



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.



The Entrusted Pounds (1963), Paulamaria Walter.

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NEWS FROM LONG GULLY

Watching the recent axing of yet another political leader by their own party in the lead up to an election (Jacinta Allen, Victorian Premiere), I have been reflecting (again) on the corruption of politics. Allen was largely undone by the odour of Victorian Labor's enabling of CFMEU corruption and criminality, at vast expense to the taxpayer. Meanwhile, the Queensland Government has recently announced the expansion of an inquiry into Queensland Labor's kow-towing to CFMEU corruption. Meanwhile, in NSW a corruption inquiry has been uncovering the sordid financial affairs of a faction of 'conservative Christians Reformers' attempting to branch-stack the NSW Liberal Party with more of their own kind. The mind boggles. All the while, Pauline Hanson has been glorying in media attention, not even trying to hide the fact that she is in the pocket of Gina Rhinehart.

Everywhere you look in Australian politics, from local to Federal, there is ample evidence of people using political position for sordid gain. Some of it is illegal; much of it is just cynical gaming of the system.

The very structure of our politics actively blocks the emergence of leaders with strong moral character and a clear and consistent long-term political vision.

Jesus derided people who 'swear by heaven' but don't deliver, and pleaded for some who would simply let their 'yes' be yes, and their 'no' be no (Matt 5:33-37). It seems to me that the very structure of our politics actively blocks the emergence of leaders with strong moral character

and a clear and consistent long-term political vision. The media cycle, party structures, electoral funding and voter selfishness all work to advantage the scheming opportunists and self-promoters.

Where is the hope in politics? This edition goes to press as we are starting up another round of Melbourne Evening Conversations. This month I spoke with Josh Lourensz, Head of Catholic Social Services Victoria. If you attended then you'd know that we managed to fully solve these issues.

This is a crazy-busy period for Manna Gum, with a frenetic schedule of writing and speaking over July, August, and September. I am not

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Jonathan (right) speaking at a recent Wesley Centre event with Catherine de Fontenay (left).

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

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A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO ECO-RENTING

by Jono Barnett



Australia has more renters than ever. At the time of writing, rents are at record highs and vacancy rates at record lows. People are renting for longer before buying a home, if they can buy at all. More than ever before, the question of how to build healthy, sustainable communities in Australia requires considering the relationships between renters, landlords, and their properties.

Sustainability in rental homes is not only an environmental issue. Inefficient homes compound health and financial problems, especially for people who are already struggling and can only afford low-quality housing. As the climate crisis deepens, these problems will only get worse.

While upgrades to owner-occupiers' homes are common, rentals suffer from a 'split incentive': landlords usually pay for upgrades, while tenants receive the immediate benefit through lower

bills and improved comfort. Aligning these interests with the public interest of sustainable housing has become a significant Australian policy problem.

This article won't tackle this problem, but we will explore what renters can do *right now*. There's plenty to say about how landlords can manage their properties wisely, and obviously they have greater agency over the property that they own (see 'Building a Good News Home' from *MM* Aug '23, or both Jon and Alison's articles from the *MM* Dec 2014 edition). However, tenants are not without agency, limited though it may be. (e.g. 'Reflections from an urban renter' in *MM* June '10, or even 'Farming the 'burbs' in *MM* Aug '21).

While many tenants feel hesitant to assert their rights or request changes in a tight rental market where insecurity is common, there remain opportunities to produce and consume sustainably in rental homes.

Quick disclaimer:

Tenancy laws across Australia share many principles but do vary a lot. They also change relatively regularly. Before making decisions, it's a good idea to research the law and get advice from your state or territory's tenant support services to know where you stand. For example, the Tenants' Union of NSW and Tenants Victoria websites are founts of knowledge and explain how to get advice. Renters within strata schemes (e.g. apartment blocks) can have additional considerations so should consider their by-laws too. All that to say: this article is intended as idea inspiration, not legal advice!

Tenants' rights

Tenants often have more rights than they realise, and this is true of sustainability pursuits. Here's a list of things renters can do:

- Choose an environmentally conscious energy retailer and purchase certified GreenPower. Some electricity plans reward households for shifting energy use outside peak demand periods or participating in demand-response.
- Utilise your right to minimum water efficiency standards.
- Utilise your right to minimum energy efficiency standards if you're in the ACT or Victoria (and hopefully soon in NSW!).
- Utilise your right to repairs to address issues like water leaks, mould, unsafe appliances and drafts.
- Grow plants in pots and use a contained, portable compost system.
- Make legally recognised requests for minor modifications to install energy efficiency measures at your own expense, such as LED lights, window insulation film, thermal curtains or blinds, and flyscreens to enable airflow. Often landlord consent is required but they must not unreasonably withhold that consent. Depending on how the modifications are agreed to and installed, you may be able to take these things with you when you move. Laws vary here, so check the rules or get advice.

Tenants often have more rights than they realise, and this is true of sustainability pursuits.

- Make legally recognised requests for minor modifications to plant in the ground, within your jurisdiction's rules. For example, in NSW, landlords must not unreasonably refuse consent for planting if existing vegetation does not need to be removed and the plants will not grow taller than two metres.
- Use plug-in appliances like portable induction cooktops, air fryers, electric frypans, efficient space heaters, and heated lap blankets to reduce gas reliance and electricity use.
- Use small portable off-grid solar or battery systems (though check any strata by-laws and consider safety and practicalities carefully first).
- Participate in community energy initiatives where possible.
- Request a pet or pets, such as chickens. Rules vary by jurisdiction, so do your research, but in some cases a landlord can only refuse for specific (and contestable) reasons.
- Reduce energy consumption in many of the usual ways, like switching appliances off at the wall, using draft stoppers, heating and cooling the home naturally where possible and with appliances only as needed, and so on. There are plenty of resources available on this.

If your landlord tries to block any of the above, you may be able to legally challenge their refusal. Get advice before doing this.



Vertical planters like this one require very little room and can be very productive.



Targeted heating and cooling methods (like blankets and directional fans) are generally more efficient than room- or house-scale options.

Tenants' negotiating power

Anything beyond the above list can be done if a landlord agrees to it. Tenants can request and negotiate over the full gamut of home sustainability measures. Ideas include:

- More serious gardening work or planting (e.g. trees) that involves larger changes than the minor modifications rule allows.
- Improving energy and water efficiency (beyond any enforceable minimum standards), such as with insulation, ventilation, heat pumps, electrification of appliances, reverse-cycle air conditioners, external shading, double glazing, better draft sealing, water tanks, greywater systems, rooftop solar, household batteries, EV charging, and so on.

These things might be more complicated in strata properties, but if you can get your landlord or neighbours to raise ideas with the strata committee, you might be able to influence the entire strata scheme.

Some ways to increase the chance of getting a landlord's agreement to these things include:

- Being a reliable and kind tenant with good relationships with real estate agents, landlords, and neighbours.
- Referring the landlord to government programs that incentivise upgrades. These change regularly and depend on your location, but they often cover things like rooftop solar, hot water systems, insulation, reverse-cycle air conditioners, and household batteries. Victoria has a 'solar rebates for rental properties' scheme, and NSW has a 'solar for apartment residents' scheme



Left: 'Everybody's Home' and 'Healthy Homes for Renters': two campaigns aiming to improve Australian housing conditions at the policy level.

Right: Solar panels come in many sizes and can be installed in a variety of locations. Some are portable and can be taken with the tenants when they move.



(you would need to get the strata committee on board). The federal Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water 'rebates and assistance' website has a form to help find schemes available in your area.

- Offering to share the up-front cost of an upgrade, or agreeing to an ongoing rent increase in exchange for the landlord paying for an upgrade. For example, you could research the size of rooftop solar and/or battery system that suits your energy consumption, estimate how much per week it would save you in energy bills, and offer to pay up to that amount extra in rent in exchange for the landlord installing that system. Stronger rent increase regulations in jurisdictions like Victoria and the ACT may provide additional bargaining power. Of course, think carefully before offering a permanent rent increase.
- Teaming up and making joint requests with like-minded neighbours who have the same landlord or are part of the same strata scheme.

Make the conversation in person if possible – it gives you a chance to build rapport, and it's harder to say 'no' in person!

- Mentioning how upgrades would improve the landlord's property value and reduce maintenance costs and mould risk.
- Explaining your motives and inviting the landlord to make values-based decisions given the health and climate benefits.
- Using the other tips listed on the Tenants Union of NSW webpage, 'Tips: negotiating with the landlord'. I especially like their suggestion to make the conversation in person if possible – it gives you a chance to build rapport, and it's harder to say 'no' in person!

Make sure to put any agreements in writing.

Changing the law

Whether you're a renter or not, there are ways to help by campaigning for improvements in the law.

Your state MP is always there for you to call, meet, or write to. This is especially worth doing when relevant issues are in the news due to a recent event or because the government is



considering changing the law. I think landlords expressing their support for better sustainability-focused rules for rental properties can be particularly powerful.

I highly recommend subscribing to the newsletter of your state's or territory's tenant advocacy body if you have one. They regularly share opportunities to advocate to politicians on all things renting, including sustainability and energy efficiency. In places that don't have one, local community legal centres or social services peak bodies often also do what they can and are worth supporting.

The 'Everybody's Home' campaign is a must. They provide opportunities to advocate for housing justice generally, including minimum energy standards for rentals. 'Healthy Homes For Renters' is another good one, they also have a specific form which they ask supportive landlords to complete.

These groups also occasionally share opportunities for renters to participate in research projects about their experiences and the energy performance of their homes in order to inform policy and campaigns.

Closing thoughts

Lastly, if sustainability changes in your tenancy just aren't happening for reasons outside your control, you can still channel your enthusiasm into meaningful action in other ways. Consider investing in a 'solar garden' (e.g. Haystacks in NSW) as an alternative to having panels on your home, though the financial equation is different. Join a local community garden, repair café, or bush care or environmental advocacy group. If you have the privilege of planning an exit from the rental market, then do some eco-dreaming around your next home. There are plenty of stories in previous editions of *Manna Matters* to inspire you about co-housing, sustainable buildings, small-scale farming, and more.

Good luck!

Jono lives with his wife Sarita on Dharawal country in the region of the 'pleasant place near the sea', the Illawarra. He works as a lawyer at the local community legal centre and enjoys being part of the Central Church Port Kembla community.



A PARABLE TOLD IN JERICHO

LUKE 19:11–27

by Deborah Storie

Jesus told a parable to those who, having witnessed his encounter with Jericho's ruling tribute collector, expected the kingdom of God to appear immediately. Residents of Jericho and pilgrims *en route* to Passover—householders, slaves, servants and children; beggars and prostitutes; small traders and merchants; daily labourers, peasants and fisherfolk; Roman and Herodian soldiers; toll collectors of various kinds — had you been among them, what might you have made of this parable? How might you have sought to respond?

This, the fourth of five reflections on Luke 19:1–27, focuses on the parable of 19:11–27. Three previous reflections in *Manna Matters* examined how the passage is often misread; explored the world inhabited by Jesus, Zacchaeus, and the watching, listening crowd; and offered a reading of the first half of the scene, Luke 19:1–10. The final article in this series will ask how Luke 19:1–27 might inspire us to engage the pressing challenges of our day.

We begin with seven observations about Jesus' parables, and seven notes about the parable told in Jericho. Next, I'll draw on the work of other scholars to trace connections between the parable and other parts of Luke's narrative which support realistic, rather than allegorical, interpretations. Finally, we return to Jericho to hear the parable *as if* among those to whom Jesus first told it.

Approaching the text while minding the gap

The following seven observations about Jesus' parables are, in one sense, obvious. They warrant repeating, however, because their interpretive significance is frequently overlooked.

1. According to the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus told many of his parables in response to a question, complaint, or situation. To hear a parable aright, we need to respect the narrative, rhetorical, and historical contexts that the Gospels provide.



The Three Servants, Nelly Bube (b. 1949). Displayed here in two halves: top (p. 8) and bottom (p. 9).
Copyright: Norwegian Bible Society.

2. Jesus and the Gospel writers leave most parables uninterpreted, leaving Jesus' original and Luke's later audiences to wrestle with these parables themselves.
3. Those few occasions on which Jesus *does* interpret a parable frustrate attempts to devise principles or rules to determine how other parables should be interpreted. Jesus interprets 'the Parable of the Sower' (Mark 4:3-20; Matt 13:3-23; Luke 8:5-15) allegorically: its elements function as metaphors for other things. In contrast, Jesus interprets the Parable of 'the Good Samaritan' (Luke 10:30-37) realistically and politically: 'Go and *do* likewise.'
4. Jesus addressed all his parables to groups of first-century people, the vast majority of whom were Jewish. He could, therefore, draw on Old Testament traditions and allude to common knowledge of his world, without spelling things out.
5. The Old Testament prophets told parables that indicted Israel's ruling elites, calling them back to God, and/or inspired their people to imagine and live toward a better God-given future. Would we not, therefore, expect Jesus, a prophet of Israel, to tell parables with similar intent?
6. Jesus was not bound by any communicative principles or rules constructed by post-biblical commentators.
7. When an interpretation of a parable conflicts with Jesus' non-parabolic teaching, and/or with the Gospel writers' portrayal of Jesus and his ministry, we should question that interpretation, return to the text, and seek to hear that parable afresh.

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Additionally, the following observations about the parable of Luke 19:11–27 remind us to ‘mind the gap’ between its worlds and our own.

1. The parable depicts a single reality in which power and violence, economics and politics, exploitation and resistance, are inextricably entwined. Receiving a realm from a far country (Rome) entailed receiving power to claim tribute and the obligation to maintain a steady flow of tribute to that far country in return. Direct military violence enforced indirect structural violence, enabling ruling elites and their slaves to take up what they didn’t deposit and reap what they didn’t sow.
2. Following the death of Herod the Great, Rome appointed three of his sons (Archelaus, Antipas, and Philip) as tetrarchs. While the parable could be an abstract account of the reign of any vassal king, it most closely reflects the reign of Archelaus (4 BCE–6 CE) as described by the first-century Jewish historian Josephus (*Antiquities* 17.11).

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3. The subordinate characters in the parable are slaves (*douloi*), not ‘servants’ (a mistranslation favoured by the King James Bible and some other versions).
4. A *mina*, the amount of silver their owner gives each slave, was worth approximately 200 denarii, as much as an average worker could hope to earn in year.
5. Interest (*tokos*): the Torah explicitly forbids taking *tokos* (Exod 22:25; Lev 25:36–37; Deut 23:19). English versions often add qualifiers such as ‘excessive’ or ‘exorbitant’ that are not in the Hebrew and Greek manuscripts. The Psalms, Proverbs, and Prophets refer to taking *tokos* as a practice of the unrighteous/ unjust (Psalm 55:11; Prov 28:8; Ezek 22:12) from which the righteous/ just refrain (Psalm 15:5; Ezek 18:8, 13, 17), and sometimes use *tokos* as a synonym for oppression. *Tokos* appears twice in the Gospels: here and in Matthew 25:27.



The Parable of the Talents, *Lucas van Doetechum* (d. 1579).

6. Neither Jesus nor the narrator explicitly affirms or condemns any of the parable protagonists, their words or actions. Do the slaveowner/king and obedient slaves act rightly, or the noncompliant slave and dissenting citizens? Such questions are left for those who hear or read the parable to discern.
7. The economic violence (exploitative investment), physical violence (slaughtering the citizens), and historical violence (of

enslavement) critiqued by the parable all happen off stage, but are not hidden from those who choose to remember, choose to see, and choose to hear.

The parable within Luke's narrative

Growing numbers of biblical scholars identify striking parallels and contrasts between parable protagonists, characters in Luke's narrative, and historical figures (in and beyond the narrative).

Narrative parallels and contrasts		
Slaveowner/king of Lk 19:11-27	(Herodian) client kings	Jesus
Seeks a kingdom from a far country	Sought kingdoms from Rome/ other imperial centres	Refused Satan's offer of 'authority over all the kingdoms of the world'
Hated and opposed by citizens of the region	Archelaus hated and opposed by Jewish delegation	Opposed by ruling priests, Sanhedrin, leaders of the people
Distributes money and authority to slaves	Deployed slaves in many capacities	Distributes healing power, bread and fish, authority over demons and diseases (to the twelve)
Demands profits be turned (no questions asked); exploits his country folk	Collected tribute; amassed and displayed immense wealth	Instructs followers to share resources/give to whoever asks; friend of tribute collectors, sinners, prostitutes
Appoints slaves to exert authority over cities	Appointed slaves over cities (administration depended on and generated slavery)	Appoints disciples to serve
Feared by third slave	Lord it over others; greatly feared	Comes as one who serves; seeks and saves the lost
Calls non-compliant slave 'evil'	Herod Antipas did 'evil' (Luke 3:19)	Offers forgiveness
Has no qualms about collecting interest	Presided over oppressive debt and land relations	Instructs followers to forgive debts, restore equal relationships, lend expecting nothing in return
Desires vengeance and commands dissidents be slaughtered in his presence	Slaughtered dissidents, prophets, opponents, and potential opponents	Teaches love of enemies; embodies way of peace; weeps over Jerusalem; dies forgiving enemies
Affirms rich getting richer and poor getting poorer	Reigns enriched the rich and impoverished the majority	'the first shall be last and the last shall be first'
Acts like a king	Acted like kings	Acts like a prophet

Merrill Kitchen highlights further parallels between the parabolic slaveowner/king and the devil/Satan, the compliant slaves and Judas, and the non-compliant slave and Jesus. The slaveowner/king claims a kingdom, demands obedience, and promises rewards. The devil/Satan claims 'all the kingdoms of the world,' demands obedience, and promises rewards. The compliant slaves collaborate with the ruling system and achieve monetary gain through exploitative means. Judas collaborates with the ruling priests and achieves monetary gain by betraying Jesus. The noncompliant slave refuses to participate in exploitative power, confronts the slaveowner/king, is judged by his 'own words,' exposes injustice, and suffers the consequences. Jesus confronts the devil/Satan and the Sanhedrin, is judged by his 'own words,' exposes injustice, and suffers the consequences.

These narrative parallels and contrasts, together with the enslavement, impoverishment, and dispossession of the peasant population, the trajectory of Jesus' other teaching, and the ethical thrust of the Hebrew Scriptures create an interpretive framework that renders positive interpretations of the slaveowner/king untenable.

Even within the scene to which the parable belongs, the contrast between the economic vision Jesus affirms and the future the parabolic slaveowner/king pursues is stark: Jesus celebrates Zacchaeus's declaration that he will give away half his possessions and pay back any he defrauds; the nobleman/king praises slaves who accumulate wealth and condemns the slave who does not.

The broader narrative context of Luke provides even stronger guidance. Consider, for example, chapters one through four. The angelic appearances and Spirit-inspired songs of the birth and infancy narratives call prevailing economic and political arrangements into question. Jesus' wilderness contest with the devil alerts readers to the ongoing conflict between the powers of good and evil, between the reign of God and the rulers of this world. Reading Isaiah in his hometown synagogue, Jesus identifies with the promise and vision of Jubilee: good news for the poor, release for captives, freedom for the oppressed.

Returning to Jericho

Let's walk with the disciples as Jesus enters Jericho and passes through. We watch Jesus approach the ruling tribute collector and, with all who see it, grumble. The rich ruler promises to change. Jesus declares salvation has come—today! What surer signs of God's reign! Besides, Jesus is close to Jerusalem. But listen, he's telling a story...

Our hearts sink when the slaveowner returns having taken the kingdom. We are not surprised when the first two slaves report large profits nor when they are deployed, still slaves, to wield authority over cities. These 'good' slaves do not benefit from their 'faithful' slaving. With each obedient act, they replicate the reign of terror and strengthen the system that enslaves us all. How did those slaves turn a profit? In what did they trade? Debt? Land? Sex? Slaves? We shudder at the human consequences turning such profits involves.

What slave would openly declare his owner morally bankrupt? No slave who values their skin.

We are surprised when the third slave does not report, 'Your mina has made two more.' He does not feign subservience, veil his meaning, or flatter his owner. What slave would tell his owner that he, not his owner,

decides what to do? What slave would openly declare his owner morally bankrupt? No slave who values their skin. Who dreams of defying those who dominate them? Who yearns to speak truth to power? Everyone we know. We admire the slave's audacity and fear for his life. The slave admits he is afraid yet, with every reason to be afraid, does not bow to fear. His words cut through the fiction that *minas* make *minas*, that money *works*, unmasking the slaveowner/king's malevolence and greed: 'You take what you did not deposit; you reap what you did not sow' (19:21).

Predictably, the slaveowner/king is angry. Assuming himself entitled to take what others deposited and reap what others sowed, he asks: 'Why then did you not give my silver on the (money changer's) table? Then, when I came, I could have collected it with interest.' (19:22–23). We disciples are familiar with scriptural traditions about interest (*tokos*), justice, and injustice. According to Leviticus (25:35–37), taking *tokos* is

antithetical to the fear of God: fear God or take interest, you cannot do both.

The slaveowner/king does not fear God but *is* afraid. The noncompliant slave demonstrates that even slaves cannot be forced to obey. Were other slaves to take his *minas* out of circulation, the slaveowner's wealth would be scattered. Were nobody to obey his edicts, his opponents would not die. Were citizens, slaves and bystanders to unite, his rule would disintegrate. Addressing everyone and no-one, the slaveowner/king commands a slaughter (19:26–27). Does he no longer expect to be obeyed? The parable ends with the fate of the resisting citizens, the slaves, and the slaveowner/king unresolved.

Jesus goes on ahead, climbing up to Jerusalem. We follow slowly, lost in our thoughts. The parable clearly recounts the wretched history of Herod Archelaus, his ambition, the cruelty of his rule... Might the slaveowner/king simultaneously represent all rulers of his ilk? The slaves are literal slaves... Might they also represent all those *metaphorically* enslaved to wealth, prestige, and power? Do the first two slaves represent Zacchaeus as he was, and the third Zacchaeus as he hopes to become? How will Zacchaeus, how will the people of Jericho, respond?

We are going to Jerusalem. Slaveowner-slaves as dangerous as Archelaus rule that city. Their orders are too often obeyed. What will the ruling priests, the leaders of the people, and the Romans do when the Son of Humanity prophesies against the city and against them?



The Talents, *Eugene Burnand* (1850-1921).

I remember Isaiah: 'Thus says the Lord, "Maintain justice, and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed"' (56:1). A rich ruler promised to give just about everything away but the infrastructure of empire remains very much intact. Yet, we all have influence, even slaves... Are we brave enough to use it? Could it be that when and how God's reign arrives depends, at least in part, on us?

This reflection builds on the work of others who should be acknowledged.

- Merrill Kitchen, "The Parable of the Pounds" (1993).
- Luise Schottroff, *The Parables of Jesus* (2006).
- Elizabeth Dowling, *Taking Away the Pound* (2007).
- George Folarin, "The Parable of the Talents in the African Context" (2008).
- Sylvia Keesmaat and Brian Walsh, "Outside of a Small Circle of Friends" (2011).
- Justin Ukpong, "The Parable of the Talents" (2012).

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Parable of the Three Slaves (1973), *JESUS MAFA*.

IN SEARCH OF LIMITS

ANTHROPOLOGY, ECOLOGY, AND TECHNOLOGY IN JOB, PT. 2

by Jacob Garrett

If you're a lover of wild animals, I'm afraid I have some troubling news. According to a recently published study, in the year 1850 the amount of wild mammals—measured by mass—compared with the mass of all humans plus our domesticated mammals (cattle, sheep, pets, etc.) was about half/half – about 200 million tonnes each.

By 2025, however, wild mammals accounted for just 5% of the total. That means 95% of all the mass of mammalian life on earth is now found among humans and animals bred by humans for human purposes. Globally, farmed pigs alone weigh as much as all the whales, dolphins, seals, and sea otters in the world combined.

Importantly, this is not just a decline in the *relative* amounts: while the human side has increased dramatically, the mass of wild mammals has also decreased by almost three quarters in the last 175 years.

Now, if you find measuring animals by mass a bit strange I'm with you there, but nevertheless I find this statistic heartbreaking. But, if a world where 95% of all mammals are either us or ours seems amiss to you too, the question is: *why*? And when does it become a problem? Is there some perfect ratio which allows for human flourishing without squeezing the rest of creation into the few corners we have left? In an age when we have such a dramatic ability to order the world for our benefit at the expense of our fellow creatures, can we—and how can we—observe limits?

In an age when we have such a dramatic ability to order the world for our benefit at the expense of our fellow creatures, can we—and how can we—observe limits?

This is the second article in a series reflecting on the book of Job and the proper relationship between humans, technology, and the rest of creation. The previous article offered some basics of an anthropological and ecological reading of Job. This article will focus on the need for limits regarding technology in the light of the immense power it grants us over the material world.

Last time...

While Job is most commonly associated with the question of human suffering, it's perhaps less well known as a key source of biblical reflection on creation and humanity's place within it. In the previous article, we saw how the book identifies us as creatures both like and un-like others God has made: we share in the frailty and dependence of all flesh, yet we also possess moral and technical capacities which mark us out as unique, even god-like. As we saw in Job 28, things like rope, a pick, and a shovel allow humans to do remarkable things that no other animal

does: we mine the depths of the earth and seek out its hidden treasures. Moreover, throughout the whole poetic dialogue Job and his friends demonstrate their moral and rational nature as they debate about causes and effects, rights and wrongs. Unlike other creatures, humans naturally seek to lay hold of the world with both our hands and our minds, while God holds us accountable for our freedom to act.

Yet while Job and his companions are mostly focussed on their own concerns, God cares



about a far larger sphere: the divine speeches at the end of the book are the longest unbroken discourse on the creation in the entire Bible and emphatically demonstrate that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is also the God of wild places and wild animals too. He not only brings forth the constellations in the sky and sends rain on unpeopled lands, but he also tenderly counts the months until the deer and mountain goat bear their young, hunts prey for the lioness, and revels in the strength of Behemoth and Leviathan.

Look at Behemoth,
 which I made along with you
 and which feeds on grass like an ox.
 What strength it has in its loins,
 what power in the muscles of its belly!
 Its tail sways like a cedar;
 the sinews of its thighs are close-knit.
 Its bones are tubes of bronze,
 its limbs like rods of iron.
 It ranks first among the works of God,
 yet its Maker can approach it with
 his sword.
 The hills bring it their produce,
 and all the wild animals play nearby.
 (40:15-20)

Matter and spirit, spirit and control

Additionally, we observed last time how every voice in Job agrees that God's Spirit is necessarily expressed in the world he has made. When the LORD answers Job 'out of the storm' his speeches direct Job's attention to various features and beings in his creation. Included in the subtext is that by doing so he expects Job to apprehend something about himself in the way he makes, sustains, governs, and delights in the world.

Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades?
 Can you loosen Orion's belt?
 Can you bring forth the constellations in their
 seasons
 or lead out the Bear with its cubs?
 Do you know the laws of the heavens?
 Can you set up God's dominion over
 the earth?

(38:31-33)

This is not to say that the material world we see is an exhaustive or unambiguous revelation, after all, God himself seems to invite bewilderment and confusion in his descriptions of the ostrich



Above: NASA astronaut Nicholas Patrick performing maintenance on the International Space Station. Source: NASA.

Page 15: Job and His Friends (1869), Ilya Repin.

(why did God make such a silly creature?) and Leviathan (why does he allow this fearsome beast a place in his world?). Nevertheless, the order we observe in the Earth's cycles and seasons, as well as the sheer wonder of the created world, tell us something true about the Mind which conceived it all. Indeed, as theologian and former Archbishop of Canterbury William Temple says, 'the sublimity of nature is an expression of the divine majesty, and its beauty of the divine artistry'. As the Almighty, the maker of everything, this means the whole universe is ultimately an expression of God's mind and purpose.

Significantly, Temple points out that the same principle is true of humans too as spiritual beings. While we do not create matter, he argues that it remains the essential nature of spirit to express itself 'not by ignoring matter but by controlling it.' For Temple, matter is the

medium of spirit—its symbolic instrument—such that 'where spirit exists it exercises control'. Understood in these terms, the whole universe takes on something of a sacramental character, for actions undertaken in the material world by spirit—whether human or divine—are visible signs embodying invisible realities.

This is where it gets uncomfortable though... What are we to make of facts like our appropriation of 95% of mammalian biomass? Or how should we read such signs as the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, anthropogenic climate change, or our erosion of global topsoils 100 times faster than they can be replenished? These are the results of the aggregate expression of our wills in directing and controlling matter: they are a material expression of our spiritual orientation. In Temple's terms, then, it seems we are justified in describing our various ecological crises as a sort of sacrament, albeit a sacrament of our sin.

Humans: technological creatures

The scale of our modern ecological issues is paralleled by the scale and power of our modern technologies. Every day it appears as if there are fewer and fewer limits to what humanity is capable of with respect to our ordering and manipulation of matter.

In one sense, though, aspects of our ecological crises are not entirely new: phenomena such as deforestation or animal extinction have accompanied humankind back into deep time. What's more, archaeological data reveal our species has never existed apart from technology: tool use, fire making, and wooden hut construction all pre-date the appearance of *Homo sapiens*. Good thing too - just imagine how long we'd last naked in the bush with just our teeth and fingernails! We have always lived by technology: we know no other existence.

They put their hand to the flinty rock,
and overturn mountains by the roots.
They cut out channels in the rocks,
and their eyes see every precious thing.
The sources of the rivers they probe;
hidden things they bring to light. (28:9-11)

Accordingly, technology is part of how we participate in what Dietrich Bonhoeffer calls 'the mandate of labour': our calling to participate in the action of creation by making new things from what God has made. Humanity was told to work and keep the Garden of Eden, and we're not going to get far without any tools! Indeed, Genesis 4 tell us how Adam and Eve's descendants soon set about inventing cities, musical instruments, and metal smithing: more technology. Is humankind going from strength to strength then? Bonhoeffer, for one, is cautious about assessing our works after the Fall. While the mandate of labour remains, he reminds us that it is now 'the race of Cain that is to fulfil this mandate, and that is what casts the darkest shadow over all human labour.'

So then, if humans are essentially technological, then the question cannot be whether technology is, in the abstract, good or bad. However, since we belong to the family of Cain neither can

we naïvely expect the works of our hands will be benevolent.

Importantly, there can be no easy separation here between the tool and its maker. It is sometimes proclaimed that 'technologies themselves are neutral, what matters is how we use them.' This is false. Applying William Temple's insights, we realise that all our technology arises from and gives expression to our spirits. From conception, to design, to implementation and use, technology is as neutral as those making and using it: that is to say, not neutral at all. As moral beings, our tools inevitably embody our wills. Indeed, as Wendell Berry observes, 'our technology is the practical aspect of our culture. By it we enact our religion, or our lack of it.'

**By our technology
we enact our limits,
or our lack of them.**

In a world where our technology delivers power over creation into our hands like never before, this means that by our technology we enact our limits, or our lack of them.

Confronting limits

In many ways, Job is a book about human limits. Job is a man taken to the brink of his endurance, who suffers grievously in both body and soul, and all the more so because *he does not know why* calamity has befallen him. The human dialogue which takes up most of the book centres on this question, but it ends inconclusively. Strangely, even when God finally shows up, still he declines to pierce the veil and let Job in on the background the reader has known all along. Perhaps just as bizarre to some readers is the verdict God pronounces on the Friends, who had vigorously defended him against Job's complaints:

After the LORD had said these things to Job, he said to Eliphaz the Temanite, 'I am angry with you and your two friends, because you have not spoken the truth about me, as my servant Job has.' (42:7)

Without doubt, many of the things these three had been saying were pious and true – so what's the problem? In the previous article we saw how a key movement within God's response to Job was not to answer all his questions, but to deepen him into mystery: to bring peace by means of wonder rather than knowledge.

By contrast, the Friends had made a clear calculation explaining Job's condition:

Is not your wickedness great?
There is no end to your iniquities...

Therefore snares are around you,
and sudden terror overwhelms you
(22:5, 10)

Essentially, their argument runs like this:

1. God is just, punishing wrongdoers and blessing the righteous (without exception).
2. You, Job, have had your blessings removed and replaced with suffering.
3. Therefore, you are being punished for wrongdoing, otherwise you would not be suffering.

This simple logic gave Job's friends a firm grip on the world: they *knew* why Job was suffering. Such sure knowledge of good and evil gave the Friends mastery over Job's reality: they had boiled God's rule down to a mechanism of retribution, making them overconfident in their counsels. The whole time of course, we readers have seen behind the curtain, and we know that they are dead wrong.

Living as creatures

Bonhoeffer spent a great deal of time meditating on the Christian life as one lived acknowledging and accepting—even loving—limits. He maintains that what marks out Christian attempts to live rightly and responsibly in the world is the *rejection* of any claim to stable and secure knowledge of good and evil. This is because such knowledge sets up a world apart from God in which we may judge things independently *for ourselves*, whereas in fact the Good depends not on any abstract criteria we might try to superimpose on life (like Job's friends), rather the Good 'is reality itself, reality as seen and recognised in God.' Only with reference to God in Christ can we know or participate in reality. We are not the masters of the world.

You asked, 'Who is this that obscures my plans without knowledge?'

Surely I spoke of things I did not understand,

things too wonderful for me to know. (42:3)

For Bonhoeffer, the opposite of self-sufficient knowledge is not ignorance as we normally think of it. We must responsibly discern things as best we can: we still have to reflect, venture



judgements, and act accordingly. Instead, the opposite of such knowledge is humility: the resolution to keep God as ‘the Creator before whom man can live only as a creature’. This is the effect of God’s dialogue with Job: not to answer his questions, but to make it possible for him to return to life on renewed and richer terms.

Freedom *from* or freedom *for*?

For Bonhoeffer, to live as a creature is also to live in freedom. Most of us tend to think of freedom as freedom *from* some constraint such that greater freedom equals greater independence. Bonhoeffer intimates at times that this is the kind of freedom technology holds out to us: the expansion of our possibilities beyond former limits and dependencies. Indeed, he links the historical rise of modern science and technology to the expansion of freedom of thought and experimentation which characterised the early modern period in Europe. However, he cautions that while this ‘free exercise of reason’ brought many benefits, it also has a dark side:

The technical science of the modern western world has emancipated itself from any kind of subservience. It is in essence not service but mastery, mastery over nature. It was an entirely new spirit which evoked it, and will continue only so long as this spirit continues. This is the spirit of the forcible subjugation of nature beneath the rule of thinking and experimenting man. Technology became an end in itself. It has a soul of its own. Its symbol is the machine, the embodiment of the violation and exploitation of nature.

Left: The Nubian Ibex, commonly thought to be the mountain goat of Job 39:1. Though an inhabitant of ‘uninhabited’ places, it is one of the many wild creatures we are pushing to the brink, with a wild adult population of just 4500.

Pictured here in the Ein Gedi Nature Reserve in the Judean Desert. Credit: Yuvalr.

The success of the physical sciences allowed us to impose our will on the natural world like never before. Whereas before this time, says Bonhoeffer, technology had been placed in the service of some other end—religion, kings, art, or daily needs—he argues that there is ‘a new spirit’ at work in our time which throws off these constraints, seemingly seeking *freedom from* through *mastery over* the material creation.

Yet this is a false freedom. Bonhoeffer points out that simply being free from constraints is not really freedom at all, unless we are free *for* something else. The only meaningful thing to be freed for is some kind of relationship. In love, I freely submit to my responsibilities as they confront me in God and the other.

**In love, I freely submit
to my responsibilities
as they confront me in
God and the other.**

So then, to receive our limits as a gift—as grace—foreswearing mastery, remaining responsible and obedient in our freedom conditioned by loving relationship: this is what it means to live as a creature before the Creator. To do

otherwise is to aim at limitlessness: at godhood grasped in our own power. That is the path to our own destruction.

In chapters 38-41, Job is shown his creaturely limits amid a cosmos beyond his comprehension or control. Yet we may wonder whether this remains a relatable situation today. After all, as some have argued, Job lived in a time before the scientific method: of course he doesn’t know how the earth was formed or understand the cycles of the seasons and the weather! But *we* do! And we cannot be so easily stunned into silence: slowly but surely we are unlocking the secrets of the universe and there is no limit to what we may do and discover.

This is the challenge with which we began this series, and it is real. It requires us to make a clear-eyed appraisal of how our contemporary technological powers and structures condition both human and non-human life. Are we actually in control? What can we do to redirect our spirits toward a more responsible stewardship of matter? The final article in this series will explore some challenges and possibilities for the practise of true humanity amid all else God has made.

Continued from p. 2.

long returned from Brisbane, where we held a Manna Gum Afternoon Conversation, I spoke to the Catholic Worker community, and spoke twice at City South Presbyterian Church. Upon returning, I spoke at a Wesley Centre event in Melbourne on the subject of inequality and economic leadership, along with Productivity Commissioner, Catherine de Fontenay. As this goes out, I will be running a webinar on the Bible and our ecological crisis for Uniting Church folk in WA. Sydney readers will have an opportunity to hear me speak at an event at St Paul's College on Friday, 4 September.

Meanwhile Jacob and I are trying to squeeze in recording a couple of podcasts on the strange history and character of money. Pray for us!

Jonathan Cornford

Coming up...

Public Forum: Religion & the Rise of Capitalism

5:30pm-8:15pm, Friday 4 September
St Paul's College, University of Sydney

Podcasts in the pipeline...

- Interview: growing up in a world of screens and social media
- What is money?
- Jesus vs. Mammon

Check the website for details



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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!