



QUARTERLY OF MANNA GUM
Spring 2025

*Original cover artwork courtesy
of Phoebe Garrett*

*50th
edition*

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MANNA STILL MATTERS

Reflecting on 50 editions

On a long hike, it is always worth taking a moment every now and then to reflect on the ground that has been covered. The first edition of *Manna Matters* came out in April 2009, and since then it has remained the flagship of Manna Gum's message. Back then, the whole thing was a very uncertain venture, so to have reached 50 editions seems a milestone worthy of celebrating and giving thanks. The feedback that many of you have graciously provided over the years makes us confident that *Manna Matters* has made a good contribution, however small and marginal. Whatever happens in coming years, it will have been worth it.

A lot has changed since 2009. The front page of that first edition has a photo of my family in the backyard of our rental property in Footscray. Renting in Footscray was still pretty cheap back then. My daughters, then five and three, are now in university and beginning to step independently into the world. Two months before that photo, the Black Saturday Bushfires wreaked destruction across Victoria, including where we now live next to bushland on the edge of Bendigo. That year was also the nadir of the Millennium Drought; the general concern about climate change in Australia was then elevated to a seriousness and level of consensus that now seems hard to imagine. In 2007, Kevin Rudd declared that climate change was 'the great

moral challenge of our generation', a position that contributed significantly to his landslide election victory.

In 2009, we were still living in the fallout of the Global Financial Crisis, and there is an article in that first edition discussing what to do with 'Manna from Kevin', referring to the \$900 cash handouts by which the Rudd Government encouraged us to consume our way out of recession. Interest rates dropped to new lows, making housing loans cheap and adding further fuel to already mushrooming house prices. Back then, even though the writing was on the wall, talk of a housing crisis was still marginal to the public consciousness. How quickly the ground changes. How quickly we forget.

Manna Matters has itself changed over that time. In that first edition, I signalled my expectation that *Manna Matters* would typically be four to six pages long. The next edition was ten pages, and the one after sixteen, and there it sat until we bumped up to twenty pages in 2022. We have been forced to concede that, despite the cultural pressure for brevity, the issues we confront demand depth.

And what are the issues *Manna Matters* confronts? At core, this has not changed over 50 issues. My first lead article was entitled, 'Matter Matters'. This compact pun signals the foundation of a biblical perspective of material life. When the Gospel of John announced that 'the Word became flesh', and that 'God so loved the *kosmos*', it underlined God's fundamental concern for how we live *this life* in *this world*.



2009: When rent was cheap, kids were cute, and parents were daggy. Some things change, some stay the same...

All written and artistic contributions to *Manna Matters* are graciously provided for free.

Editorial team: Jacob Garrett & Jonathan Cornford
Production & layout: Jacob Garrett



Over the last 50 editions, *Manna Matters* has endeavoured to uncover, fragment by fragment, the vast implications of this testimony. Articles have covered broad range: from the history of the capitalist world system to how to make your own cordial; from the global politics of climate change to what to do with cat poo; from regenerative agriculture to indigenous justice and the future of the church. All the way along we have grappled with issues of money, property, production, consumption, investment, waste, land, food, and housing. Articles have consistently drawn attention to the ways in which our economic system treats the Earth and people badly, but also to the ways in which we could do things differently.

Through the whole journey we have endeavoured to confront all of these issues within a single, coherent biblical lens. Perhaps the greatest achievement of *Manna Matters* has been to demonstrate that such a thing is possible. This has required an intensive process of re-engaging the Bible and unpacking the hidden depths of its language of sin, salvation, redemption, holiness, and judgement; re-focussing again and again on its core narrative of calling people to a new way of living.

The work has just begun. I hope you can share some of this journey with us.

News from Long Gully

The very first edition of *Manna Matters* began with some uncertainty as to the financial viability of this venture. There is perhaps some symmetry, then, to the fact that we are once again facing this question. Simply put, costs have escalated faster than income. Jacob and I are taking a cut in pay for the next while, till things improve.

This is only the second time this has happened over the last sixteen years, something for which we are enormously thankful. But it does pose a challenge. We will take the unusual step of making an Advent appeal this year and we would be grateful for any help you can give. (Of course,

you needn't wait till then; feel free to make a donation right now—see the back page for how to do this.)

The last few months have been dominated by the mammoth task of recording a podcast series on 'The Legacies of Colonisation'. Four episodes have been published, and another six are coming, possibly more. The question of colonisation is so fundamental to understanding the shape of economic life in Australia that we didn't want to do it by halves. (See the back page for details.)

A new initiative in the last couple of months has been trialing a couple of 'Evening Conversations' in Melbourne's CBD. These have been generously

hosted by ValueLab, a 'social impact collective' housed in Donkey Wheel House, near Southern Cross Station. These evening gatherings aim to be a more intimate space in which people can gather to discuss issues that find little room in the Christian world. The first evening explored 'the politics of place', and

the second sought to unsettle perspectives on political polarities such as conservative/progressive and left/right. Many thanks to Shiung Low, from ValueLab, and Robyn Whitaker, from the Wesley Centre, for their sharp contributions to these evenings. We hope to be able to offer similar conversations in other capital cities, as opportunity presents. (See the back page for some pictures from our most recent event.)

As we go to press, we will be embarking on the *A Different Way Week*. This is a week-long intensive exploring Christ's call to a new way of living, hosted by the Seeds Community here in Long Gully. This is the first one since Covid, and we are fully subscribed! Your prayers for all participants will be appreciated.

Jonathan Cornford

You can explore all back editions of *Manna Matters* at
<https://mannagum.org.au/resources/manna-matters/>

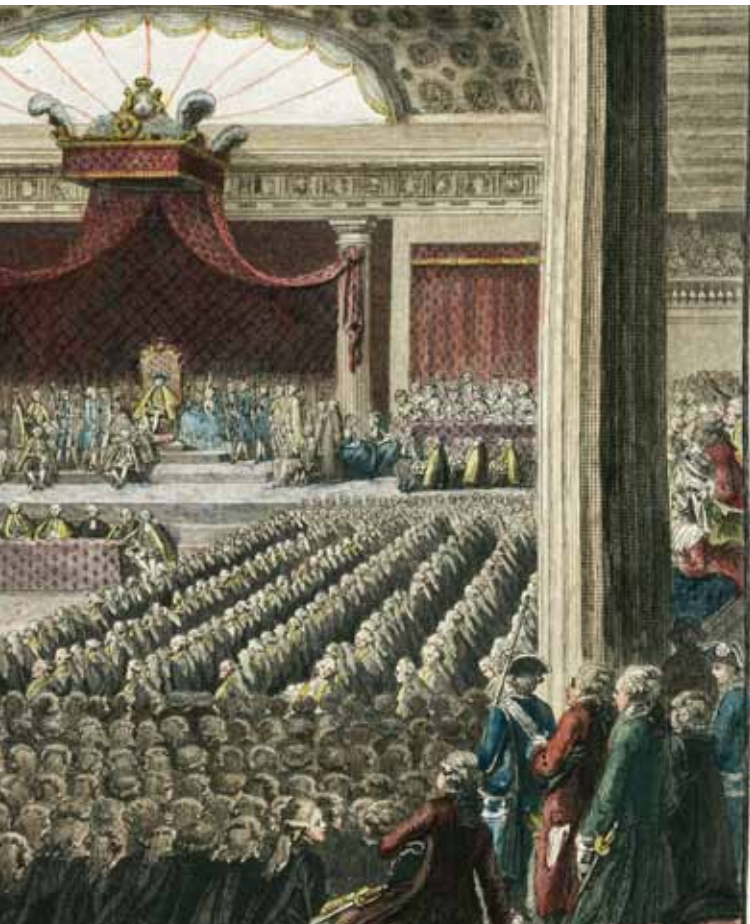


WHY I AM A LEFT-WING CONSERVATIVE RADICAL (BUT NOT A PROGRESSIVE)

by Jonathan Cornford

Churches are not very good at talking about politics. There are still many who think that faith and politics should not mix—that these two spheres of life can somehow be quarantined-off from each other, despite the fact that both deal with the fundamental questions of ‘how should we live?’ and ‘what is good for us?’. But as soon as we say something as basic as, ‘God loves justice’, then we are unavoidably in the territory of politics. (See our *MannaCast* series on Christianity and Politics for a fuller exploration of these ideas.)

For some time now, I have suspected that some Christians actually hold their political commitments more deeply than their theological commitments. For example, it is a very simple matter to show that, for biblical authors, the idea of a sovereign of God in no way conflicts with an understanding of human-induced climate change (see my article on ‘The Ecological Ethics of Genesis 1 & 2, *MM* May 2022). Yet the doctrine of the sovereignty of God is cited by many Christians (in Australia and the US) as a major objection to accepting the science of



Opening of the Estates-General
in Versailles 5 May 1789,
*engraving by Isidore Stanislas
Helman (1743-1806) following a
sketch by Charles Monnet.*

climate change. I suspect that for many, what is really at stake is not theology, but the (correctly) perceived threat to a high-consumption way of life. And the same can be true for many on the progressive side of politics: if political commitments to identity politics clash with biblical ideas on human identity, then it is faith that must give way.

When you combine these two factors—the fact that churches are not good at talking about politics, and that they often house people with deeply held political commitments—then it can make Christians unusually vulnerable to a stifling atmosphere of ‘group think’. In 2017, the year of the marriage equality plebiscite, I had the experience of being in both ‘Yes’ and ‘No’ churches (to put it crudely), where, in both, it was blithely assumed that I would share the stated position of that group. People didn’t bother to ask me, they just talked as if it was obvious that I would support the Yes campaign/ No campaign. I was not particularly comfortable with either of those campaigns, but there was little space for that.

As everyone knows, we live in highly polarised times. Political commitments now come in increasingly tightly-bound ‘package deals’: your views on climate change determine your views on abortion, trade unions, gender and sexuality, covid vaccines, and Israel/Palestine. If you tell me you are either pro or anti-abortion, I can guess, with reasonably high predictivity, your views on all those other issues.

This is madness. Every one of those issues represents its own universe of human tragedy and struggle, historical legacy, and social complexity. Each one of these ‘issues’ is, in fact, a tight complex of sub-issues which each deserve separate consideration. Each of these ‘issues’ changes complexion in different ways when you move from the realm ethics to politics, from the actions of individuals to the actions of governments. To subscribe to a pre-mix ‘position’ on any one of these issues just because you are on the conservative or progressive side of politics makes a travesty of the God who takes on flesh and enters into the suffering of the world.

I have argued elsewhere (see *MannaCast* ep. 33) that biblical faith does suggest some foundational political commitments for those who would follow Jesus:

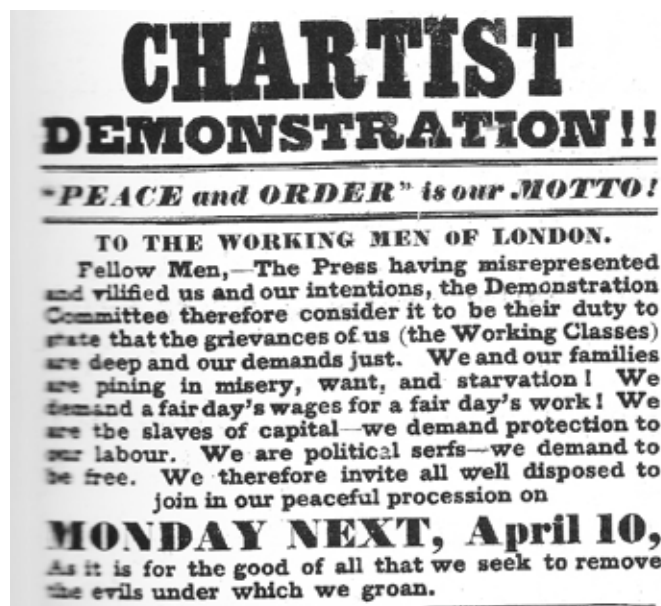
1. The rejection of all idolatries (ideologies?).
2. The equality of all human beings.
3. The human vocation to care for the earth.
4. Humans are created for relationship and connection, and find their good in the good of the whole.
5. The fundamental concern for just relations between people.
6. The special concern for the poor, hurting, and vulnerable.
7. The shaping of material/economic life to reflect each of the above commitments.

To my mind, these are non-negotiable Christian positions. Yet, just how these foundational commitments translate into the policies we might support on a given issue (much less, which parties we might support), is by no means straight forward. It depends, amongst other things, on the quality of our information and how well we understand what is actually happening in the world. Faith in Christ demands that we do politics, but that doesn't make it simple.

I don't propose to try and cut through all of this complexity here. It is my hope that over time, through a mix of articles and podcasts we can chip away at this enormous challenge, bit by bit. Ed Sheeran's dad might have told him not to get involved in politics, religions, or other people's quarrels, but here at Manna Gum, we are committed to doing just that.

For now, I would like to demonstrate that the bundle of political ideas that are ordinarily grouped together today under labels such as 'progressive' and 'conservative', are not the only ways, or even the most coherent ways, that political ideas may be assembled. To that end, let me explain why I am left-wing conservative radical, but not a progressive.

In the summer edition of *Manna Matters* this year, I outlined a mildly tongue-in-cheek Manna Gum



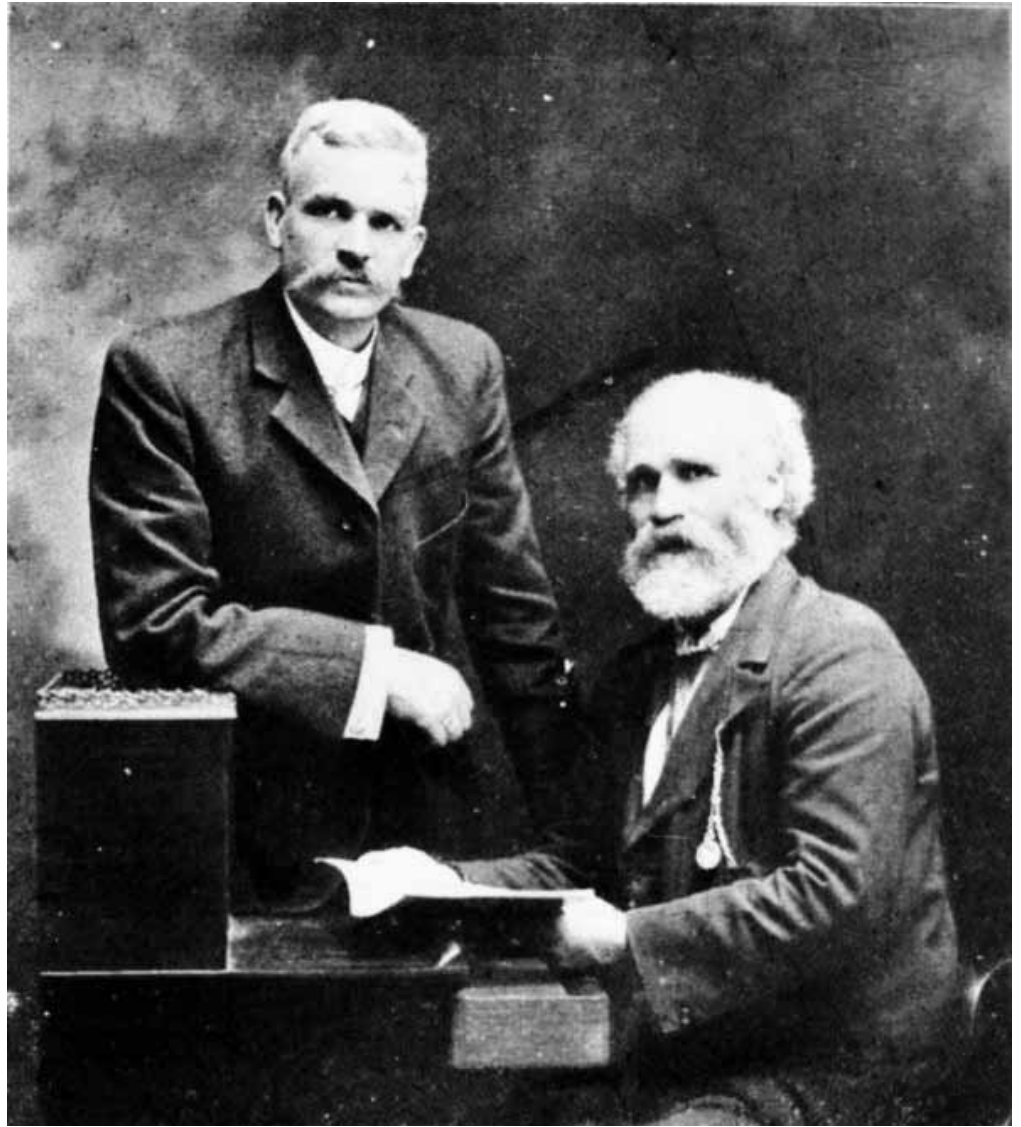
An 1848 poster advertising the Great Chartist Meeting in London. The Chartists were a radical working class movement that called for manhood suffrage, the secret ballot, and paid parliamentarians, so working men could be represented. Chartists played a key role in the Eureka Rebellion in Australia in 1854.

Election Manifesto ("Vote 1 Manna Gum"). Many people would describe the collection of policies outlined there on climate change, taxation, and housing, as 'progressive'. But not me. It is generally assumed that 'Left' and 'Progressive' mean the same thing, and likewise that 'Right' and 'Conservative' mean the same thing. I beg to differ. Here are the meanings that I attach to these terms:

Left-wing

This term has its origins in the French Revolution, when, in the Estates General of 1789, the commoners sat to the left of the Chair and the nobility to the right. Since that time, left-wing politics has been associated with a huge array of different ideas, some inspiring and world-changing, some very dangerous and world-changing (think of the extremities of the French and Russian revolutions), and some very silly ideas that couldn't change a wet nappy. Nevertheless, despite these cautions, the fact that left-wing politics is fundamentally concerned with the plight of the ordinary and forgotten people, and with reducing inequalities

Keir Hardie (seated, right) was the inspirational founder of the British Labour Party. A coal miner and lay preacher, his left-wing politics was the expression of his deep personal faith and his own experience of injustice. Here he is with his close friend Andrew Fisher (standing, left), who emigrated to Australia and in 1908 became the first elected Labour leader in the world. The two first met as young men during the 1881 Ayrshire coal miners' strike (Scotland).



in economic and political power, means that, for me, it captures something very powerful in trying to translate the gospel proclaimed by Jesus into secular politics. By contrast, right-wing politics is always a rear-guard action seeking to protect the power and privilege of some group or other.

Conservative

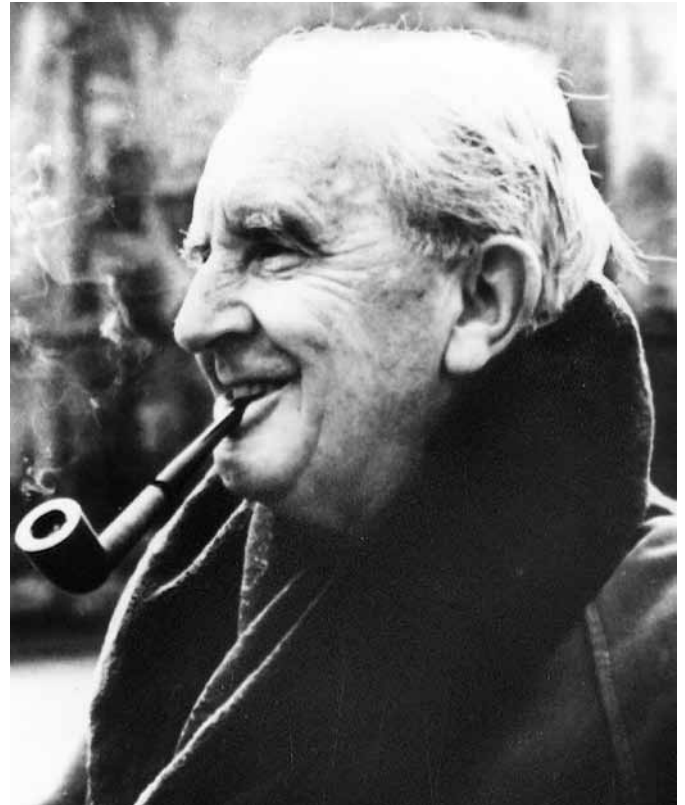
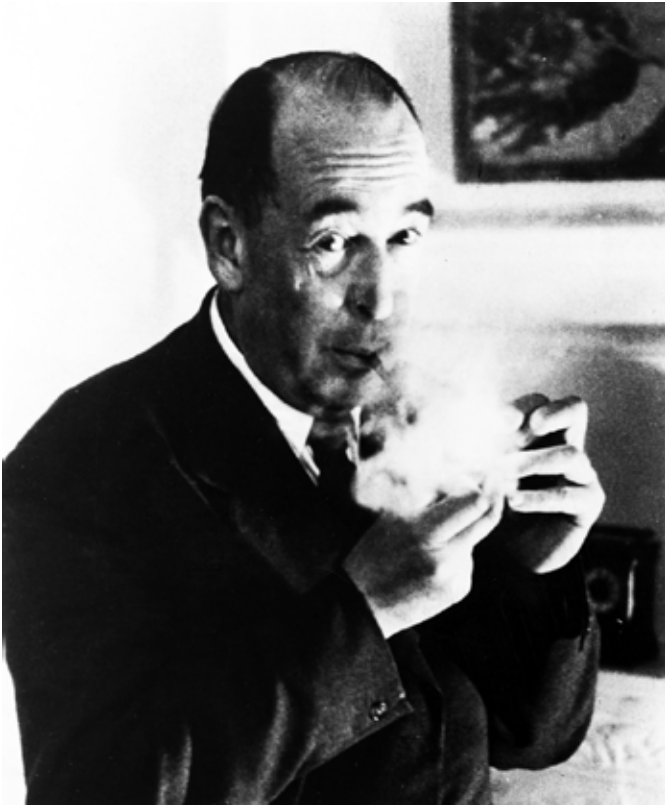
Modern conservatism (in the English-speaking world) also has its origins with the French Revolution, when the English parliamentarian, Edmund Burke, spoke out against revolutionary politics (as opposed to reformist politics) as endangering the social fabric. Genuine

conservatism is concerned to protect the basic structures of nature and society on which we depend, and it is wary of how much change

human communities can bare at any one time. That is, conservatism is (or should be) strongly rooted in respect for the created order. Much of what is labelled as conservatism today has very

little interest in conserving things. J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis were both true conservatives: their critique of the destruction of nature by the industrial economy was paralleled by their critique of its sundering of human community. However, their conservatism also gave them some large blind-spots about troubling

Faith in Christ demands that we do politics, but that doesn't make it simple.



elements of the social status quo, particularly the prevailing attitudes about race and empire. I am happy to be associated with the term 'conservative' when used as an adjective, qualifying the extremities of both left-wing and radical. But I am not happy to be associated with it as a noun: I am not 'a conservative' (more on this below).

The task of Christian politics is always to try and discern, and align with, God's 'yes' and 'no' for the present moment.

desire to qualify it with 'conservative'. As William Temple, the great Archbishop of Canterbury during the Second World War, put it: 'The conservative temperament tends to dwell on what is indispensable, that this may be safeguarded. The radical temperament tends to dwell most on the higher ends of life, that these may be facilitated. The world needs both.'

Radical

The term 'radical' derives from the Latin, *radix*, for root. Radicals are not happy with superficial diagnoses of the human condition or band-aid measures for social evils. Radicals seek 'root and branch' reform. In the eighteenth century, radicals propounded crazy and unworkable ideas, such as the idea that every adult should get a vote. I contrast 'radical' (concerned with deep and durable change) with 'extremist' (concerned with sudden and violent change). Jesus was a radical exponent of the faith of Israel; the Zealots were extremists. Nevertheless, like left-wing politics, radicalism has also been associated with all sorts of silliness throughout history, hence my

Not a progressive

In their truest sense, both *conservatism* and *progressivism* (where the 'ism' draws attention to an ideology) represent dispositions to history. Conservatism posits a golden era for society at some point in the past, and its politics seeks to reinstate elements of that age. Progressivism posits a golden era for humanity in the future. The past is always something to be left behind and abandoned for what comes next. The besetting sin of conservatism is to minimise the injustices of the social status quo. The besetting sin of progressivism is to denigrate anything associated with the old order. In my view, a



Christianity & Politics

Four-part *MannaCast* series (eps. 30-33)

1. God's Politics
2. The Gospel vs. the Christian West?
3. The Australian Project
4. Christian Political Witness

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or on your preferred podcast platform*

C.S. Lewis (left) and J.R.R. Tolkien (right) were both true conservatives. Smoking a pipe is an essential ingredient of conservatism.

Christian position must reject both these views of history. Rather, it sees every age as equidistant from eternity, none elevated above the others. Every age receives both the fundamental affirmation of God's 'yes' and the challenging judgment of God's 'no'. The task of Christian politics is always to try and discern, and align with, God's 'yes' and 'no' for the present moment.

Let me hasten to stress that I am in no way claiming that left-wing conservative radicalism is 'the proper Christian political position'. It is merely the way that I am currently improvising the ongoing challenge of applying gospel insights to the messy world of politics. Moreover, the ways in which I unpack the terms used here, are not the only ways in which they can be used. Indeed, they are not even the only ways in which *I use* these terms. In this article, I have positively associated with left, conservative, and radical, but, at other times, I can also use each of these with a negative inference. Similarly, I have disassociated from progressive politics here; however, I also sometimes use the term 'progressive' with positive connotations. The one exception is the term 'right-wing', which, for me, is always negative.

If we are going to use terms like 'progressive' and 'conservative', 'left' and 'right', as more than mere badges of identity or as slurs and accusations, then paying attention to the heritage of political ideas and to the meaning of words can help us see beyond the straight-jacket of today's package-deal politics. But ultimately, a politics that seeks to be faithful to Christ must move beyond such labels, and even beyond policy positions. More than anything, it must resist the absurdities created by ideological factionalism. Christian political thinking must be prepared to think about issues in their own terms and from a biblical framework, wrestling with the pain and complexity bound up in the human mess, and resisting the impulse towards simple and ideologically convenient resolutions. Ultimately, a Christian politics must acknowledge that any good that can be achieved through politics is only ever a limited and partial good—it is not an answer to anything. It is not through politics that the kingdom comes.

LOVE NOT FEAR

THE JOY OF MAKING A BIT OF EDEN OUT OF RUBBISH

by Megan Forward



A lot of environmental messages to kids these days are fear-based, but I've personally never found anxiety a helpful motivator. Anxiety tends to stifle creativity and build inflexibility; it can freeze and shut us down. But love... now you're talking. Love is motivating, inspirational, exciting, energising, creative, and calling us forward into new places and ways to be. It speaks to our hearts as well as our minds, it lifts our spirit, it asks the deeper, quieter questions. Who do I want to be in the world? What are my passions? What shall I do with them? Where shall I go? What matters to me? 'What do you want to do with your one wild and precious life?' as poet Mary Oliver asks us.

So how do we fall in love with the natural world? With this extraordinary planet? With this place that sustains us in a seemingly infinite outer space? What is this life? What seeming miracle do we exist inside?

One thing leads to another...

Quite a few years ago now, my family and I fell in love with our connection to the natural world. It all started one afternoon when I picked my boys up from childcare. They had run a 'Hatchlings Program' with the kids at the centre, where fertilised chicken eggs are incubated under a warm light for a time so that the children get to watch the chickens hatch out of their eggs. When the chickens hatch, the program moves on, and the question of *what to do with the chickens* is raised. So that day I went to pick up two little boys and came home with two boys and five baby chicks!

We had no idea at all how to care for them. We got a cardboard box, tore up some newspaper, and popped the chicks inside and gave them



water. We visited the local produce store to find out what they ate and brought them home extra finely ground chook mash. They were cute and adorable little things and we all had fun holding their tiny fluffy bodies, naming them, and learning how to care for them. They grew quickly and we researched and built a chook pen and hutch. We learned that chickens love food scraps and next thing we discovered our weekly rubbish was greatly reduced as we recycled our scraps into a chook feast. Having heard that chook poo was great fertiliser I asked my mum how to use it.

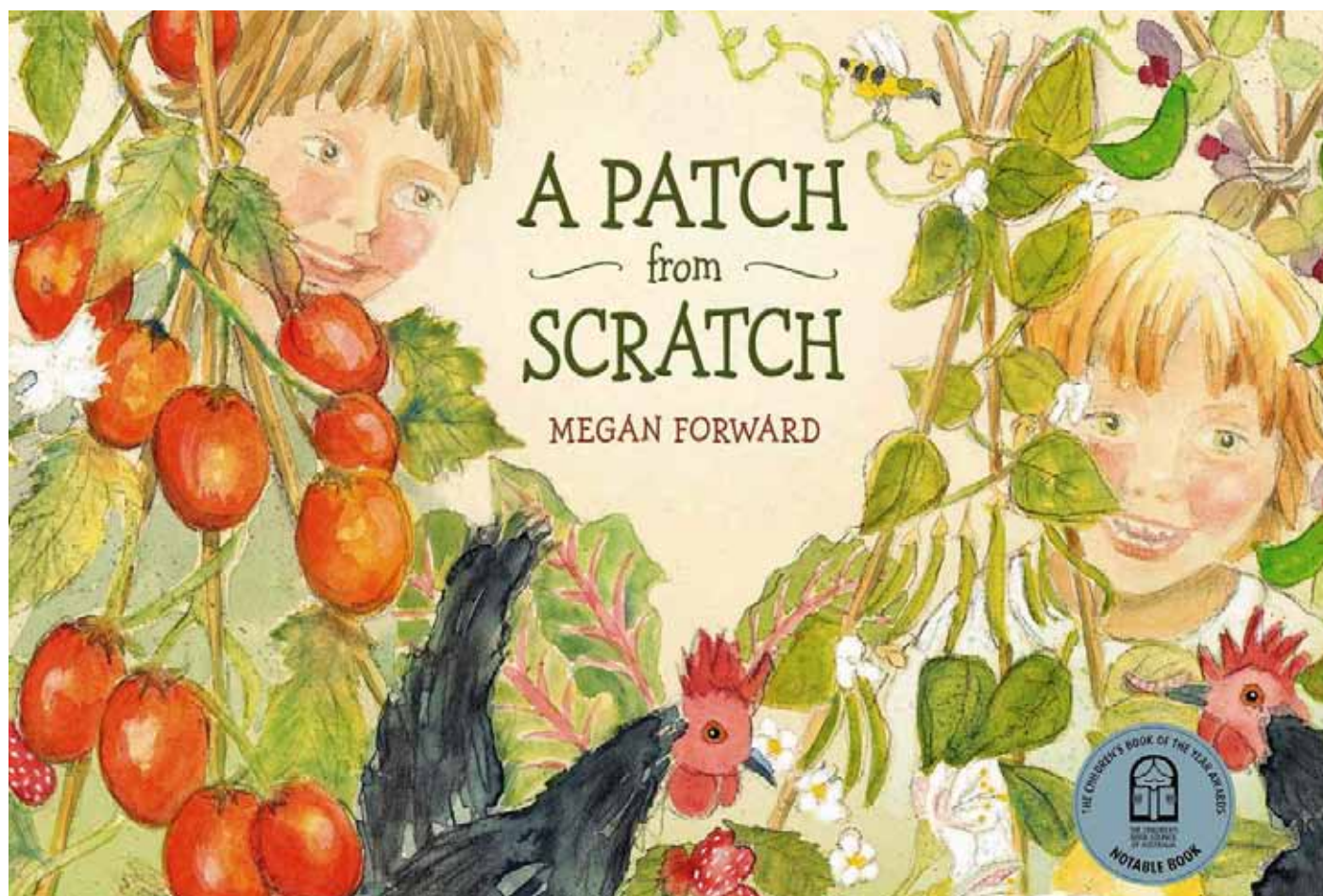
Living on a busy suburban corner, I had visited our local native plant nursery years before and had been slowly cultivating a native planting strip around the road perimeter of our property.

How do we fall in love with the natural world? With this extraordinary planet?

I might live in the city but I wanted my family to feel connected to the bush and provide habitat for native creatures. 'Don't put the chook poo on the natives' my mum announced. 'It's too high in phosphorus for natives that have adapted to our

low phosphorus Australian soil.' 'What am I going to do with it then?' I asked. 'It's great for vegies' she replied. So voila! Our next family project was born. We built raised garden beds, gently reworking areas of grass

in sunny spots, and mixed the chook poo rich soil on the surface of the chook pen into the patch. We watered it all in and sourced local organic sugar cane mulch to go on top to hold in the moisture and keep down weeds. We bought some seedlings and planted them in. In this nutrient rich environment they flourished, and many other



plants grew up from seeds that were dormant in the soil from the scraps fed to the chooks.

It seemed like a miracle, this mini garden of Eden, with lush and delicious food sprouting from what we had thought was rubbish! We'd been throwing away gold! The kids were proud of their patch and watered and weeded and harvested with me before dinner times. They showed their friends. We shared produce with our neighbours. Our Sudanese friends taught us how to use the discarded leaves of vegetables in our cooking.

We noticed the change of the seasons brought different plants to flower and fruit. Bees, wasps, and dragonflies began to visit the vegie flowers for nectar, fertilising our next crop as they went. The chooks contentedly scratched and pecked and chatted as they did so.

**It seemed like a miracle,
this mini garden of Eden,
with lush and delicious food
sprouting from what we had
thought was rubbish!**

We worked in with nature as co-creators rather than bystanders. We fell in love with the intricacies and interconnections between everything. The delicate and beautiful dance between it all. Life felt deep, nourishing, diverse, and rich.

We were literally putting down roots. We felt deeply connected to the land beneath our feet. Some post-natal anxiety in me began to transform into quiet joy. We enjoyed our unscheduled free-range life in the suburbs. We had a small house but space for nature with actual trees to climb! I encouraged risk taking and the household rule

was you might hurt yourself or break something climbing, you're just not allowed to die! No injuries or breaks occurred anyway as children learned to gauge distances and weights and their bodies grew flexible and strong.

Previous spread: Primary school children participating in a City Farm Workshop.

Page 12: Megan's A Patch from Scratch book cover.

Page 13: Exploring and responding during a school incursion.



A Patch from Scratch

I felt the urge to share our experiences with other children and families. Having dreamed of writing and illustrating books like Beatrix Potter as a child, and with a background as an artist, turning this all into a picture book, in hindsight, was a natural fit. It came like a bolt of inspiration while attending a writing workshop, and there began my first children's picture book, *A Patch from Scratch*, eventually published by Penguin Random House Australia in 2016.

Soon afterwards came requests for author/illustrator talks and workshop incursions in primary schools, kindergartens, community garden groups, libraries, and festivals. With my teaching degree I was able to link my nature-based picture books into curriculum linked Science, Technology, Engineering, English, Art, Maths, and Music (STEAM) workshops that added value to the curriculum. Kids were learning while having heaps of creative fun.

Love and joy in participating and connecting to nature's rhythms and intricacies is the place from which I engage children and families in my writing, illustrating, workshops, art classes, and talks. The multi-modal workshops foster creativity, sustainability, and ecological awareness

for children in a gentle, joyful, and highly interactive way. Using the picture books as stimuli, participants are invited to hypothesise, solve problems, experiment, and get creative. Ten years on, it's all been a wonderful—and at times very challenging—adventure. I still can't believe I get to share the love of nature and creativity with so many people for a living.

Love, not fear, is what we need to encourage in our future generations... because you care for what you love.

Artist, author, illustrator, and writer Megan Forward explores creativity, story, and sustainability with a deep curiosity and appreciation for the wonders and interconnectedness of life. Her picture books have been shortlisted by the Children's Book Council of Australia and provide the stimulus for her curriculum-connected STEAM workshops, as well as regular presentations at festivals, libraries, schools, kindergartens, and community organisations.

You can connect with Megan via her website: www.meganforwardstudio.com.au or on Instagram and facebook as meganforwardstudio.

ZACCHAEUS AND JERICHO IN FULL COLOUR

THE WORLD OF LUKE 19:1–27

by Deborah Storie

*Jericho, an imaginative, rather than
historical, depiction of the city by
Konstantin Gorbatov (1876-1945).*

Jesus travelled from Galilee to Jerusalem for Passover, passing through Jericho on the way. Were you among the pilgrim crowd, what would you have seen as you approached Jericho? How might you have felt about that city, its past and present? When Jesus declares he'll visit Zacchaeus, a ruling tribute collector—and rich—would you have muttered with everyone else, 'Look, he's gone to stay with a sinful man'? Why?

In this, the second of five articles about Luke 19:1–27, we explore the world inhabited by Jesus, Zacchaeus, and those who witnessed their encounter. In the previous article, we examined how this passage is often mis-read and introduced an alternative reading which invites us to consider the this-world consequences of what and how we read. We concluded with two questions: How do the parable and the scene of which it is part relate? How might attending to the story's contexts—historical (Palestine under Roman and Herodian rule), geographical (Jericho in Judaea), temporal (approaching Passover), and canonical (with the Scriptures of Israel)—enrich our engagement with this text? To the second of these questions we now turn.

A strategically located city

Nestled at the foot of the mountains, Jericho straddled a major east-west trade route and one of three pilgrimage routes between Galilee and Jerusalem: the gateway between the plains of the Jordan and Jerusalem, 25 kilometres away and 500 metres above. It was no coincidence that Jesus encountered a rich ruling tribute collector in Jericho, nor that he told that parable there and then.

The city looms large in the Scriptures of Israel (Josh 2–6). The point of entry to the Promised Land, Jericho speaks of warfare by miracle and the promise of dignity, freedom, a future. Its promise comes with a curse and a warning: when the covenant is violated and devoted things deceitfully stolen, destruction and violence ensue.

In the intertestamental period, the Seleucids (a Greek empire) built a fortress in Jericho (161–160 BCE). A few decades later, priest-princes and elites of an independent Jewish Kingdom (142–63 BCE) established palaces and pleasure gardens.



Herod the Great, King of Judea 37–4 BCE, fortified the city walls, constructed additional palaces, and extended the aqueduct network that fed swimming pools, bath houses, underground reservoirs, rose gardens, date plantations, and balm groves.

At the time of Jesus, Jericho was a major administrative, trade, military, and pleasure centre. Depending on your perspective, it was ‘the city of palm trees’ or ‘of princes, paupers, and prostitutes.’ To appreciate the animosity ruling tribute collectors incurred and the hopes the parable of Luke 19:12–27 evoked, we need to look beyond Jericho and examine the fraught realities of its world.

An unequal world

First century Palestine was highly unequal. The vast majority of the population—peasants, artisans, daily labourers, and fisher-folk—lived at subsistence or sub-subsistence levels. Unable to accumulate food or other reserves,

heavy taxation, and other obligations meant that injury, crop failure, or unemployment led to debt and, via debt, to prostitution, banditry, beggary, imprisonment, bonded labour, slavery, or starvation. At the other end of the economic scale, a small governing class (1–2%) controlled

most land, human labour, and other resources through slaves and a retainer class (5–7%) of priests, scribes, administrators, and soldiers.

Extreme disparities of wealth, power, and privilege

enabled and were exacerbated by other interrelated dimensions on which that world depended. We review each in turn.

1. Imperial rule. Rome ruled subjugated regions indirectly through local client kings, aristocracies, and religious leaders. During Jesus’ ministry, Roman procurators ruled Judea through the ruling priesthood and temple establishment, while Herodian tetrarchs ruled Galilee, Idumaea, and Peraea. Political, religious, and economic dimensions

Depending on your perspective, Jericho was ‘the city of palm trees’ or ‘of princes, paupers, and prostitutes.’

of Roman rule were thoroughly intertwined: Roman procurators appointed ruling priests; the religious establishment facilitated Roman rule.

2. **Taxation as tribute.** Roman and Herodian taxation was nothing like taxation in participatory democracies. Tribute and taxes took all that could be taken from ordinary people to support and protect elite property and lifestyles, recruit, retain and maintain armies, and construct infrastructure that served elite interests. Direct imperial land and head taxes were collected with cooperation from local *sanhedria*, leading families, and ruling priests. Indirect taxes were managed by contractors who paid the administration in advance, and then used collectors and slaves to extract as much as possible from local populations. Tribute collection was, and was expected to be, a profitable enterprise. It was no accident that Zacchaeus was rich.

Daily bread became harder to find. The landless peasantry grew increasingly desperate.

3. **Slavery.** Large numbers of free-born Jews were enslaved during and following Pompey's and Cassius's campaigns (63 and 53–48 BCE) and uprisings associated with Herod the Great's death (4 BCE) and Quirinius' census (6 CE). Some captives remained in Palestine; most were sold to Rome and other imperial centres. An estimated 7 to 25 % of the population were enslaved. Elite

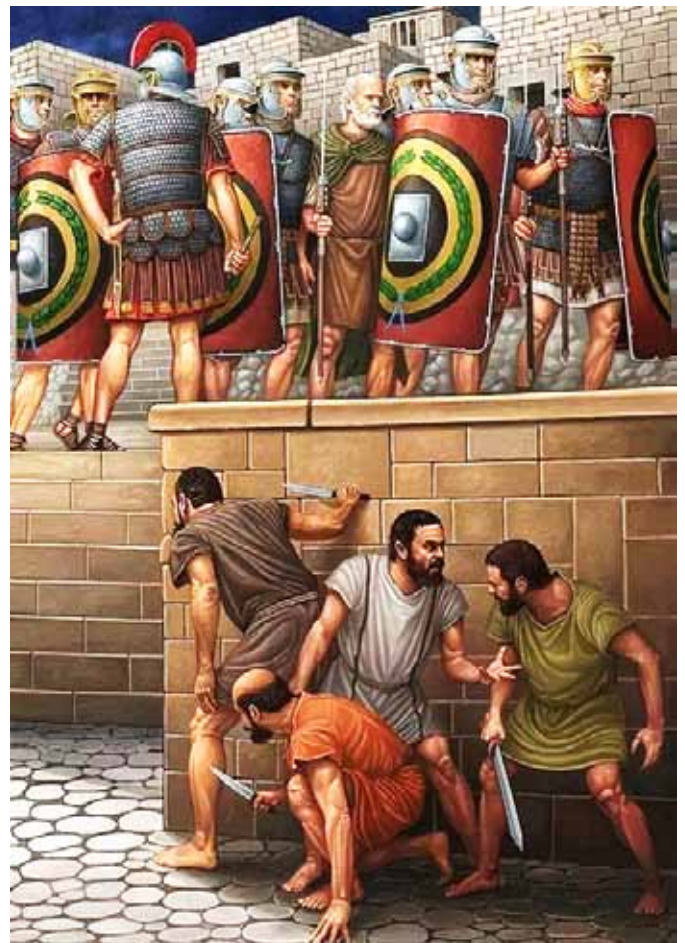
households retained large numbers of slaves; some peasant households owned one or two. One way or another, most people used the products of slave labour, were subject to impositions

mediated by slaves, and accessed services provided by slaves. As for the enslaved, those sent to mines or brothels rarely survived long. At the other end of the spectrum, slaves who administered elite affairs lived comfortably provided they served the system that enslaved them. It is highly likely that Zacchaeus owned slaves and that slaves were among those who 'supposed that

First century Palestine was often a desperate and violent place.

Page 16: Sicarii (assassins) waiting to strike their target. Image credit: Angel García Pinto on inkyillustration.com.

Page 17: Artist's rendition of Roman brutality following the siege of Jerusalem in 70 CE, continuing a long legacy of pillage and violence. Credit: Radu Oltean (2014).



the kingdom of God was about to appear immediately' (19:11). The power delegated to the slaves in Jesus' parable does not erase their vulnerability: slaves who turn profits and exercise authority over cities are still slaves.

4. Land and debt relations. Land, its ownership and control, were burning issues for much of the population. For Jewish small-holders, land was about much more than physical and financial survival. Land was identity and community, hope and purpose, covenant—the gift and promise of God. Unable to pay taxes or, having paid taxes, unable to survive, many peasant smallholders became indebted and eventually lost their lands when debts were foreclosed. As land changed hands, so did its use. Luxury and commercially oriented crops displaced the mixed farming and subsistence crops that sustained local populations. Daily bread became harder to find. The landless peasantry grew increasingly desperate. No wonder Jesus taught his disciples to pray: 'Give us each day our daily bread' (Luke 11:3).

5. Militarisation. Early first century Palestine was highly militarised with a fluid mix of foreign and local militaries: Roman armies, legions, and auxiliaries; Herodian armies and cavalry; Temple guards; and private militia retained by ruling priests and elites. At Passover and other high-risk seasons, extra troops reinforced small Roman garrisons at Jerusalem and Jericho. At other times, legions from Caesarea, Sebaste, Gerasa, or Syria could descend anywhere in Palestine within weeks of a disturbance. Armies also constructed roads and other infrastructure, provided protection and logistical support for local and foreign elites, enforced tribute and debt collection, and crucified runaway slaves and political dissidents, including prophets like Jesus. Soldiers were probably among the crowd travelling with Jesus and certainly patrolled Jericho and its major roads. Did guards accompany Zacchaeus on his quest to see Jesus? Luke does not say.

It is difficult to overestimate how deeply the collective trauma of mass slaughter, rape, and enslavement following the 4 BCE and 6 CE





[Herod] Archelaus kneels before Augustus, by Jan Luyken, 1704.

Jesus' parable in Luke 19 appears to be a thinly veiled account of Herod's rise to power and brief reign.

uprisings impacted local populations. Violent resistance continued on a smaller scale through subsequent decades: *sicarii* (armed assassins) stabbed wealthy individuals before melting into the crowd; bandits attacked trade and taxation convoys. Most Jews resisted Roman and Herodian rule more quietly by celebrating Sabbath, Passover, and Pentecost, and by refusing to adopt Roman values or conduct business the Roman way.

The geographical, political, economic, and temporal dimensions of Jesus' encounter with Zacchaeus are not coincidental. Jericho epitomised and embodied the consequences of imperial domination and Herodian ambition. Its royal estates, aqueducts, plantations, palaces, gardens, and slaves advertised wealth accumulation, conspicuous consumption, and the

play of power—the command and domination of space. A different picture emerges if we penetrate the city's glossy façade. Within city limits, beggary, prostitution, hunger, squalor, and coercion told another story. Beyond the city and its plantations, the countryside and villages whose water Jericho consumed spoke of desiccation and dispossession. The city that enriched a few impoverished many.

Passover celebrated Ancient Israel's foundational story: the liberation of the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt, the giving of the Torah through Moses at Sinai, the 40 wilderness years, the covenant and land of promise. For faithful Jews, Passover reawakened memories and hopes of freedom through divine intervention: a new and better Moses, a Messiah who would release God's people from the hand of all who oppress them (Luke 1:74). Passover called the rule of Caesar and his clients, like Pharaoh, into question.

Although Luke does not describe the crowd who witnessed Jesus' encounter with Zacchaeus, the spatial and temporal contexts provide clues to its composition: residents of Jericho and surrounding estates: Passover pilgrims from Galilee and elsewhere, including Jesus and his disciples; people visiting or passing through Jericho for other reasons: soldiers and tax collectors, merchants, and priests. Among these groups were people who had lost everything to debt and those who had 'taken what they did not deposit and reaped what they did not sow' (Luke 19:21–22). There were absentee landlords and their retainers, families still clinging to ancestral plots, landless families, and slaves. For many but not all these people, Jericho was tangible evidence of how far Israel had fallen from covenant ideals. Zacchaeus, ruling tribute collector of Jericho, was part of the problem. So were the political and material ambitions of Hasmonaean, Herodian, and ruling priestly families. So were the imperial reach and conceits of a far country.

The parable told in Jericho

Jesus addressed the parable of Luke 19:12–27 to people who embodied the tensions between those who owned land and those who cultivated it, between those whose slaves turned a profit and those who bore the cost, between rulers and those they ruled. The parable presupposes a militarised politico-economic situation. A far country apportions rule within a local realm. After gaining royal power, a nobleman directs slaves to exercise authority over cities, expects bystanders to re-allocate resources at his command, and appears to command a militia capable of slaughtering his enemies. With Herodian palaces in view, the parable is a thinly veiled account of Herod Archelaus's rise to power and the administration of his short-lived reign (4 BCE – 6 CE). When a nobleman gains ruling power, his enemies tremble. When a ruler's slaves turn profits, his poorest subjects lose what little they have. As it is written, 'The rich rule over the poor, and the borrower is the slave of the lender' (Prov 22.7).

The New Testament world was characterised by inequality, imperial rule, tribute, slavery, conflictual land and debt relations, militarisation, and resistance. Do somewhat analogous dynamics operate today?

And yet, and yet. The city's past reawakens the memory and hope of divine intervention, the Jubilee promise of land and dignity for all, the prophetic vision of a society of justice, mercy, peace, freedom, and abundance: enough for all. As Passover and the parable testify, things to do not have to be—and will not always be—the way they are. Soldiers do not always obey orders, nor slaves their owners.

What next?

Three further articles on Luke 19:1–27 will share interpretations of Luke 19:1–10 and 11–27 and ask how Luke 19:1–27 might equip us to engage the pressing challenges of our day. Two suggestions meanwhile:

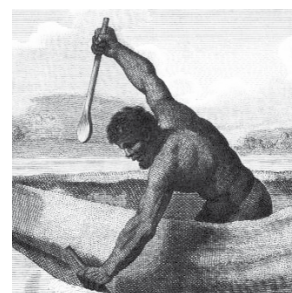
1. Create a character who witnessed Jesus' encounter with Zacchaeus and imagine yourself into the story of Luke 18 and 19 *as if* from their perspective. Does reading *as if* through their eyes lend a different hue to events as they unfold? What does your character remember, see, hear, smell, feel, and hope?
2. Step out of the story to compare the worlds behind, and in front of, the text. The New Testament world was characterised by inequality, imperial rule, tribute, slavery, conflictual land and debt relations, militarisation, and resistance. Do somewhat analogous dynamics operate today? Many of us materially benefit from the way things are. Might the parable invite us to recognise that current arrangements are not God-given—and need to change?

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The Legacies of Colonisation

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A couple of snaps from Manna Gum's most recent Evening Conversation event in October:

Top left: Robyn Whitaker responds to Jonathan's pot-stirring.

Top right and bottom: the discussion continues over drinks.

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Manna Matters is produced on the lands of the Wurundjeri and Dja Dja Wurrung peoples, both members of the Kulin nation. The 'wurun' of the Wurundjeri refers to Eucalyptus viminalis, a sacred tree whose leaves are required for a 'Welcome to Country'. The early Europeans colloquially named this tree the Manna Gum for the sweet white gum (lerp) it sometimes produces, which reminded them of the biblical story of the manna in the wilderness. In doing so, they unknowingly associated a locally sacred tree with one of the foundational lessons in God's economics: collect what you need; none shall have too little; none shall have too much; don't store it up; there is enough for all!