Manna Matters

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Manna Matters is a publication of Manna Gum. Manna Gum is an independent non-profit organisation which seeks to help Christians reclaim and practise biblical teaching on material life, and promote understanding of the ways our economic lives impact upon ourselves, others, and the earth.

Artwork courtesy of Lena Singla
www.lenasingla.com

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News From Long Gully

In February I attended a two-day Community Tax Summit in Melbourne, hosted by think tank Per Capita and the University of Melbourne's Community Tax Project. Now I know that this seems like the the least sexy way to start sharing my news, but it was actually a really exciting and stimulating event. The structure of our tax system lies at the heart of Australia's major challenges this century, including climate change, housing crisis, and growing economic inequality.

What made this event so positive was that it wasn't just highlighting everything that is wrong with Australia at the moment, but made clear that the alternative policies for a better Australia are not some chimera in the distance, but are in fact very near to hand, and eminently doable. And it was not just a bunch of cranks, but a gathering of some of Australia's most respected economic thinkers. A highlight was the keynote address given by Ken Henry, former Treasury Secretary, in which he was unexpectedly frank about the failings of the current economic structure of Australia:

> We have political leaders who insist that mining and forestry underwrite Australian prosperity. I will state it plainly. Those who believe this nonsense cannot be trusted with the wellbeing of future generations. … Mining and native forest logging industries, collectively, employ only about 2% of the labour force. … There is a strong case to be made that all these things are a consequence of governments having been hijacked by vested interest, by those who flaunt plunder as progress.

In between us going to press with this edition of *Manna Matters* and you getting it, we will likely know the outcome of the federal election. My personal preference is for a minority government led by Labor, with the balance of power held by independents, with or without the Greens. I do not trust Labor with a majority government, or the Greens controlling the balance of power. And I do not trust Peter Dutton full stop.

In March I was privileged to give one of the keynote addresses at the Surrender Conference, in Belgrave Heights (VIC), speaking on 'Money and Stuff in the Upside Down Kingdom'. Channelling a bit of Ken Henry, I made plain my view that our current housing crisis is a crisis by design, a train wreck happening in slow motion for 25 years, in which all Australian governments have shrunken from ending the ongoing windfall for the wealthy. There was a great vibe at the weekend, which once again was a great opportunity to connect with other Christians thinking about justice. Well done to the organisers.

Very excitingly, Jacob and his wife Andi have been in Mongolia over March/April, exploring possibilities for a stint working overseas sometime in the future. We took the opportunity to record a podcast on Mongolia, whose influence on world affairs is bigger than you think! Although in Outer Mongolia, Jacob still managed to produce the bulk of this edition from over there. Despite our recent defence of the Luddites (*MannaCast* ep.28), we are not ourselves Luddites…

Jonathan Cornford

Please take note of the ads for upcoming events:

- ***Kingdom Communities Webinars: Revisioning Church in Australia***
  Wednesdays, 7pm-8:15, June 4-25 - see p.9.
- ***A Different Way Exposure Week***
  Bendigo, VIC (Nov 23-28) - see back page.

What's Mine is Ours

A Christian Ethic of Property for 21st Century Australia

A Christian Ethic of Property (Part 5)

by Jonathan Cornford

"That's mine!" protests a child as another child snatches a toy. We've all seen it, we've all done it. There will be violence soon, unless a parent steps in. Often the parent will mediate the dispute by explaining and enforcing property rights: "You can't take that toy because it belongs to her." The idea of property is introduced to limit conflict, but almost immediately it takes root, transmuting into possessiveness. Soon the statement, "That's mine!" will be used to prevent the other child from playing with a toy not in use.

The aggressive defence of "Mine!" lies at the heart of Australian politics. It underlies a property-owning class who will eject any government that presides over a fall in house prices; it drives the catastrophic clearing of native vegetation by landholders in defiance of proposed environmental regulation; and it emboldens the defence of shameless profits by banks, supermarkets, and gas companies amid rising cost of living pressure and social distress.

Unless we can find a more positive conception of the role of property in society, we will not be able to loosen the many knotty problems we confront: climate change, housing crisis, justice for First Nations. But do Christians hold attitudes to property that are different from anyone else? On the whole, I suspect not.

This is the last in a series of articles that seeks to rewaken a biblical vision of property, and a distinctive *practice* of property amongst Christian communities. In my view, such an ethic will be both evangelical—a visible witness to Christ—and political—it will shape what policies we vote for and speak out for.

A foundational vision of property

We need a starting point.

Reflecting on the biblical vision of property and the heritage of Christian thought that has been discussed in the previous four articles, the moral theologian, Oliver O'Donovan, summarises the purpose of property as a means by which humans *administer common possession of the goods of creation*. That is, the act of possessing something represents only a moment when that which is properly 'ours' (belonging to all creatures) becomes, for a period, 'mine', but not for the purposes of selfish aggrandisement. Rather, through the alchemy of 'good work' (see *MM* Nov 2022), property is a means to contribute to the common good, such that what is 'mine' is meaningfully transformed into something that once again becomes 'ours'. Property releases good work in the world that serves the community of creation.

When property becomes a means of hoarding wealth, of exerting power over others, or of pursuing a selfish independence from others, then property becomes improper. Currently Australia is founded on 'improperty': how do we transform it?

In what follows I will attempt to outline a proposal for a positive, practical, moral, and political ethic of property which attempts to forward a Christian vision within the realities of twenty-first century Australia, taking account of justice for First Nations, the housing crisis, economic inequality, and more. 'Property' here, does not just refer to real estate (although land plays a central role), but to all that we possess: land, houses, cars, and all our stuff.

I emphasise that this is a *proposal*: it is a tentative sketch which represents an attempt to recover something that has been largely lost to Australian Christians. It should be read as first word, not a last word.

Living on stolen land

Two hundred and thirty years down the track of settler colonisation, we have to frankly admit that it cannot now be undone. The legal-economic tapestry of property rights that supports 28 million people cannot now simply be erased.

I know of some Christians, who are rightly grieved by the deep wrongs underpinning the foundation of Australia, and who have come to the conclusion that it cannot then, be ethical for a non-Indigenous Christian to own land. But this

Left: the iconic St Paul's Cathedral in Melbourne was granted by the Crown to the Anglican Church in 1848, the first 'beneficial owner' of the land since British dispossession of the Wurundjeri.

Previous page: detail from an early Christian fresco of an agape *(love) feast: a communal fellowship meal shared among believers, Catacombs of Domitilla, Rome.*

is pointless and self-defeating. It requires putting one's life at the disposal of landlords, who do own the property, and are far less likely to think about how this bit of property might contribute to the broader social good, as opposed to merely personal accumulation. It would resign property rights over to those in the community with the most negative conception of property.

However, acknowledging the reality of our departure point in 2025 need not amount to a resignation to (much less, a justification of) the deep injustices that still afflicts the First Nations of this continent. It is incumbent on Christ's people to seek whatever healing and justice can now be sought. There is still a great deal that can, and should, be done.

Home ownership

Currently, the primary possibilities for housing in Australia are to be an owner or a renter. As has been stated, there is virtually no place in Australia in which freehold property is not stolen land; however, for most people, the idea of divesting one's family home to traditional owners is simply out of the question. This means that, whether or not we own or rent, *all non-Indigenous Australians* are, in a sense, *in debt* to First Nations people. The biblical injunction with regards to land ownership is that we are 'but aliens and tenants' on the land (Lev 25:24): people with a responsibility of stewardship. How much more so, then, is such a responsibility forwarded by an outstanding debt to First Nations?

Residence on stolen land therefore obligates us to work for Indigenous justice whenever and however we able. This is first and foremost a political obligation. It requires endeavouring to *listen to, and understand* First Nations voices, and to join with them in their struggle for 'Truth, Treaty, and Voice' and the ongoing quest for land rights in the form of title and/or custodianship. Tragically, we missed one such an opportunity in 2023, but the debt remains. In Victoria, another opportunity will be presented in June this year when the Yoorook Commission presents a final blueprint document for the redress of injustices in the area of land and water, education, and health and housing. However, the political quest for Indigenous justice is not restricted to the arenas of federal or state governments: it can be pursued at a very local level. This requires becoming acquainted with the local traditional owners, learning about their context and supporting their goals and objectives.

Property is a means to contribute to the common good, such that what is 'mine' is meaningfully transformed into something that once again becomes 'ours'.

Larger landowners

In the case of large landowners—whether wealthy individuals, organisations, or private companies—there are more possibilities, and perhaps responsibilities, for thinking about some level of divestment of property to First Nations groups, or entering into joint custodianship arrangements. There is particular scope for this in the case of environmental philanthropy, where land is purchased privately to ensure conservation of its ecological values. There are now a number of examples around Australia where such projects have been twinned with Indigenous justice concerns, either divesting ownership wholly to traditional owners, or including them as custodians of the land, restoring opportunities to care for Country (for example the HalfCut initiative in the Daintree, QLD, divesting to Kuku Yalanji traditional owners; and the Cooroong Lakes Project, SA, partnering Cassinia Environmental and Ngarrindjeri traditional owners). There are also cases of farming properties that have entered into agreements with traditional owners to give them access to Country and voice in caring for Country. I hope we can profile some of these stories in *Manna Matters* in the future.

Church land

I think there is a particularly sharp case for various Christian denominations to be thinking about their responsibilities for some divestment and joint custodianship of property. This is for two reasons: firstly, some denominations (especially the older mainline churches) are large owners of land, both urban and rural, some (much?) of which is severely underutilised. Secondly, the fact that some of this land was in fact *granted to churches by the Crown* as the first 'beneficial owner' following

A suburb of McMansions.

Indigenous dispossession, is an open moral wound undermining the vocation of churches to be bearers of the gospel of reconciliation. Irrespective of such original land grants, if churches take seriously their calling to be the Body of Christ in the world, then they simply cannot ignore the foundational and unaddressed injustice by which churches have come to exist in this continent in the first place. There are number of ways this can begin to be addressed:

Acknowledgement of Country: apparently, since the failed 2023 'Voice' referendum, many churches have retreated from what was a growing practice of including some acknowledgement of Country in their gatherings. This is a shameful instance of churches cowering at a change in the winds of public opinion. No wonder so many Indigenous Australians have shaken the dust of Christianity from their feet, bitter at the shallow 'fair weather' reconciliation of the churches. Acknowledgement of Country represents an absolute minimum of truth-telling, and if we cannot even do this, we are nowhere.

Paying the rent: in the absence of broader structural justice for First Nations people, churches can themselves undertake to 'pay a rent' to First Nations peoples for the use of land that was rightfully theirs. This is not without complexities: should it be calculated somehow in relation to current commercial rents, or as a proportion of income, like a tithe? Should it be paid to the formal traditional owner bodies, or should some way be found to include the many 'historic Indigenous Australians' whose dispossession is such that they cannot claim membership in any such bodies? Should priority be given to Indigenous *Christian* ministries or more broadly representative Indigenous groups? I do not offer an opinion, and note that there are differences of views amongst Indigenous leaders. But even *discussing these questions* would be a significant step forward for churches in grappling with the manifold realities of Indigenous dispossession.

Shared space: many churches have underutilised spaces and facilities that could be made freely available to Indigenous groups and/or services, forming an 'in kind' form of paying the rent, and potentially opening up the opportunity for new and deeper relationships.

Divestment: those denominations that have large real estate holdings should be examining the possibility of divesting some of this property to First Nations people, especially where they are

closing down non-viable congregations. This could take the form of simply giving the property over to First Nations groups; transferring ownership but retaining use through a lease-back arrangement; or directing a percentage of all property sales to Indigenous organisations. This raises many similar questions as above, but such complexities should not be used as an excuse to do nothing. Of course, the major obstacle is the fact that denominations are often using land sales or rental income to bolster their declining financial sustainability, thus making this a very hard proposition to come at. But addressing historic injustice can never be costless. Church fears about financial security played a large role in driving their inadequate responses to revelations of child sexual abuse, and it is arguable that this failure meant churches have ultimately paid a much higher price in lost credibility. We should be wary of such false accounting when addressing our colonial legacy.

Given that Australians have one of the highest ecological footprints on the planet, this suggests that a primary goal for Australian Christians should be to attempt to live with less stuff, and with more care.

I should note that some denominations and local churches have made beginnings in these directions. This is to be commended, but there is still much to be done.

Less stuff with more care

If we think about property as: (i) that which enables a decent standard of living for my family; (ii) a concrete part of creation which I am responsible to steward; and (iii) and a means to release good work into the world; then this suggests a primary task for Australian Christians is to recalibrate our idea of how many possessions we need in order to achieve these things. The Early Church Father, Clement of Alexandria, advised: 'Just as the foot is the measure of the sandal, so the physical needs of each are the measure of what one should possess.' Given that Australians have one of the highest ecological footprints on the planet, this suggests that a primary goal for Australian Christians should be to attempt to live with less stuff, and with more care. Very briefly, here is some of what that could mean:

Housing

Aspiring to more modestly-sized housing, and giving more attention (time and money) to energy and water efficiency.

Understanding a house and land not as an isolated packet of possession ('mine'), but as one part of a much bigger ecology, even in urban areas, and doing what we can to make it more hospitable to the community of creation (especially native animals and soil microbes). (See articles in *MM* Aug 2023, Oct 2020, June 2010)

Cars, clothes, computers, and other stuff

Can we do with fewer of all these things, can we make them last longer and can we take greater care in obtaining and disposing of them? (There are so many *MM* articles on this: search 'ethical consumption' under 'All articles by topic' on the website.)

Housing and economic inequality

The housing crisis in Australia is not just a crisis of the affordability of housing, it is a crisis of a deepening social division between those who own property and those who do not. Once again, a Christian approach to property requires attending to our personal ethics within this sphere and attending to the politics of property in Australia.

Investment properties

Christ's people must absolutely reject the use of 'real estate'—i.e. someone's home—as a means of building wealth. Rather, those Christians who own investment properties should see them as an opportunity to invest in the kingdom of God. This requires a profound rethink of the ethics and responsibilities of being a landlord – someone with power over someone else's home. What does it mean to be a Christ-centred landlord in the midst of a housing crisis? One place to begin answering this question is within church communities themselves. Can those in the community with investment properties, or other

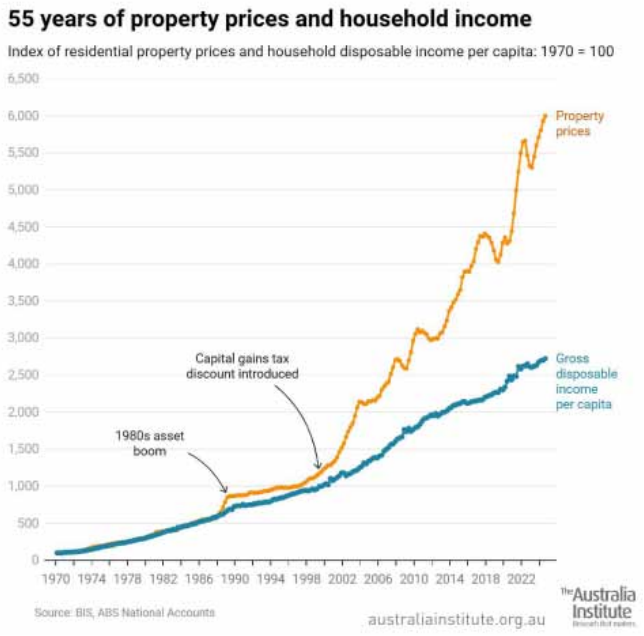
financial assets, assist those in the community who are locked out to secure decent, stable, and affordable housing? For a fuller discussion of this see *MM* Dec 2014.

Church land

Around the country there are churches with unused or vacant land that could be made available to partner with organisations seeking to deliver affordable housing. There are now numerous examples of this which demonstrate that these partnerships can be mutually beneficial. Hopefully we will profile some of these schemes in coming editions of *Manna Matters*.

Housing politics

The housing crisis has not just happened, it is an outcome of policy design that has been developing for twenty-five years: a train wreck in slow motion, where no government has yet felt moved to pull on the brake. Addressing the housing crisis requires a multi-pronged approach, including: overhauling taxation at federal and state levels (capital gains discount, negative gearing, stamp duty, land tax); a massive re-investment of governments in providing housing; and encouraging more and better non-ownership access to housing than simply short-term private rental (see *MM* June 2019, *MM* Summer 2025). The upshot is ultimately that house prices must come down, and Christian home owners and investors must be prepared to vote against their own short-term financial interest, and for the common good.



A new political vision for property

Beyond housing, a vision of a just, neighbourly, and sustainable Australia requires addressing the massive concentrations of property-as-economic-power that have been allowed to congeal in key sectors of the economy, especially banking, mining, supermarkets, agribusiness, pharmaceuticals, and digital technology. The vested interests of big money are playing a decidedly obstructionist role when it comes to doing what we need to do to face the massive challenges of the twenty-first century. This will require some smart regulation from government, and may even require employing some form of anti-trust (monopoly-breaking) legislation.

Moreover, a new political vision of property should include rethinking elements of the privatisation binge of the previous three decades, especially in the areas of energy and transport. Rather than idolising private property, we should be asking what a given sector of the economy needs to do serve the common good, and seek to apply the most appropriate property regime to achieve that, whether that be private, collective, or some form of public ownership. An overarching goal should be to break up distorting concentrations of property (i.e. economic power) and seek to distribute access to, and stakes in, property, as widely as possible.

Currently, such thinking is mere fantasy within Australian politics. To be advanced it will require people with a new and hopeful vision of social life, people who are prepared to say what is not popular. Where will they come from?

This graph from The Australia Institute shows that a major cause of rising house prices has been increased demand from investors. The research shows restricting negative gearing to newly built housing and scrapping the capital gains tax discount would reduce speculation in the housing market and allow more first home buyers to get into their own home.

Churches re-imagining common property

How do we overcome our possessive individualist attitude to property? We need communities where there is both the opportunity and common desire for thicker relationships of mutual dependence. Believe it or not, the local church is a purpose-made social technology for economic cooperation, however, this aspect of its vocation has been largely mothballed in the Western Christian imagination (see also *MannaCast* ep. 11). However, it is in this community, more than any other, where people can learn what it means for what is 'mine' to become 'ours'.

Most people think the example of economic community described in Acts 2 and 4 is an unattainable chimera, but actually the steps to begin building economic cooperation are smaller and easier than many people think. The major caveat to this is that they generally require a certain amount of geographical proximity. Sharing place and sharing property go together.

> **The local church is a purpose-made social technology for economic cooperation.**

Economic cooperation is not one big, scary thing, but rather a series of practices that can begin very modestly and grow organically (see *MM* Sept 2019). These include things such as:

- Basic material support (e.g. meals in a time of crisis)
- Sharing of knowledge and know-how (gardening, DIY, preserving, etc.)
- Simple sharing of stuff (tools, cars, etc.)
- Shared labour (working bees, help with projects)
- Cooperative purchasing (bulk goods)
- Co-ownership (a bigger step: buying big lumpy things together that don't make sense replicating in a community, such as mowers, whipper snippers, trailers, etc.)
- Income sharing (today called 'crowdfunding', all churches already do this with their offering, but it is a practice that can be extended in multiple directions)
- Renewing commons (nurturing assets, such as church facilities, as something in which the whole community can have a stake)

These are all things that can be done in small steps, where we learn to relax our possessive muscle and discover the richer life that awaits when what is 'mine' becomes 'ours' in some meaningful way. This is a subject that warrants much more conversation and, for those who are interested, will be explored in detail in Manna Gum's 'Kingdom Communities' series of webinars in June (see below).

I am convinced that if the church in Australia is to undergo some sort of renewal, it will likely be connected to the recovery of the idea that local Christian communities are *economic communities* in which there is a rich sharing of everyday material life, underpinned by a transformed heart-disposition to our property. As Acts 2 makes clear, when the Holy Spirit moves, this is one of the first and most natural outcomes.

Kingdom Communities Webinar Series

Revisioning Church in Australia

Wednesdays, 7pm-8:15, June 4-25

June 4: Church in Oz 21C: context and critique
June 11: The community founded by Jesus: shape, purpose, mission
June 18: The church as an economic community
June 25: Renewing church as economic community today

Visit the website to register: www.mannagum.org.au

Giving up Consumerism for Lent

by Jacob Garrett

Despite growing up in the Anglican Church, my awareness of the liturgical calendar—the yearly cycle of Christian seasons and holy days—has been decidedly minimal. As a child I knew when Christmas was, of course, but perhaps more from self-interest than piety. I remembered Easter always fell early in the year, but the first I knew of Palm Sunday was generally upon walking in to see the church decked out with fronds.

My wife Andi's experience has been a little different: growing up, her family regularly gave up chocolate during Lent, using the desire for it to prompt reflection on the gift of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.

> **Simply deciding to treat what we already have as enough goes a long way to making it so.**

In early 2024, Andi suggested bringing Lent observance into our new family together. The problem? I don't eat much chocolate, and both of us already fell somewhere between vegetarian and vegan when it came to food. Neither of us really drink alcohol either, so we couldn't meaningfully give up dairy, meat, fish, or alcohol. Given a full solid food fast seemed beyond us, what else could we give up for forty days which would practically help us direct our energy and attention to God?

After tossing a few ideas around, we soon had our answer: acquisition. 'Acquire nothing for forty days': that became our fast for Lent. Importantly, for us this had to include not just new items but anything not already ours, apart from groceries. For years we have both prided ourselves on buying relatively little that is completely new, favouring op shops and liberating other people's 'rubbish' instead. (A common date night for us is walking our local streets digging through piles of miscellany left on nature strips.) However, we realised that while this approach neatly side-steps the various ethical and environmental questions associated with new purchases, it still allowed us to retain—unchallenged—the same fundamentally consumerist maxim underpinning our wider economic culture: that acquisition leads to life. Our behaviour still suggested that deep-down we suspected life may actually consist in the abundance of possessions after all, or at least in the thrill of acquiring something new.

On top of this, we were married only a few months earlier and, while we had tried to moderate the influx of extravagant gifts which has become the nuptial norm, we still felt ourselves to be glutted with sheer STUFF. Was this the precedent we wanted to set for our marriage going forward? (Listen to *MannaCast* ep. 9 for further discussion of the challenges of trying to live with less).

What was it like?

Initially, for both of us, it was hard. We would walk past op shops or roadside dumps and really feel the pull: *we wanted to look*. We wanted to know what goodies might be awaiting discovery which we could take home and thereby (presumably) enrich our lives. We suffered from withdrawal of a sort: we felt we were missing out.

As the days turned to weeks though, this sense of craving steadily diminished to a point where our fast became tangibly freeing instead. If you simply can't do it then you don't have to think about it: you can walk on by, content with the abundance you already have. Simply the strength of the desire we experienced at the beginning gave much spiritual food for thought: if we have enough, why do we seek more? Is acquisition really going to bring us the life we crave and hope for?

Our self-imposed restriction also begot creativity. We were midway through setting up a house

together when Lent began: what now? This issue presented particularly memorably in the form of a bright lamp with no shade. We were too late to buy one, so we got experimenting. Jar? No. Piece of cloth? Not quite. Orange plastic lunchbox carefully balanced on top? Close enough… Close enough that even now—a year on—we are yet to replace it; it has even become something of a memento of the experience! In this and other ways, we both quickly embraced the creativity of make-do solutions, something which our culture tends to squash. It became a new kind of game: can we get this done with just the things we have? Our world of advertising and cheap consumer goods teaches us to solve our problems with products and paid services rather than our God-given minds, hands, and the things already around us, but this drastically reduces our sense of our own usefulness to ourselves and to others.

Moreover, it is commonly observed that communities tend to be strongest where there is some level of tangible mutual dependence. The more we simply purchase solutions to our problems instead of seeking the help of those around us, the more we can inadvertently undermine our commitment to these relationships, especially when they become hard or complicated.

Finally, we both quite quickly discovered that, in our case, simply deciding to treat what we already have as enough goes a long way to making it so. We even started looking at our existing belongings differently: without the distraction of novelty, we spent more time contemplating afresh some the many possessions we had forgotten about or been ignoring for years. Because of this, we began to experience the burden of owning as the other side of acquiring: once something is in your life it becomes something you have to manage—to maintain, or organise, or keep somewhere. After a certain point, *having* carries a hidden cost. (Other costs are more apparent: self-storage in Australasia is a $2 billion industry, and growing!)

Outcomes and take-aways

Surprisingly, once the fast was over we didn't feel a sudden wave of relief and immediately rush out to buy stuff like we expected. Instead, having gone forty days without a toaster, we found we didn't need one (a sandwich press will do the job just as well). Having got out of the habit or acquiring, we felt more able to judge the difference between our 'needs' and 'wants'. Even things we did feel the need of, such as a decent bicycle pump, we were a bit sluggish in seeking. So, for those considering a similar fast, be warned: you might enjoy shopping less afterwards!

Realising anew how much useful stuff we already had also led us to set up a sharing network at our church. Essentially, it's an online document listing all the things and skills community members have which they are happy to offer to others free of charge. Want to go kayaking but don't want to own a boat? No worries. Indoor plant cuttings? Got you covered. Need a baby sitter or a maths tutor? Check the list. Want to borrow a sewing machine or a food processor? It's there. Woodworking tools? Hiking gear? Gardening advice? Yup. And so much more!

Overall, we ended our season of Lent newly grateful for this beautiful part of our faith tradition. Now, whenever we feel the tug of acquisition we also feel a prompt to reflect again on God's provision and love for us. In our world, it's particularly easy to lose sight of commands like Hebrews 13:5:

> Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."

For us, observing Lent this way has helped realign our behaviour and attitudes with God's commands and promises.

Reading and Mis-Reading Zacchaeus

A Study in Missing the Point (Part 1)

by Deborah Storie

Jesus travelled from Galilee to Passover, passing through Jericho on the way. What happened in Jericho? It depends on the Gospel with which you travel. According to Mark and Matthew, Jesus, his disciples, and a large crowd come to Jericho only to leave it, healing blind Bartimaeus (Mark 10:46–52) or two blind men (Matt 20:29 –34) as they depart. According to Luke, Jesus heals the blind man before entering Jericho (18:35–43) and meets Zacchaeus when passing through that city (19:1–10). The Gospel of John doesn't mention Jericho at all.

What do you remember about Zacchaeus? How have you been encouraged to respond to his story? Jesus told a parable to Zacchaeus and all who witnessed their encounter. What was that parable? Do you know?

In this, the first of five articles about Luke 19:1–27, I review how the story of Zacchaeus and the parable told in Jericho are often read and introduce an alternative interpretive tradition that challenges us to consider the this-world consequences of how we read. I conclude with some general observations about Luke's story of Jesus and how to read it well, and suggest a first step toward deeper engagement with this text.

Dominant traditions of interpretation

Luke 19:1–27, a single scene in Luke's Gospel, is often read as if the 'story of Zacchaeus' ended with verse 10 and the 'parable of the pounds' (19:11–27) did not address the people to whom,

and the context in which, Jesus first told it. We consider, in turn, how these texts are often read and experienced in congregational and in scholarly contexts.

Meeting Zacchaeus and hearing the parable in Sunday school and church

Whether you grew up in Sunday school or encountered these stories later in life, your experiences may be similar to my own. In Sunday school, our teachers taught the story of Zacchaeus as a moralistic tale about befriending unpopular children and sharing treats. In church, preachers expounded it to extoll the grace of God and encourage congregants to seek Jesus, befriend marginalised people regardless of physical appearance and employment status, and practice generosity. In effect, our preachers assured us that Zacchaeus was proof that, despite Jesus' teaching after meeting a rich ruler (18:18–30), the rich *can* be saved *without* giving everything away.

What about the parable Jesus told in Jericho? When speaking of Zacchaeus, it was never mentioned.

In effect, our preachers assured us that Zacchaeus was proof that, despite Jesus' teaching after meeting a rich ruler, the rich can be saved without giving everything away.

I must have read and studied Luke 19:11–27 myself but have no recollection of so doing. In church, it was occasionally used alongside the somewhat similar 'parable of the talents' (Matt 25:1–30) to support wealth creation and stewardship teaching, thoroughly allegorising both parables in the process. The nobleman/master/king represented God or Jesus, as did more powerful characters in other parables. The first two 'servants' were diligent, the third indolent or cowardly. The fate of the rebellious citizens illustrated 'end time tribulations' to be visited upon all who resist God's rule. Until Jesus returns, we should use the resources 'with which God has blessed us' and the opportunities 'God brings our way' responsibly: tithing 10% before saving and investing to provide for our families, prepare for retirement, and insure against future misfortune. In none of this was the parable associated with Zacchaeus, Luke's wider narrative, Jericho, Passover, tribute, or other social, economic, and political realities of the first century world.

These readings of Zacchaeus and the parable told in Jericho merge seamlessly with the aspiration of middle-class Australia, bolstering an ethic of individual wealth acquisition tempered by charity and tithing. Any call for transformation is limited to individual and personal change, readily accommodated within existing economic and political arrangements.

Zacchaeus and the parable in the academy

The story of Zacchaeus features prominently in academic Lukan studies. Scholars identify Luke 19:1–10 as 'the climax of Jesus' ministry,' 'the essence of the entire Gospel,' 'a retrospective summary of Jesus' saving work,' 'a paradigm for hospitality in Luke', or a call 'to practise Jubilee in everyday life.' The question of whether Zacchaeus repents or is vindicated by Jesus preoccupies many scholars. The debate hinges on a grammatical ambiguity in Zacchaeus's speech (19:8): 'Look, Lord! Half my possessions I give to the poor and if I have defrauded anybody of anything I pay back four times.' Does Zacchaeus speak of his *intended* (future) actions or *established* (past, present, and future) practice? The conclusions drawn by scholars on either side of the debate align with their prior doctrinal convictions, assumptions about the theology and purpose of Luke-Acts, and sense of what 'seems obvious' or 'feels natural.' The question itself arises from broader anxieties about whether and how the rich can be saved and a religio-cultural emphasis on personal repentance and salvation.

Until recently, extreme scepticism about the historical reliability of the Gospels prevailed in some scholarly circles. Those who attributed the parable to the Early Church, rather than to Jesus, were disinclined to hear it as related by Luke. As a result, many published studies detach the parable from its historical and narrative contexts, interpret its so-called economic and political 'plot lines' or 'strands' separately, conflate it with the somewhat similar parable of Matthew 25:14–30, and/or surmise that it addresses 'the problem' of the allegedly 'delayed return of Christ.'

Readers, scholarly or lay, who approach the parable as an 'earthly story with a heavenly meaning' read it allegorically with the dominant character representing God or Jesus. This allegorical identification leaves readers unable to question the nobleman/sovereign's right to rule or the economic and political practices from which he profits and that he appears to demand. Many scholars cling to this allegorical reading despite noting a range of difficulties, including the contrast between the nobleman/sovereign's conduct and aspirations and those elsewhere affirmed by Jesus. Some suggest that the slave-owner/sovereign represents God or Jesus in an ironic, parodic way.

Such allegorical readings of Luke 19:11–27 inevitably reduce things with concrete significance in the worlds behind the text (slaves and slave-owners; sovereigns and realms; money, turning a profit and interest; political dissidents and their slaughter) to metaphors or allegories for other things. Once allegorised, the parable is left with nothing to say about the political, economic, and social arrangements of first century Palestine, or about somewhat analogous arrangements in the worlds of its subsequent audiences. Yet, most of the parables told by the Old Testament prophets indicted Israel's rulers, their retainers and/or wealthiest people whose regimes exploited, oppressed, and dispossessed others. It would, then, be strange indeed if the parables of Jesus, a prophet of Israel, did *not* challenge the idolatrous political, economic, and social injustices of his day.

Above: Jesus and Zacchaeus, *by Soichi Watanabe (1930-2017).*

Page 12: Zacchaeus in the Sycamore Awaiting the Passage of Jesus, *by James Tissot (1836-1902).*

Alternative traditions of interpretation

I stumbled into an alternative interpretive tradition when invited to preach on Luke 19:1–10, a lectionary reading for the day. Initially uninspired, I put all my previous encounters with Zacchaeus aside and sat down to read Luke from the beginning *as if* for the first time. Imagining myself into the story, I watched the encounter between Jesus and Zacchaeus *as if* one of the crowd and heard the parable *as if* among those to whom Jesus first told it. For the first time, I realised that Luke 19:1–10 and 12–27 are not separate, self-contained episodes, noticed how intimately 19:1–27 connects with Luke's wider narrative, and felt echoes of Scripture reverberate through the text. Reading that way, I met a very different Zacchaeus and heard an infinitely more challenging parable.

Zacchaeus is a ruling tribute collector based in Herodian Jericho, a city with a complex history, under Roman rule. The human consequences of the fundamentally exploitative and oppressive system within which he operates preclude any possibility that Jesus vindicates the ruling tribute collector. No wonder 'all who saw it were muttering, saying that he had gone in to stay with a sinful man' (19:7). Zacchaeus's declaration (19:8) aligns with John's description of 'fruit worthy of repentance' (3:8–14). Jesus' response (19:9–10) raises high expectations, the horizons of which extend far beyond personal repentance and salvation. Jesus speaks of his own identity and vocation using imagery drawn from a prophetic oracle (Ezek 34) that envisages salvation in economic, political, social, and ecological terms, a salvation that involves the demise of arrangements through which the 'strong' and the 'fat' devour and plunder, ravage, and push aside the 'thin' and the 'weak.'

A growing minority of readers approach the parable of Luke 19:11–27 as a realistic story without assuming that its dominant character represents God or Jesus. They observe striking parallels between the character and conduct of the nobleman/sovereign and Jewish vassal kings (the Herods), and stark contrasts between the nobleman/sovereign and Jesus. They applaud the noncompliant slave who speaks truth to power and refuses to participate in processes that give more to those who already have and take up from those who have not the little they might otherwise retain. Heard this way, the parable exposes the false claims and unjust conduct of human rulers, challenges oppressive social, economic, and political arrangements, and calls for change. Its realism and challenge only deepen when heard within the multidimensional (canonical, historical, narrative, communicative, geographic, political, economic, temporal) context in which, according to Luke, it was first told.

It would be strange indeed if the parables of Jesus, a prophet of Israel, did not challenge the idolatrous political, economic, and social injustices of his day.

What next?

Future *Manna Matters* will publish four further articles on Luke 19:1 –27. These will (i) explore the interrelated and mutually reinforcing economic, social, political, and military dimensions of the world in which Jesus meets Zacchaeus; (ii) and (iii) share more detailed readings of Luke 19:1–10 and 11–27; and (iv) considers how Luke 19:1–27 might challenge Australian Christians to respond to the pressing challenges confronting our world.

Some general observations and a suggestion

Reading or listening to the Gospel of Luke is a cross-cultural experience. It was probably written between 75 and 90 CE, not long after Roman legions killed, raped, and enslaved hundreds of thousands of Jews and destroyed Jerusalem and its temple. Its author/s and earliest audiences shared many life experiences and assumptions of which we are ignorant and others we find foreign and strange. The more carefully we 'mind the gap' between our world and theirs, the more responsibly we can read and respond. We would be wise, for example, to 'mind the gap' between the functions and purposes of taxation in participatory democracies and those of tribute under Roman rule.

The Gospel of Luke was written to be experienced as a story read out loud, recited from memory, or dramatically performed to group audiences. As with other well-crafted narratives, it invites us to lose ourselves in the story. The (anonymous) storyteller was a person or persons of faith who wrote for communities of faith. They composed 'an orderly account of the things that have been fulfilled among us' in order to persuade others more fully of 'the significance' of what they already believed (1:1, 4). The inscription 'According to Luke' was added *after* the written text had circulated widely for a hundred years or more. As a matter of convenience, we now refer to the 'Gospel according to Luke' and call the storyteller 'Luke.'

As a first step toward deeper engagement, why not take two to three hours to listen to the Gospel from the beginning until Jesus leaves Jericho and goes on ahead up to Jerusalem? Set aside all your previous experiences with Luke's Gospel and listen *as if* hearing it for the first time. Imagining yourself into the story, how do you feel when Jesus approaches Zacchaeus and Zacchaeus welcomes him with joy? Hearing the parable *as if* among the crowd listening to Jesus, with which character/s do you instinctively empathise?

Step out of the story to consider two more analytical questions. How do the parable and the preceding public conversation relate? How might we enrich our engagement with this scene by attending to its contexts: canonical (with the Scriptures of Israel), historical (Palestine under Roman and Herodian rule), geographical (Jericho) and temporal (approaching Passover)? These are questions to which we shall return.

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How we Give *versus* How we Live

From Charity to Justice

Clinton Bergsma

The old saying 'to a hammer, everything is a nail' rings true for my interest in theology. I work in the faith-based development sector, and I've been particularly fascinated by the theologies that are unstated but evidenced by the way we operate. What we say we believe, and what our actions show we *really* believe are at times quite different. For example, what do our strategic plans and the way we develop and implement them declare about our understanding of God and the Spirit's role in addressing injustice? What do the poverty-alleviation programs and projects we choose to fund declare about what we *really* believe is the good life? Our communications to supporters, the way we collect and share stories about our work, the parts of people's stories we share and those we leave out – what do they *really* say about our view of this person, God, and ourselves? To this wannabe theologian, everything is theological.

A particular interest of mine is around the historical movement from charity to justice in faith-based development. While many Christians (and others!) have long cared for the poor and marginalised, it was only in the post-World War period that poverty alleviation began developing as a professional sector. As with most changes there was a mix of wins and losses, but one positive outcome was increased theological reflection on poverty, its causes, and its remedies. This was partly due to the heavy lifting that missionary agencies did in the early days of development work, raising questions around the role of faith for poverty alleviation and where it fitted with evangelism: is it a side note—a way to access a community so the 'real' gospel could be shared—or an integral part of the gospel?

A key shift during this time was a movement from viewing poverty alleviation through a charity lens to one that was justice-oriented. As faith-based development organisations gathered and reflected biblically on their work, they began concluding that a biblically grounded response to poverty needed to go beyond charity—the giving of excess to help those with less—to justice, recognising the structural nature of poverty and working to undo the webs that contribute to keeping poor people poor.

Far left: Selvina, an Indonesian widow who learned to make tempe from one of Amos Australia's partners, increasing her income. A good news story, but are we still keeping the poor poor?

Mid Left: Amos Australia's partners assist rural villages in Cambodia adapt to climate change caused by the likes of the average Australian. Photo: Arlene Ward.

Mid & far right: what would it look like to go beyond charity?

A dilemma

I admire the evangelical spirit behind this movement: we will search the Scriptures and, wherever the biblical narrative guides us, we will bravely go. But moving from charity to justice created a dilemma that was perhaps overlooked and unweighed in the thrill of exegesis (we've all experienced that, right?). A movement from charity to justice looked great when thinking about poor people and how to best assist them, but as the process of mapping injustices began, the needle kept pointing north to the very same sources that faith-based development organisations relied on for funding.

Many organisations were understandably cautious about biting the hand that fed them, and they responded in a variety of ways. Some began using—and still use—the term 'justice' where it is beneficial for marketing purposes while never engaging with their supporters about the impact of their lifestyles for addressing or perpetuating poverty. Those with greater courage and integrity took a different approach and worked to 'educate the hand that fed them.' This was—and remains—somewhat dangerous work: how do you challenge your supporter base and question things like their environmental impact, career choice, or investment options without losing their financial support to a different organisation that tones down the justice talk and leans heavy on the ego-boosting lever?

It's a little akin to preparing a last supper in an upper room knowing full well that some kind of death lies in the not-to-distant future. But what if we don't resurrect after three days as Christ did?

Needless to say, the majority of Australian faith-based development organisations have adopted the word 'justice' while avoiding or diminishing justice as a key guiding principle for how we approach supporters. We prefer the awkward irony of declaring that poverty is largely an issue of injustice while avoiding conversations with the very people who have an ability to undo some of these injustices through their life choices. We prefer self-preservation and the pursuit of growth over a theologically sound approach to poverty alleviation.

The impact of lifestyle

But let's rewind a little to March 17, 1980, at a conference centre a little north of London. Eighty-five evangelical leaders from twenty-seven countries gathered to put some flesh to the Lausanne Covenant resolution on 'A Commitment to Simple Lifestyle' made six years earlier. A collection of the papers entitled *Lifestyle in the Eighties* was published shortly after, arguing persuasively that a biblical approach to addressing poverty and injustice must include Christians in high-income countries choosing to live simply, and it mapped out some practicalities of what that might look like. I purchased a copy of the book a few years ago, figuring it would be an interesting historical document. It was an excellent read, but I came away a little disappointed that so little seems to have shifted. When it comes to strategies used by faith-based development organisations to approach supporters, the overall movement has been, if anything, backwards and *away* from justice. It felt like the only change needed to make the book relevant for today would be adjusting the title on the cover page to *Lifestyle in the 2020s.*

Our lifestyle choices alleviate or perpetuate poverty today as much as they ever did, and perhaps more-so given the hyper-globalised world we live in.

Our lifestyle choices alleviate or perpetuate poverty today as much as they ever did, and perhaps more-so given the hyper-globalised world we live in. I regularly buy products from

places all over the world and my carbon footprint is felt by subsistence farmers in countries with names I can't spell. Who I vote for matters in a fragile geo-political environment, while the tentacles of my superannuation reach to… well, who knows where?

Lifestyles in the 2020s matter for addressing poverty and are quiet declarations of what we *truly* believe the gospel to be and our role in living out its implications. Our 95 theses won't be found tidy, typed, and nailed to a wooden door; they're silently written into the everyday decisions we make and, in my experience, they are read most easily and plainly by folks on the margins (may the poor always be with us!). I've wondered at times whether supporters of faith-based development are a force for good in the world, or whether on-balance we are hurting the poor further. What would it look like if we went beyond donations and calculated everything? What if we counted not just what we give to the poor, but also what we *take* from them through things like excessive consumption, unjust superannuation investments, and climate change contributions? It's a difficult, complex calculation, and probably an embarrassing one; maybe that's why it's not been attempted yet.

What would it look like if we went beyond donations and calculated everything?

But hey, come follow in the footsteps of King David and Psalm 51 with me - let's embarrass ourselves with the spirit of evangelical honesty and integrity. God's grace is always bigger than any mess we've made.

Climate change

A study by the World Bank in 2010 showed that the reasonable estimated cost for low-income countries to adapt to climate change was $75-100 billion per year – that's about the same amount of annual global aid that was given that year to those same countries. Remember how climate change is primarily caused by the lifestyles of wealthy people, but disproportionately disadvantages economically poor people? If that's true, our level of aid is just enough to help the poor to adjust to climate change. That's not generosity: it's just mopping up some of the mess we made. And it is a mess. I regularly visit rural farming communities in South-East Asia that are struggling with unpredictable weather patterns caused by climate change, and some of our work involves helping them adjust and adapt. Our carbon footprints matter if we declare we care about the poor, and reducing the size of the thing is a quiet, everyday declaration of that love.

Superannuation

In 2024, eighty-eight percent of Australians said they would prefer to have their super invested ethically, but only thirty-six percent of superannuation in Australia is currently 'invested responsibly'. This is a rather odd situation given that every Aussie has the opportunity (I'd suggest 'responsibility') to choose which superannuation fund to invest with – what's stopping fifty-two percent of Aussies from switching to a more ethical superannuation provider that aligns with their values? Many ethical superannuation funds still have thresholds (or appetites) for investments in things like fossil fuels, tobacco, and weapons manufacturing. Regardless, if we count the thirty-six percent as genuinely ethical investments (we're keen on grace, remember), it means that sixty-four percent of superannuation in Australia—or roughly $2.3 trillion—has little to no interest in screening for investments beyond what will provide the largest returns. That's two-thirds of Aussie superannuation investments being potentially invested in companies that are responsible for deforestation in the Mekong, selling weapons to the Myanmar junta, poisoning rivers with mining tailings in Papua, or running sweatshops in Bangladesh.

So, by the time we add the impact of our collective superannuation investments to our climate change mess, the net benefit is already flowing steadily from the global poor to the average Australian.

Consumption

I searched up Australian average levels of consumption for things like meat, transport, and housing and plugged them into an online ecological footprint calculator. While online calculators are always going to be somewhat inaccurate, the outcome suggested that we would need the resources of roughly eight

earths to sustain life if every human lived like an average Australian. This is just looking at levels or rates of consumption. The calculator doesn't weigh up how ethical our purchases of food, services, and products are, but they matter too, and they work in a similar way to our superannuation investments. Every purchase is a vote for the type of world we want to live in and how we want businesses to operate. Bought a brand-new t-shirt for $12? It's not possible to produce it for that; someone—some people—bore some of the hidden costs through being underpaid for their work or copping the environmental burden. But it doesn't end there. For example, we're protecting our forests and banning old-growth logging in places like Western Australia; but this means we're off-shoring the issue by importing hardwood timbers from places with little regulation on deforestation—places like Indonesia and Malaysia. And then there's the other side of our consumption: our waste, much of which is shipped to low-income countries under the guise of recycling or gifts.

Once consumption is added, the flow of net benefit swells to a river that will hardly be slowed by the $300 given annually by the average Australian to international aid programs. Perhaps responsibility for the rather sluggish wins in the war on poverty lies more in the living rooms of suburban Australia than the failures of international aid organisations. Maybe we feed that fire by telling folks we can end poverty with just a $300 donation.

Household economics

Maybe this all just sounds like a grumpy rant – and perhaps it is. But there is little point in sharing the ways organisations like Amos Australia are working to address poverty internationally if we don't also (first?) have serious conversations about stemming the flow of injustice fueled by lifestyle choices here in Australia. I get that it's impossible to live 100% ethically – we're sinful folks living in a sinful world, and I live with that tension myself. But there are ways forward and tools like the *Household Covenant* study resource from Manna Gum. I just finished walking through this study with a small group of friends and it was great. We burned the grace candle at both ends, but we had cracking conversations and shared some great ideas. We all made decisions that moved us towards a more just world, and we somehow left feeling encouraged, supported, and unjudged.

Let's not confuse charity with biblical justice. I do hope that the average Australian Christian supports economically poor people as part of their response to the gospel. But I hope this is one of a wide variety of responses that are kingdom-shaped and aim to be ethical and just – from the kinds of work and rest we enjoy, to where we invest our money, who we give our time to, and how we use our political power. These all impact the economically poor. There is much to be done in this area in the Christian community, and encouragingly there are small pockets of people already thinking this stuff through and seeking to live just lives.

If that's you, hang in there! Share with grace the ways that you are attempting to live justly. Be David-like in your honesty about the challenges of living justly and prepare each supper like it's your last.

Because there's a resurrection just around the corner. And according to this wannabe theologian every story ultimately—somewhere, somehow—ends with a resurrection.

Clinton lives with his wife and four children near Fremantle, Perth. He works for Amos Australia and is chipping away at a PhD looking at theologies of supporter engagement in Australian faith-based development organisations.

Amos Australia is trying to address the 'poverty of the rich' through conversations at events like this one where folks watched short documentaries and heard from local people attempting creative ways of responding to issues like environmental degradation, incarceration, and refugees. Photo: Aimee DeHaan.

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