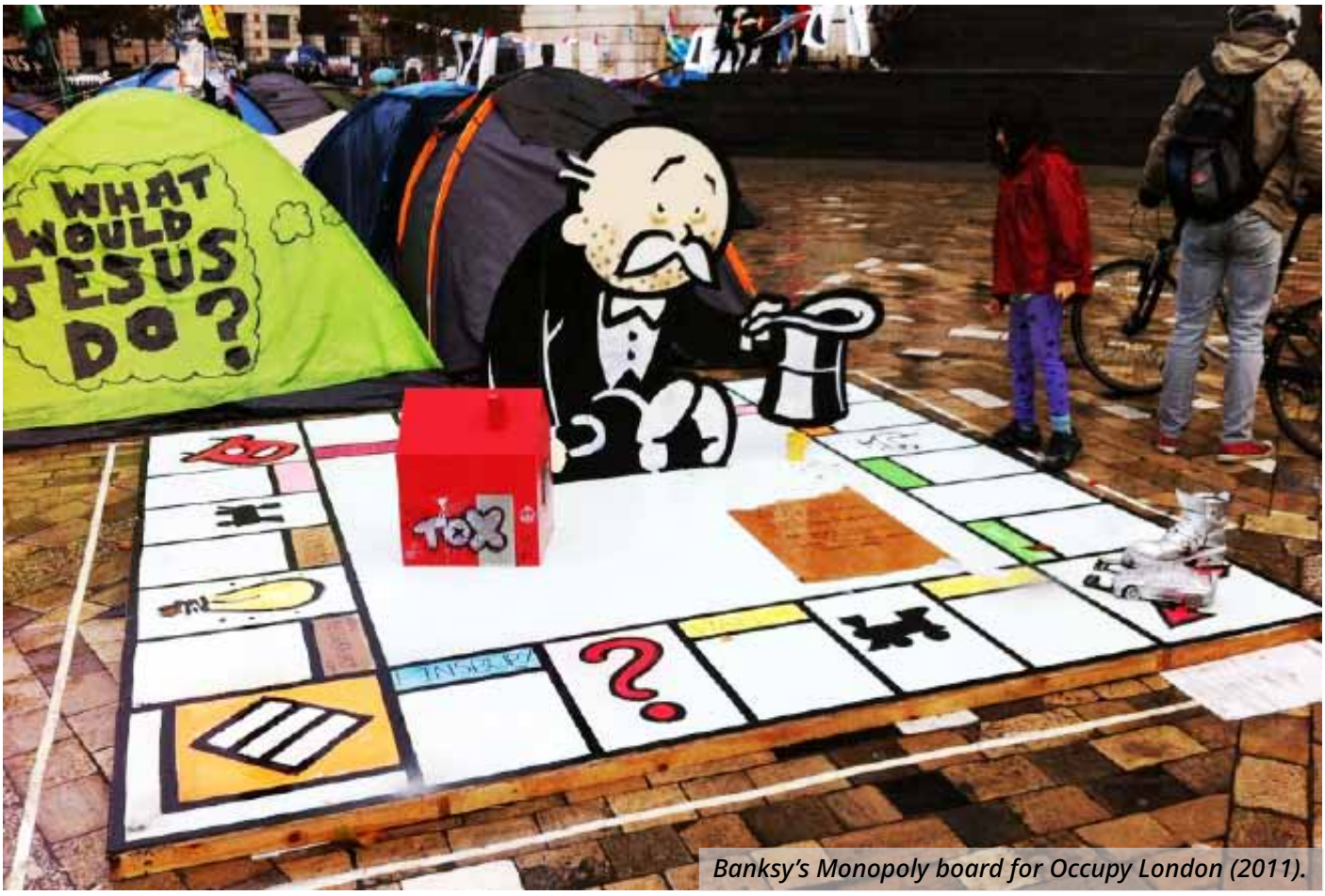
Manna Matters

QUARTERLY OF MANNA GUM

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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.



Banksy's Monopoly board for Occupy London (2011).

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Printed on 100% post-consumer waste paper

News From Long Gully



Our little dam/wetland after much rain.

As this goes out to press, we are at the culmination of the year: garlic harvest time! Not before time too; we are down to the dregs of last years crop, which by this stage, is looking a bit sad. If I was designing a traditional culture, I would place a major festival at this time.

In Bendigo, we have had a generously wet winter and spring, so the vegie garden is going gangbusters. But so are the weeds! One of the challenges of living next to bushland is that we have realised we are frontline for stopping the encroachment of domestic weeds into the bush. This spring we have fought a gruelling campaign against capeweed, which had exploded, partly due to our mismanagement. Lessons like these are a good reminder of how much caring for the earth is dependent on intimate understanding a particular place.

One of the joys of living next to our patch of bushland is that there is an old goldrush dam that, when we have good rains, effectively becomes a mini wetland. This year our wetland attracted more water birds than we have ever seen here before: white-faced herons and wood ducks (who are regulars), but also pacific black ducks, white-necked herons, cormorants, dusky moorhens, and even a great egret. Apparently white-necked herons have staged a bit of a recovery this season, and have been sighted widely across Victoria.

It has been an intensely busy season for Manna Gum work too—perhaps our busiest ever. There is too much to detail here, but highlights include Jacob running a couple of workshops for young people in Brisbane last month on Christian ethical living and, for me, presenting a series of talks in September—two in Sydney and one in the UK (via Zoom)—marking the 100th anniversary of the publication of *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* by the great economic historian and Christian thinker, R.H. Tawney. One of the talks I gave reflecting on Tawney's legacy will appear as an article in the pages of *Manna Matters* next year.

Tawney's work has played an important role in the development of the ideas that underpin Manna Gum, but it wasn't until I undertook my recent writing and reflecting on Tawney that I realised how important it has been.

I first read *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* twenty-five years ago, closely followed by another of Tawney's great works, *The Acquisitive Society*. They had a big impact on me. In *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism,* Tawney unpacks the history of how the religion whose founder taught 'You cannot serve God and money' and 'Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth' came to endorse the economic system of endless accumulation, showing just how disastrous

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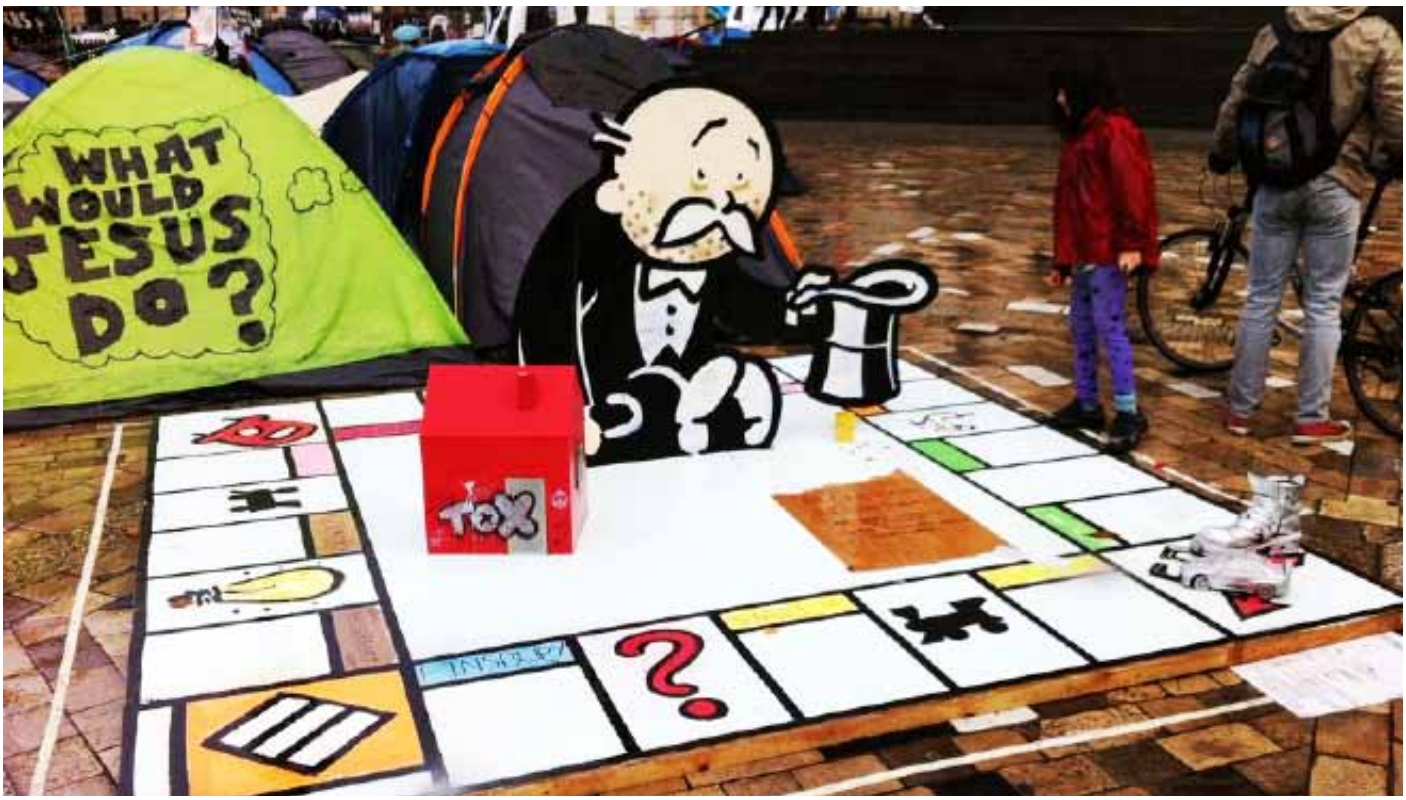
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Compassionate Monopoly

The Kingdom Landlord's Game?

by Columba L. D.



In 1903, a leftwing feminist called Lizzy Magie patented *The Landlord's Game*. It had

> two sets of rules: an anti-monopolist set in which all were rewarded when wealth was created, and a monopolist set in which the goal was to create monopolies and crush opponents... it was the monopolist rules that would later capture the public's imagination (Mary Pilon, *The Guardian)*.

Noting my children's alternating responses of despair and gloating (and managing the ensuing squabbles) as we played *Monopoly*, I was struck with the realisation that I was demonstrating acceptance of a world in which 'winners' achieve economic success at the expense of 'losers'. I decided to change the rules.

We played 'Compassionate Monopoly', in which unaffordable rent or fines (incurred by the fateful throw of the dice) could be paid by another. The impact was dramatic. Most notably, the game didn't end. We put everyone's money in labelled envelopes and held them over for the next round. Lo and behold, we had created a sustainable economy in which everyone kept moving around the board and no-one had anything to argue about. They lost interest. My adult kids now tease me about this, but it opened their eyes and their hearts to the impact of greed and inequity, and the possibilities of a community of kindness.

In our current Monopoly-like housing market ... There are winners and losers and this is not a game.

In our current *Monopoly*-like housing market, we are witnessing a staggering intergenerational transfer of wealth. There are winners and losers and this is not a game.

I must be clear-eyed about what is in my envelope. I am wealthy and the dice are weighted in my favour. As tail-end Baby Boomers, my husband and I won the birthday lottery. We have sailed up a rainbow of increasing national wealth, with free education for well-paid professions and free medical care. We have landed in a pot of gold, created by record-breaking property values and a superannuation system which protects our wealth and minimises our taxes. Many of us are property owners, investors, and landlords.

We're familiar with the description of the early church in Acts 2 in which some believers sold properties to provide for others. They shared 'everything in common'. Effectively networked communities can reduce their need for monetary exchange through sharing produce, goods, skills, and time but bills need paying and cars need petrol. In the spirit of 'Compassionate Monopoly', we can help one another through gifting, loans, or much-needed practical assistance. Generously, quietly, everyone gives as they are able, and we all keep moving around the board, giving thanks for God's provision.

Reading through Leviticus, I was struck by the relevance of 25:35-38. As prices in the suburbs around our church rise inexorably, it's getting harder for the non-home-owning members of our inner-urban church family to be able to remain 'amongst us'. Communal mowers and trailers are one thing, but in a housing availability crisis, what about sharing the cost of real estate? What if, instead converting valuable properties into cash, we hold on to them and enable others to remain 'amongst us'?

In a housing availability crisis, what about sharing the cost of real estate? What if, instead converting valuable properties into cash, we hold on to them and enable others to remain 'amongst us'?

How might this look? Here are some ideas and real-life stories (de-identified). They are presented here, not as models that are being advocated, but as examples that more can be done than is generally recognised. The examples given here represent different approaches to the formality or informality of arrangements, and different levels of tolerance for risk. These matters need to be considered very carefully (see 'Considering risk and legal advice' below).

1) Help pay the rent

Some church communities include this kind of emergency giving as part of their local ministry. A family able to manage rent but stuck for bond money could be helped over the threshold by a financial gift or loan. If things are still tight, a regular supplementary contribution or a deposit in a particular account to be used in times of need might be considered.

2) Sharing the house? Or a 'secondary dwelling'?

Some might be able to manage sharing their home (and expenses and tasks) with equanimity. A home with well-defined or separate spaces does make this easier.

Our granny flat:

Since 2006, our compact, comfortable one bedroom apartment has housed more people than I can remember. Family, friends, their friends and family, couch-surfers, missionaries on furlough, folks stuck here because of COVID, or from out of town with a loved-one in ICU have all stayed for a night or up to eighteen months. Some have paid (because they wanted to or because we needed them to take some responsibility) but most have not, as we didn't need them to. Situations have occasionally been a little tense or messy, but the granny flat has undoubtedly been an extraordinary asset and a source of great blessing for us, as well as for our visitors.

However, you should be aware that, depending on what state you are in, and if there is money involved, hosting someone in a secondary dwelling might accidentally create an unwritten residential tenancy (in the eyes of the law) which may give the tenant certain rights to demand to stay longer, even if you initially had a verbal agreement for a certain period. It is worth checking laws about tenancy agreements as opposed to lodging agreements—the latter do not attract this problem.

A moment of unwitting truthfulness captured by the author. There's a good chance this property has indeed been 'Fleased'!



3) Kingdom landlords

An investor in a position to buy a property outright or managing a modest loan may be able to offer lower rent and housing stability, matching rent to expenses rather than the market. A property might be purchased with the needs of a particular tenant in mind. Freedom to use the yard for growing food could be part of the money-saving deal.

An affordable, stable tenancy (M & kids):

In 2018, after two years of solo parenting, M was struggling to pay rent and had defaulted on a car loan. Her pastor advocated with the bank to reduce the outstanding loan, which was paid with gifted funds. M agreed to make regular contributions to a particular ministry to repay some of this debt. A church member invested in a spacious two-bedroom apartment with a small yard and offered it to M at below-market rent. Traumatised M was not a perfect tenant, but she paid her bills. After a seven-year period of stability, they moved on. The property was sold at a considerable profit.

4) Harness the possibilities of 'tenants in common' (TIC)

The chief benefit of this instrument lies in the legal preservation of the ownership rights of all parties. Depending on the jurisdiction, there may be three or more owners on the title. In contrast to the more commonly used 'Joint Tenants' arrangement, TIC ensures each receives their proportionate return when the property is sold or when one party pays the other(s) out. It makes possible shared purchases, shared mortgages, shared residency, or donor-owners and rental tenancies with buy-in.

Option A) Deposit as leg-up: 20% : 80%

Saving for a deposit in the present housing market is becoming impossible. With an investor ready to contribute a 20% deposit, the Resident 'Tenant in Common' may be able to take out a mortgage for the remainder without mortgage insurance. The parties will negotiate payment of ongoing property costs as per their equity and capacity and may sign an agreement to that effect.

Significant shares (H & friends):

In 2006, H found herself raising two small boys alone, so some friends helped her build a house. They were investors, she and her sons were the residents. The block of land and pre-designed home cost $320K (imagine!). H had some savings and took out a loan for the remainder of her one third share. Her friends paid cash for two thirds ownership. In lieu of rent, H paid all the bills. There was no end-date on the arrangement. No-one was sure what to expect, but that little family had stability in a convenient location near their support networks for eleven years. The house was formally valued for sale at $640K and everyone received their portions, doubled!

Option B: Cash purchase by investor. No loans. No interest.

A smaller start (the Brooks):

The Brooks had saved enough for a 5% portion as tenants in common, but they couldn't manage a deposit or keep up with mortgage payments and other costs by themselves in the current market. Their co-investor paid cash to purchase 95% of the property and covered legals. As residents, the Brooks pay all bills, rates, and insurance. They cover smaller maintenance and home-improvement projects (up to $2000, contributing labour). Larger projects are co-funded. They plan to increase their equity through 5% lump sum transfers as they save. The shift in equity (as a proportion of market value) may then be adjusted through the titles office, for a small fee. The investors have committed to the arrangement for ten years, when everyone will receive back their equity (if the house is sold) or the Brooks may take out a mortgage and pay the investors their proportion of the value of the home at that time.

Investors purchase 100% - no bank interest, progressive buy-in (the Johnsons & Robertses):

In both cases below, the investors covered the purchase (in cash) while the residents cover property expenses.

The Johnsons had no funds to contribute after renting on one income and were still paying off a small personal loan. They put aside 'rent' in a savings account and even after paying the agreed bills, they soon managed to buy a much-needed 'new' second hand car and are now saving to make their first lump sum payment to their investors. They plan to activate formal inclusion as 'tenants in common' and gradually increase equity in what they hope is their 'forever' home.

The Robertses had some savings and decided to undertake a stepwise purchase of the property. Informally, they 'bought' an eighth of the property, in the form of a low (CPI) interest loan from the investor's family company. They will pay this off as quickly as possible to minimise interest payments, then take on the next eighth. At the completion of the payment of each loan, the shift in TIC equity between the Robertses and their Investors will be recorded and signed. In this case, both parties are comfortable with the informal, trust-based documentation of this arrangement. However, for others, formal legal agreements may be more advisable.

> Discernment is required and probing questions must be asked.

Option C: Mortgage rescue/investment

Misty & Aunty Liz:

Misty was injured at work. When insurance payments ceased, Aunty Liz accessed superannuation funds to provide a fortnightly 'top up' to Misty's Centrelink payments so she could stay on top of her bills and keep her flat. After ten months, Misty eased back into part-time employment but wasn't out of the mortgage-stress woods. Liz offered to place a lump sum in Misty's mortgage account for five years, halving the balance and reducing minimum payments and interest. Misty will pay off her temporarily-reduced mortgage as quickly as possible, also making an annual CPI-level interest payment to Liz. Misty can return the lump sum (and the top-up money) from her mortgage account and tackle the remaining loan. As Misty's flat has doubled in value over the past three years, Misty and Liz are considering a shared equity agreement, in which case Misty could close the mortgage, owning 75% of an unexpectedly valuable property.

Considering risk and legal advice

It is important to be aware of the financial, legal, and relational risks involved in any sort of arrangements, and to act wisely in relation to the particularities of your situation. The courts are full of intra-family conflicts in which people have different interpretations of loans/gift/equity. The larger the sums of money involved, and the greater the complexity, the more important it is to clearly document what all parties are agreeing to. Seeking some legal and financial advice is often wise. This is not to say that informal arrangements are never appropriate; but you do need to be aware of the risks.

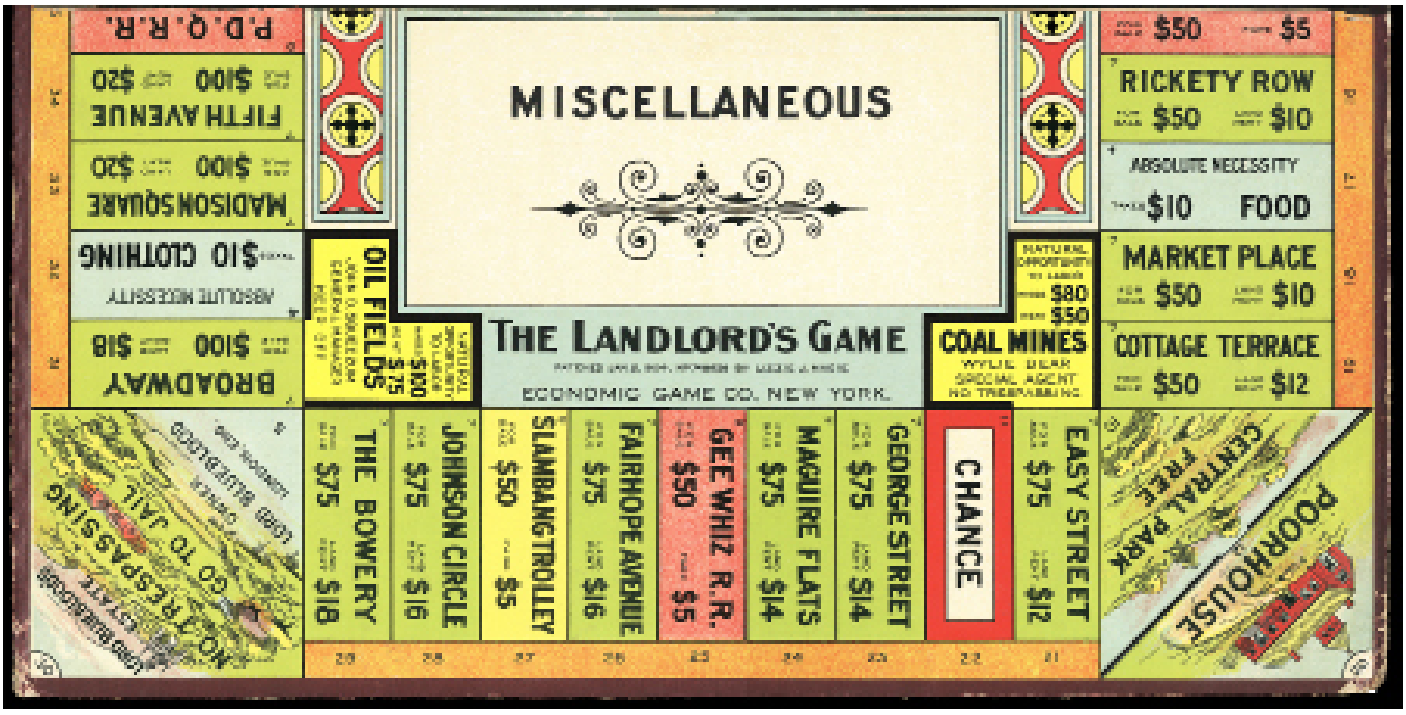
Here are some particular risks to consider:

- Inadvertently creating a type of legal relationship that is not the one intended (e.g. a gift instead of a loan, mortgage, co-ownership; a tenancy instead of a temporary stay).
- Conflict over who gets to decide whether equity is transferred at what times and how the exchange value will be calculated.
- Conflict over whether parties can buy each other out, sell their share of the equity to a third party or force the sale of the whole property.
- What any mortgagee's rights would be, if there is to be one for either or both owner parties, e.g. could they repossess the entire property (and therefore boot out the residents), even if just one of the parties defaults?
- Other defaults or problems where a party can't afford an expense they originally signed up for, if relevant.

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In *Coming Home*, Jonathan observes that 'investing in property can be either the most directly beneficial or the most directly exploitative form of investment.' These examples illustrate ways in which those with resources might respond compassionately to the challenges presented by the housing crisis.

Economic interdependence can be an expression of the values of our community. Making any shared purchase requires sound advice, godly wisdom, funds, trust, a tolerance for risk, and a commitment by all involved to act in good faith. Houses are complex, high-stakes purchases and we could really use some Kingdom-minded



Half the gamboard of The Landlord's Game *by Elizabeth (Lizzy) Magie Phillips, the basis for Parker Brothers'* Monopoly.

accountants and solicitors to guide us through the legal and financial practicalities of this 'next level' of sharing.

Discernment is required and probing questions must be asked. Even if such purchases are possible, is it better to wait until prices fall? Will they? Is it kind to assist a young couple into a big mortgage? Will changes to town planning make more affordable 'tiny homes' (and land on which they may legally sit) preferable? What if the property bubble bursts? How will we construct wise and fair agreements to protect relationships as well as finances? If we lose money or are let down, are we prepared to take the hit, or 'rather be wronged' than take our siblings in Christ to court?

In the face of such uncertainty, can financially blessed 'boomers' hold the extraordinary financial gains of the past decade lightly, trust God, and boldly resolve to do good while we can? If we have the resources to help, Proverbs 3:27-28 exhorts us to turn our minds and hearts to creative solutions right now:

> Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due,
> when it is in your power to act.
> Do not say to your neighbour,
> "Come back tomorrow and I'll give it to you"—
> when you already have it with you.

Having assisted their own freshly paired fledglings into dovecotes (the last in early 2020), home-loving Columba Livia Domestica (aka The Common Homing Pigeon) and her finance-savvy Co-Pilot soon became aware of others who were struggling to afford safe and stable nesting places. Blessed with well-feathered circumstances and keen to find ways to navigate this crisis, they have been able to guide others to suitable roosts of their own. Although flying under the radar, Columba felt that sharing experiences and ideas might inspire others to work together to creatively provide soft landings for other flight-weary members of the flock.

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* *With many thanks to Jono Barnett for further input and advice.*



Jesus, Zacchaeus, and Us

Luke 19:11–27 and our world

by Deborah Storie

Zacchaeus *(2019), Cara B. Hochhalter.*

As followers of Jesus, we seek to live toward the future for which he taught us to pray, a future with God's reign come, God's will done, on earth as in heaven. How we interpret the Bible shapes how we live, and that changes the world—in line with God's promised future or otherwise. How might the story of Zacchaeus inspire and equip us to live in ways that anticipate, however imperfectly, the reign of God?

How might the story of Zacchaeus inspire and equip us to live in ways that anticipate the reign of God?

This is the question we explore in this, the fifth and final reflection on Luke 19:1–27. The first reflection in the series contrasted two interpretive traditions. Most scholarly and lay interpreters of Luke 19:1–10 habitually focus on questions of individual repentance and salvation, overlooking the social, economic and political dimensions of the text and of the historical world behind it, and allegorise the parable of 19:11–27 in ways that implicitly affirm hierarches of power and privilege and endorse further wealth accumulation by the already wealthy. A growing minority of interpreters re-contextualise and de-individualise Jesus' encounter with the ruling tribute collector to hear the parable as an abstract yet realistic depiction of the worlds in which it was first told and heard. The second reflection of the series explored the world inhabited by Jesus, Zacchaeus, and the watching, listening crowd, and considered the significance of the story's geographical and temporal moorings. The third and fourth invited you to accompany me as I imagined myself into the story of 19:1–10 *as if* participating in events as they unfolded, and asked you to imagine hearing the parable in narrative, historical, and canonical contexts *as if* among those travelling to Passover with Jesus.

‘Minding the gap’

How, then, might Luke 19:1 –27 equip and motivate us to live toward the reign of God? As Wolfgang Stegmann observes in *Jesus and the Hope of the Poor*:

> Any translation of the concrete faith-in-action of biblical times into our concrete situation today, will require a recognition on our part of analogous relationships between biblical times and our own.

Cultivating a critical awareness of the historical worlds from which the text emerged, and in which we now receive and respond to it, better equips us to draw appropriate analogies between the situations and contexts reflected in the text and those of our own world.

When you compare the world of Jesus, the disciples, Zacchaeus, and all those with whom they interacted (the world behind the text), and the world in which we receive and respond to this story (our world in front of the text), what similarities and differences strike you most forcibly? The New Testament world was characterised by inequality, imperial rule and tribute, slavery, conflictual land and debt relations, militarisation, and resistance. Do somewhat analogous structures and systems operate today? How are you located in contemporary hierarchies of power and privilege? How am I enmeshed in economic and political, social and ecological relationships? Do our socio-economic locations, life experiences, and cultural assumptions affect how we receive and respond to Luke 19:1–27? Should they influence how we read and respond?

Socio-economic status, and the life experiences and assumptions that accompany it, profoundly influence biblical interpretation, perhaps more than any of the other ‘gaps’ that separate us from the biblical world. Social location influences interpretation but does not dictate it. Awareness of our economic status, and the power and privilege that accompany it, alerts us to choices we might otherwise overlook and to biases of which we might otherwise be unaware. It also equips us to consider the this-

Figure 1

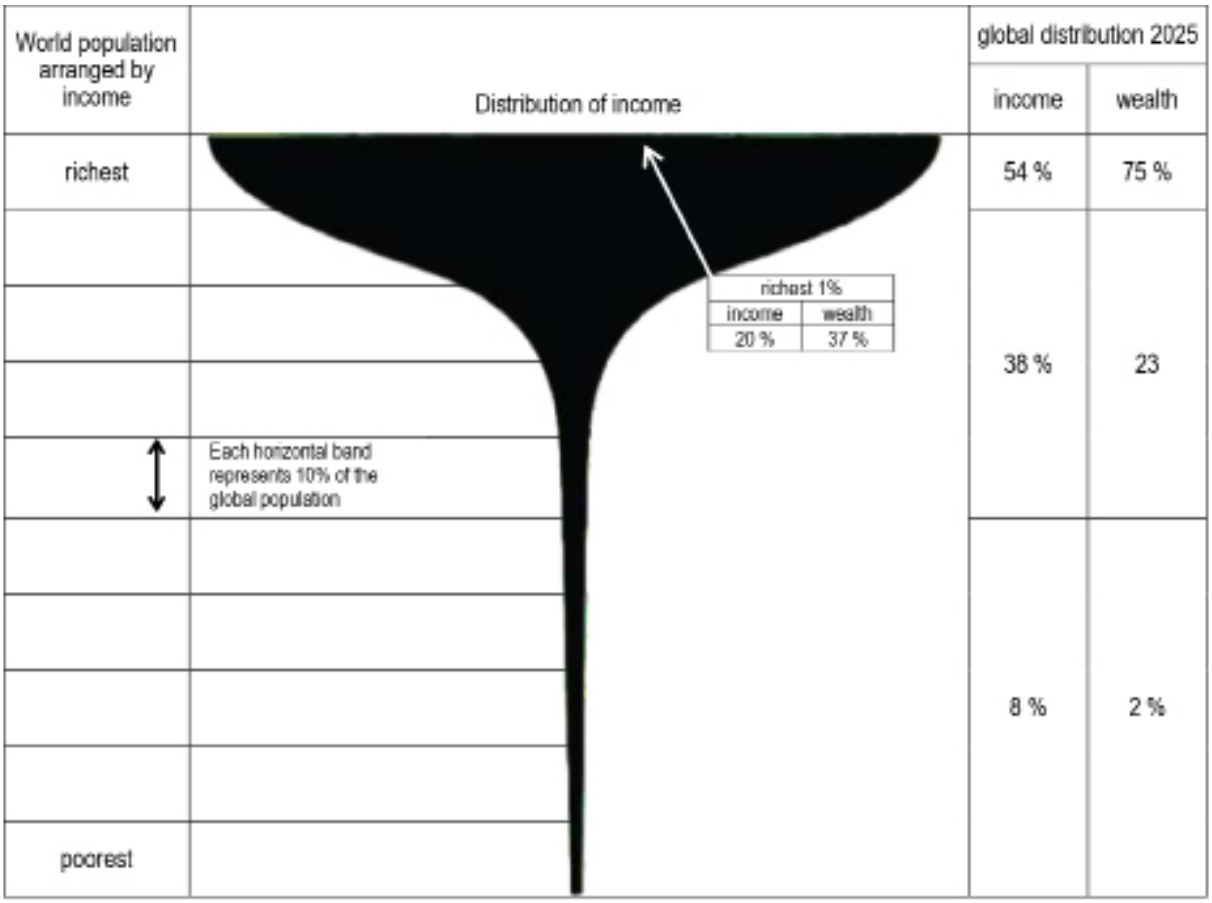


Figure 1: Diagrammatic representation of 2025 global income distribution with World Inequality Lab estimates of income and wealth distribution for the poorest 50%, middle 40%, and richest 10% of the global population.

world consequences of our interpretations, and, hence, to respond in ways that align, however imperfectly, with the reign of God. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks puts it well:

> [Biblical interpretation] is not so much a question of declaring some interpretations wrong and others right . . . What is important to us is what interpretations are responsible for people in our location in our times, and which word we choose to live by today. The ethical question concerns not so much 'Who is right and who is wrong?' as 'What sort of lives our Bible readings engender? How do our lives change the lives of others – including future generations?'
> (*The Dignity of Difference*).

All the New Testament and much of the Old emerged from communities of faith that contended with hostile power-laden contexts. For these communities, daily bread was not assured, debt was inescapable, and unjust trial commonplace. Ill-served by prevailing political and economic arrangements, biblical communities of faith longed and prayed for change.

It is difficult not to admit that I have more in common with first century governing and retainer classes than with peasants, artisans, vagrants or slaves.

Although the geographies, mechanisms, and complexions of imperialism have changed and changed again over the centuries since then, today's world is still marked by inequality (see Figure 1, p. 10), imperial rule and tribute of various kinds, modern forms of slavery, conflictual land and debt relations, militarisation and resistance. Nationally and internationally, resources are extracted from poor regions, and unwanted surpluses, weapons, and pollution are exported to them (see Figure 2, p. 12). Entrenched disparities of wealth and power are stabilized by managing the exclusion of the majority through trade, migration and labour laws; investment and business; debt and other forms of obligation; information technologies and the media; and military, humanitarian, and development interventions. The overall consequence of today's global power differentials, like that of the early Roman Empire, is to redistribute resources upwards to a wealthy minority (see Figure 2). The empires of this world still give more to 'the haves' and take up from 'the have-nots' what little they might otherwise have retained.

How am I, how are you, enmeshed in local and global hierarchies of power and privilege? Eight out of ten Australians number among the world's 10% most wealthy people. The one in five Australians outside this top global income bracket are likely to be Indigenous Australians, non-English speakers, and/or people living with disability or struggling with addiction. Yet most Australians within the top global income bracket feel anything but rich. Within Australia, 50% of households hold only 10% of Australian wealth; the wealthiest 10% of households own nearly half; the top 1% control 14% of Australian wealth (ABS data). Although ecological footprint rankings vary from year to year, Australia's per capita footprint is among the heaviest in the world. According to World Wildlife Fund, if everyone lived like Australians, over three planets would be needed to support the global population. This is no accident. Global economic systems normalise destructive commercial-industrial practices and promote irresponsible levels of consumption. The pursuit of economic growth, advertising, and broader cultural shifts produce and normalise ever-escalating levels of consumption and waste production. We passed the ecological break-even point sometime in the 1970s.

What about the church? While Australian Christians cross socio-economic spectrums, National Church Life Surveys consistently report that church members tend to have higher educational qualifications, hold a disproportionate number of influential positions in government, public services, and private institutions, and are more likely to own their homes than non-church going Australians.

It is difficult not to admit that I have more in common with first century governing and retainer classes than with peasants, artisans, vagrants or slaves. In all likelihood, the socio-economic locations of other *Manna Matters* readers are not dissimilar. Jesus and his disciples lived in the shadow of empire. In today's world, the empire serves us.

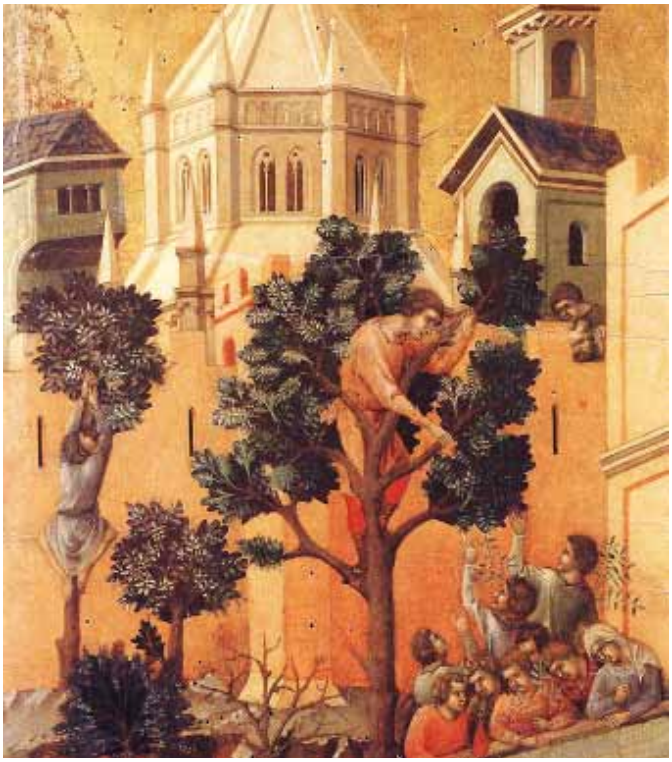
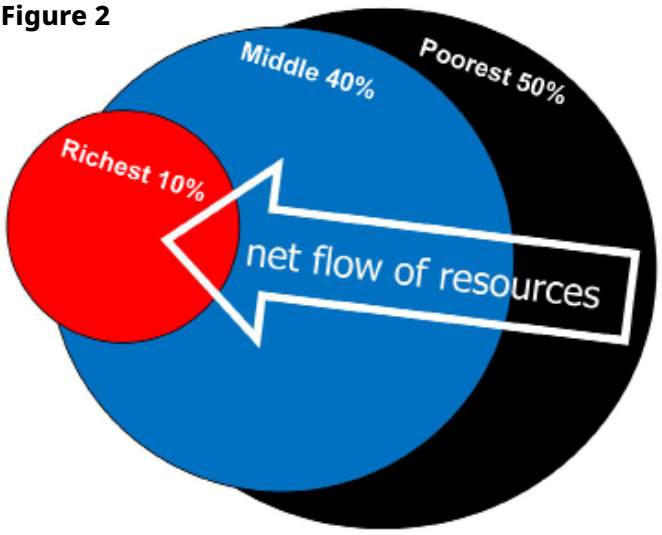


Figure 2



Left: Detail from Entry into Jerusalem *(c. 1308-11), Duccio di Buoninsegna.*

Above (figure 2): Today's global architecture of social, economic, and political relations.

Interpretive approaches and their this-world consequences

Most interpreters of Luke 19:1–27 disrupt the integrity of the narrative (separating the parable from the rhetorical context to which it belongs); approach the text through cultural assumptions shaped by power and privilege (money makes money, slaves should obey their masters); reduce things with concrete meaning to allegories or abstractions for other things (rendering the story less vivid, exciting, and emotionally engaging); and soften the imperial, political, and economic dimensions and power dynamics of the text (overlooking the function of tribute and the reality of slavery, exploitative investment, and imperial rule). Cumulatively, these interpretive habits insulate readers from the injustices and violences portrayed in the text and operative in the historical world from which it emerged and, thereby, prevent them from drawing analogies between that world and our own.

If we read the parable of Luke 19:11–27 within an imperial framework, we hear and see everything being done properly: a sovereign acting as entitled, 'good and faithful' slaves serving well, a 'wicked' (cowardly, lazy, stupid) slave being enlightened and chastened by his master. Read through cultural lenses honed by an oppressive society's understanding of justice, the parable sounds a warning to serve the empire and its vassals whole-heartedly. As masters, we see nothing wrong with taking what we didn't deposit and reaping what we didn't sow. As retainers, we appreciate the master's praise and welcome the opportunity for greater authority. This approach affirms prevailing political and economic arrangements, however inadequate, and is unlikely to inspire transformative action in the world. But that is not the only way to read.

The clue to interpreting Luke 19:1–27 resides in retaining the Gospel's narrative integrity and respecting our own innate narrative competence. This requires us to read the text (rather than an interpretation or a fragment of it), attend to the historical context it reflects and from which it arose, and participate in the story—through our imaginations—as surrogate members of the Gospel world. Reading this way, we learn to listen for scriptural echoes and attend to relationships between discourse and power: who speaks and who is silent? Who says what to whom in front of whom and in what context? What is not said or written at all? Pushing back into the story, we begin to recall the histories of appropriation and dispossession behind events and relationships, and gradually reshape our intuitive judgments about what is probable and what is not, what things might mean and what they might not. We begin to read *between the lines.*

Like the prophets before him, Jesus used parables, poetic visions, and other forms of figurative communication to expose realities that powerholders concealed and generate new possibilities the powerful denied. 'Jesus' way of teaching through parables,' as Walter Brueggeman understands it,

> [was] a pastoral act of prophetic imagination in which he invited his community of listeners out beyond the visible realities of Roman law and the ways in which Jewish law had grown restrictive in his time. . . [H]e tells parables consistent with the rabbinic tradition, but his parables serve to conjure alternative social realities. They are specific, but they are open-ended. The listener, when the story is ended, is not instructed and does not know what to do. The stories intend to characterize an alternative society which he calls 'kingdom of God' but the stories do not offer blue-prints, budgets or programs. They only tease the listeners to begin to turn loose of the givens of the day and to live toward a new social possibility. (*Hopeful Imagination*).

Like many of Jesus' parables, Luke 19:12–27 presents socio-political and economic systems that engender, depend on, and perpetuate violence as a problem audiences can identify, question, resist, and—potentially—transform.

If we hear the parable of Luke 19:1–27 within a prophetic Gospel framework—'good news for the poor!'— we see an astute critique of imperial rule and the structures and practices it promoted and upon which it depended: tribute, slavery, exploitative investment, and their consequences. We also glimpse new and hopeful possibilities. The noncompliant slave is not timid, indolent, dim-witted, or wicked. He courageously takes the *mina* out of circulation, seizing an opportunity to shape a future aligned with God's reign. Slaves *are not* extensions of their masters; slaves *do not necessarily* serve their masters' purposes. Masters *are not necessarily* slaves to their power and wealth; masters *can* give back to those they've defrauded. Slaves *can* speak the truth to their masters. Masters *can* listen and change. Zacchaeus (slave of the imperial system, master of slaves) breaks with the system and enacts new possibilities. The parable's noncompliant slave does likewise. Even if the dissident citizens are slaughtered, the prophetic voice is not silenced. Blood cries out from the earth—*Ishmael*, God hears.

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The parable Jesus told in Jericho confronted those enslaved by power—rulers, retainers, priests, landlords, and tribute collectors as well as slaves—with pressing questions: where does your allegiance lie? What vision do you pursue? Whose purposes do you serve? Retold today, the parable critiques somewhat analogous hierarchies and the exploitative structures and practices they promote and upon which they depend.

Our economic and ecological violence is rarely intentional or overt. Faceless systems and structures take for us what we didn't deposit and reap for us what we didn't sow. What human and ecological realities do our superannuation and other investment statements conceal? If we push back behind the products and services we use, what histories of appropriation, dispossession, and coercion might we find? The land upon which we live is stolen, as were its children. Will we continue to steal other lands and the futures of other children?

The parable reminds us that, however we are enmeshed in contemporary structures and systems, we each have influence and agency.

The parable reminds us that, however we are enmeshed in contemporary structures and systems, we each have influence and agency. It confronts us with pressing questions. How do we use our influence, in whose service, and to what ends? Collectively and individually, will we break loose from the givens of the day and live toward a future with God's reign come, God's will done, on earth as in heaven?

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Wonder & Restraint

Anthropology, Ecology, and Technology in Job, pt. 3

by Jacob Garrett

It's late evening, I have allowed myself to become distracted watching Elon Musk's latest Tesla presentation to find out if their new Roadster car actually flies.

Answer: no... But it sure can jump and, in the words of Buzz Lightyear, 'fall with style.'

Having settled that, it's time for a quick prayer before bed. As my wife Andi (who has no interest in flying cars) prays, I notice my mind drift and something softly descends on me—a feeling, more than a thought.

'How quaint,' it seems to say, 'praying... when you just saw a car do a kickflip.'

My conscious mind may disown it, but I think this feeling taps into a more general atmosphere of wonder at our feats of cutting-edge science and technology. We can do amazing things—many of them much more amazing (and more worthwhile) than marketing stunts with rocket cars.

It's this same kind of feeling which led the late biologist E. O. Wilson, with whom we begun this series, to dismiss the relevance of passages like Job 38-41 for people like us: Job might be impressed by God's knowledge of the world and stand in awe of its many marvels, but thanks to scientific progress we can now peer behind the curtain.

Instead of dumb wonder at the unknown, Wilson encourages us in the 'true Promethean spirit of science' which he says will 'liberate man by giving him knowledge and some measure of dominion over the physical environment.'

Elon Musk certainly has this spirit, describing his vision of a 'glorious exciting future' like this earlier in the year in his Terafab launch speech:

> We want to be a civilisation that expands to the galaxy with spaceships where anyone can go anywhere they want at any time—that would be epic—and have a city on the Moon, cities on Mars, populate the solar system and send spaceships to other star systems. That sounds like the best possible future.

For most of us it is the experience of our technological power which plays the decisive role in forming our picture of ourselves in relation to the rest of creation.

Wilson and Musk are only particularly striking examples of a broader shift in outlook that has occurred over the last 250 years. Our world today is one in which our many scientific discoveries and technological accomplishments have wrought seismic changes in our imagination and our sense of our place and potential in the cosmos. What kind of story are we living in, and who are we in it? Why pray to a God whose mysteries seem to have been solved?

This is the final article in a series reflecting on the ancient book of Job in an age of eco-crisis and modern technology. Last time, we considered humanity's need for limits in the face of the seemingly limitless promise of technology. In this one, we will try to gets to grips with what's changed and what hasn't since Job was written. We'll examine the character of our technological society and suggest some ways we might respond to the challenges we face.



Tesla's new Roadster rocket car demonstrating 'the kickflip.'
Image credit: Tesla.

Knowledge, power, and wonder

More than a few scientists and theologians may scoff at the arrogance of statements like those of Wilson or Musk. In a reflection on Job 38, for example, Bible scholar Richard Bauckham suggests 'our knowledge of the universe has expanded vastly since Job's time, but nevertheless the difference is comparatively superficial.' The more we discover, he says, the more we discover how much we don't know. The answer is to cultivate 'cosmic humility'.

Fair enough, but I feel Bauckham's response misses the point slightly. Arguing that many unknowns remain does little to address the fact that what we *do* know (or think we know) has nonetheless delivered us immense power in and over the world through the fields of applied science. The absence of a single unified Theory of Everything in physics has not stopped us inventing the internal combustion engine, plastics, supersonic aircraft, nuclear energy, synthetic crops, quantum computers, generative AI, and nanomaterials. It hasn't stopped the engineers at Tesla making a car that can park upside down and go half the speed of sound.

Regardless of the patchy state of our theoretical knowledge, for most of us it is *the experience of our technological power* which plays the decisive role in forming our picture of ourselves in relation to the rest of creation. Justified or not, Wilson's confident scientism and Musk's galactic ambitions were simply not available to the imagination of someone in Job's time: they are products of our world today, and this difference is far from superficial.

Wonder what, how, or that?

To be sure, many of God's questions to Job remain unanswerable: who has ever been shown the gates of death (38:17) or given orders to the morning (38:12)? Nevertheless, we need to come at things a bit differently.

The first step is to notice is that God's speeches in chapters 38-41 not only challenge the extent of Job's knowledge and his power, they are also an invitation to *behold* God's heavens and God's earth—to contemplate, dwell upon, and allow ourselves to be steeped in their majesty and beauty. The fact that this is poetry is important: we will miss some of the purpose of these passages if we go looking just for information.



> Does the hawk take flight
> by your wisdom
> and spread its wings
> toward the south?
> Does the eagle soar at
> your command
> and build its nest
> on high?
> (Job 39:26-27)

The griffon vulture. Truly majestic in flight and quite probably the 'hawk' of Job 39.

In her book *Consecrating Science*, Lisa Sideris, a scholar of the intersection of science, religion, and environmentalism, advocates for a form of wonder which is rooted in *encounter* with the world instead of relying simply on awe of the as-yet unknown. She promotes an approach she describes as 'less an orientation to *what* something is or *how* it came about than *that* the thing is.' We might say this is wonder at the sheer *fact of* something, instead of the *facts about* it: a disposition which foregrounds its very being, instead of our comprehension and control (or not) of it. Moreover, she says, there are aspects of the world we miss when we concern ourselves only with what the physical sciences can disclose to us, while the very success of the scientific method tempts us to subtly re-direct wonder away from the world itself and instead focus on us: techno-scientific humanity, the ones who have figured much of it out! How marvellous are we!

Importantly, Sideris argues we need not denigrate scientific endeavour in seeking an orientation to the cosmos which treats 'mystery' as something more and other than just a puzzle to be solved. The key, she says, to this richer and more stable mode of wonder 'lies in grasping the somewhat elusive claim that reality *is* mystery; the two are not in conflict.' Prosaically, we might say that no matter how much knowledge we accumulate, there always remains a surplus, not of knowledge *per se*, but—how shall we say it?—of reality itself, which evades accounting. Attending in wonder to life's irreducibility, Sideris maintains, is core to exchanging a utilitarian and possessive attitude to the Earth for one marked by true humility and receptivity.

Returning to Job 38-41, we can understand God's speeches as partly an invitation to this kind of wonder: *Come, appraise the world afresh with me Job: is it not more than you have made of it? Will you grant that it has its own life and its own ways beyond any affair of yours? Will you accept it—can you love it—and me? Can you make your home here, amid all else I have made, on these terms, or will you insist upon your own?*

Reality on our terms or God's? That is the question. Perhaps the great danger of technology is that it seems to offer us a chance to re-write the terms and conditions policy of human life and, increasingly, the power to shape the conditions of all life on Earth too. As we saw last time, this does not necessarily make technology evil, only perilous. While fundamental to our lives, it is anything but neutral.

Life in the Technological Society

Though technology has always been with us, the great theorist of technology, Jacques Ellul, saw that with modernity we entered into a new relationship with it. Ellul actually speaks chiefly not of 'technology' but rather the character of rational efficacy which technology embodies, something he calls 'technique'. At one point, he describes technique this way:

> the translation into action of man's concern to master things by means of reason, to account for what is subconscious, make quantitative what is qualitative, make clear and precise the outlines of nature, take hold of chaos and put it in order.

The overriding quest of technique is for 'the one best way'—that is, the most efficient way—of achieving some end, given what is possible in a particular time and place. This ethos is the same whether we are discussing methods of advertising, politics, surgery, military campaigning, or manufacturing a car. Effectiveness is the essence of technique, and this makes it very hard to argue with: considered technically, certain methods are simply better for attaining the desired results – something as plain as the fact that the number four is greater than three.

While technique has always played a role in human affairs, Ellul argues that in recent centuries, beginning in Western Europe, the cultural and moral frameworks of societies which kept technique in check began to break down. By our time, the technical mindset—which emphasises means over ends, objects over subjects, utility and efficiency over all other considerations—has well and truly taken over. Whether in economics, government, education, or almost any other sphere, says Ellul, the argument for optimisation according to rational efficiency is now the only real game in town. If you've ever felt like just a cog in the corporate machine, Ellul says this is why; yet CEOs and heads of government are just as beholden—if not more beholden—to the imperatives of technique than those working below them.

This is because in modern technological societies, all problems to be solved must be solved technically, and technique admits of only one best solution. Whatever 'choice' we might think we have between various methods therefore evaporates upon technical analysis. Efficiency and effectiveness set the rules of the game: if you want to win (or even stay competitive), you have to play by the rules. Go against technique with something else—i.e. something less effective—and you will, by definition, lose. The options we feel are available, as individuals and as societies, are thus constrained by technical necessity.

Taken to its furthest extent, Ellul argues technique is intolerant to all limits set by any sense of the sacred: 'mystery' is denied outright and daily proven to be merely what has not yet been technicized. Likewise, the technical ethos is impatient with nature, advocating 'the entire remaking of life and its framework because they have been badly made.' Having desacralised all that was previously revered, technique itself can even become the object of religious devotion where it promises power in our weakness, control amid the chaos, and predictability in place of chance and risk: a kind of technological salvation.

Seeing only means while remaining blind to ends, unbridled technique wreaks havoc in our world through a constant stream of the unintended consequences of its shortsightedness.

As a theologian, Ellul sees the spiritual implications of all this: left to itself, technique will subordinate all things in creation—whether humans, animals, or the earth itself—to its logic, trivialising our freedom and eroding our ability to conceive of things outside its frame of reference. Meanwhile, it persuades us that the benefits of 'progress' are worth the costs. Seeing only means while remaining blind to ends, unbridled technique wreaks havoc in our world through a constant stream of the unintended consequences of its shortsightedness. The 'technicians'—those who practise technique—will say the only way out is through: we will save the world by applying more of the very thing which has endangered it. Some argue that this is true with respect to our present ecological crises and, in some cases at least, it is hard to see an alternative (e.g. the challenge of removing PFAS— 'forever chemicals'—from the environment). Technique begets more technique.

What do we do?

> There is a price to be paid for fabricating around us a society which is as artificial and mechanised as our own, and this is that we can exist in it only on condition that we adapt ourselves to it. This is our punishment. (Philip Sherrard)

Ellul helps us recognise that the shift in our technological capabilities between the time Job was written and our own is not just one of quantity but of quality. It is in large part due to the dramatically increased power over the material world this shift has delivered into our hands that we are facing ecological challenges of a complexity and scale unthinkable by the author of Job. What does faithful and obedient Christian life in 21st century technological society look like in the light of these realities? Below are a few steps we might take.

Embrace husbandry

Every creature inescapably lives from and within the mysterious pattern of creation—what farmer and essayist Wendell Berry calls 'the Great Economy.' However, our unique combination of moral freedom and a technological nature means human beings may choose to *act as if they do not* live from mystery. So, Berry says, 'If humans choose to live in the Great Economy on *its* terms, then they must live in harmony with it, maintaining it in trust and learning to consider the lives of wild creatures.' Put simply, this means replacing mere technical mastery with something richer: husbandry. Berry finds a paradigmatic example of this in the practice of soil maintenance and cultivation. Its opposite, soil loss,

> is a problem that embarrasses all our technological pretensions. [...] It is lost a little at a time over millions of acres by the careless acts of millions of people. It cannot be saved by heroic feats of gigantic technology but only by small acts and restraints, conditioned by small fidelities, skills, and desires.

Truly speaking we cannot make soil, or any substitute for it. To some extent we can build it, but 'we can do so only by assenting to, preserving, and perhaps collaborating in its own processes.' Yet humanity's inability to create topsoil is not a problem to be solved: rather, looking for such a solution is a blind alley. We already have the 'solution' we need, but it requires a different way of participating in the material world which embraces creaturely limits. This does not mean disavowing all technology—which is impossible—or even all modern technology (though this may be the calling of some), but it does mean waking up to our relationship to our tools.

Cultivate wonder

I wrote in the first article in this series about the deep familiarity the Job poet has with the non-human creation, something expressed in a constant stream of images and metaphor. For most of us, cultivating attentive wonder toward the world outside ourselves will likely begin with going outside (though visual art, poetry, nature films, etc. can all play a role). This is often easier said than done: according to the Government, Australians spend about 90% of our time indoors! As I sit here writing this on a screen, inside, with the sounds of cars and planes outside my window, I am reminded of the words of Richard Louv: 'we cannot love what we do not know, and we cannot know what we do not see. Or hear. Or sense.'

> 'We cannot love what we do not know, and we cannot know what we do not see. Or hear. Or sense.' - Richard Louv

Taking our lead from God's specific and personal attention demonstrated in Job 38-41, we might also do our best to resist caring for creation only in the abstract. Even under the banner of 'environmentalism,' it is possible to care for no particular environment or any real place. If we're not careful, we risk reducing both the 'environmental problem' and its 'solution' to a simplistic calculus:

> Motorway through downland: bad. Wind power station on downland: good. Container port wiping out estuary mudflats: bad. Renewable hydropower barrage wiping out estuary mudflats: good. Destruction minus carbon equals sustainability. (Paul Kingsnorth)

The opposite of the abstract is the particular. Which places—gardens, parklands, wildlife corridors, coastlines, etc.—do we know and care



Image credit: Beltrán Espinosa on Unsplash.

for personally? We cannot entirely deputise such care to others, nor can a love for God's wondrous world mean much without incarnation.

Seek freedom together, through restraint

Finally, we need to give serious attention to our own use of and dependency on various forms of technology, as well as our absorption and acceptance of an instrumentalising outlook. Practically, this requires drawing lines—establishing limits on our adoption and use of technology. *Where* exactly these lines ought to be drawn is, in my view, secondary to the act of drawing them. If the impulse of our age is to ignore or dismantle limits, then simply creating and observing any sort of limit (even if it seems arbitrary) is a counter-cultural act. It's also something much more easily done together: a 'digital Sabbath', for example, is much more fun when observed with others.

Depending on how things go in coming years, there may come a time (we might already be there) when more formal 'communities of refusal' become something we may consider joining or starting. This doesn't have to look like the Amish, but there is real wisdom in recognising that the technological conditions of our lives profoundly affect the character of our communities and the practice of our discipleship.

This is also not a binary either/or: we don't have to contemplate a full-on technological monasticism to take real action. What lines could we draw as churches about how we engage with technology? What values do we want to embrace and embody? Which do we want to reject?

Importantly, the goal of such lines-in-the-sand is not restriction as a good in itself, but rather saying 'no' to some things so that our 'yes' may be given more fully to others. If we don't, we will inevitably be drawn along in the tide of the times: saying 'no' is one tool for preserving our freedom; it is one way we can make a stand.

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The goal of this series has been to explore the relationship between humanity, creation, and technology, using the ancient poetry of Job as our guide. We have seen how Job affirms an inherent goodness and likeness shared by all that God has made, yet the rational and technological nature of humanity means our role is easily abused. If our use of technology to manipulate the material world reveals our spiritual orientation, then our present crisis in ecology urgently demonstrates our need for a spiritual renewal: a new way of being human in God's world. Of course, the source of that renewal must be sought beyond the pages of Job, in the New Testament's proclamation of a new human— a Second Adam—whose work is to reconcile all things.

Seen in their ecological and theological context, the dangerous power of modern technology urgently demands we consider anew the mystery of creation, as well as God's radical challenge to human knowledge and power. Can we observe creaturely limits for the sake of ourselves as well as the rest of creation, amid the ever-expanding horizons of human control over matter? Much depends on our answer to this question.

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the accommodation of capitalism has been for the integrity of the Christian message. In the conclusion of *The Acquisitive Society*, Tawney lays out his vision for a renewed church that has rejected the logic of capitalism and reclaimed the substantive life-affirming economic ethics that is integral to faith in Christ. These two books, more than any others, planted the seed that has become Manna Gum.

It is fascinating to think that the ideas of someone who lived and struggled against the oppressions of his time, one hundred years ago on the other side of the planet, might germinate into something fresh in a completely different time and place. Leo Tolstoy once wrote,

> The most important acts, both for the one who accomplishes them and for his fellow creatures, are those that have remote consequences.

This thought should give us some pause, when we continually try to measure our ethical action by its 'effectiveness' in the near term. I take some heart from the parable of the sower, where seed is scattered without any seeming thought for effectiveness. We don't know for whom the seeds we sow will germinate, or when…

Jonathan Cornford

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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!*