-capitalist vision of R.H. Tawney. Tawney was an economic historian and public Christian intellectual in Britain between the wars, who had an enormous influence on the shape of post-war social democracy in both Britain and Australia. His ideas were rooted in his sense of the profound implications of the Christian gospel for the shape of economic life, but his influence had a lot to do with his ability to work in a broad social coalition, and to find common cause amongst diverse groups towards a vision of a better economy. I hope that more Christians in our day will be able to find their way into grassroots social movements such as the New Economy Network. This is something Manna Gum will give more focus to in the coming years.

As we head towards the new year, some significant changes are afoot in Manna Gum, with a new website, new look and new themes to be unveiled in 2024. Watch this space!

I hope this Advent season you are able to find some respite from the noise and superficiality to rediscover the wonder of the Christ child.

**Jonathan Cornford**



**Life after Capitalism?**  
The Post-Capitalist Vision of R.H. Tawney

Jonathan Cornford

2023 NENA Conference  
17 - 19 November 2023, Canberra  
[neweconomy.org.au/nena-2023](http://neweconomy.org.au/nena-2023)

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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.

[www.mannagum.org.au](http://www.mannagum.org.au)