



MANNA matters

Newsletter of MANNA GUM.



The view from St. Ninian's Cave, Whithorn, Scotland.

News from Manna Gum

Over June/July, the Cornford family had six weeks in the UK, visiting family, searching out some family history and seeing the sights. Jonathan then stayed on for an extra week to make some connections and look into some options for a possible future study trip.

Spending this extended period in another country provided a very valuable comparison point on the state of our own, both positively and negatively. We were there at the time of the Brexit vote, which was particularly turbulent and quite revealing. British society is strained by many of the same tensions as Australia: economic uncertainty, xenophobic angst and a huge social gap between the affluent, educated classes and the economically precarious and politically disenfranchised. There is widespread disaffection and cynicism about the failing structures of democracy. The quality of political debate in the UK, although far from healthy, is a few notches higher than our own.

The British church is substantially more advanced in thinking through some of the political and economic implications of Christian faith and has a strong and continuous heritage to draw upon. By comparison, we draw most of our ideas and

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inspiration about such things from overseas; but then again, perhaps we are still drawing most of our religious inspiration *per se*, from overseas. The topsoil of Christian faith in Australia is very thin indeed. However, as in Australia, the British church is highly fragmented.

In August, we held the book launch for *Coming Back to Earth* at TEAR Australia, at which National Director, Matthew Maury, spoke. TEAR has been a wonderful partner and platform for Manna Gum's message over the years, for which we are very grateful. You can order copies of *Coming Back to Earth* from our website.

At the beginning of September, Kim led a Home Economy Weekend with students from Whitley College. Assisted by the fantastic skills of Janet Ray and Meg Holmes, a group of young adults were introduced to a range of home economy arts that many had never done before: bread making, pasta making, vegie gardening, compost making, bottling, cheese making etc.

Don't forget, the *A Different Way* week is running in November - see p.2 for details.



A DIFFERENT WAY

A week-long exploration of Christ's call to a new way of living

20 - 25 November 2016

Bendigo



Come and spend a week exploring Christian alternatives in areas of money, employment, consumption, sustainability, family, community, care for creation and serving the poor. The week will be hosted by the Seeds community in Long Gully, Bendigo, with input from some of our friends.

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- Reflection and discussion
- Get your hands dirty
- Meet interesting people
- Cook and eat together
- Sing & pray

THINGS YOU WILL DISCUSS

- Vocation & employment
- Sustainable resource use
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- Urban living
- Community and mission
- Money & budgeting

THINGS YOU WILL EXPLORE

- Growing food and making compost
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- Community development
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- Land care and restoration
- Good food!

Cost: \$100

Registrations close 4 November. Places will be limited, so hurry!

To download registration forms or for more info, check the website:

www.mannagum.org.au

 **MANNA GUM**
— Enough for all —





Setting the Record Straight

The origins and meaning of capitalism

by Jonathan Cornford

Christianity versus Capitalism (Part 1)

At the beginning of the 20th Century, Max Weber published his landmark essay, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, drawing a link between Protestantism and the birth of capitalism. Ever since, the nature of the relationship between Christianity and capitalism has been debated backwards and forwards and remains hotly contested.

How is it that the religion whose founder said, 'Do not store up treasures for yourself on earth' has come to be so closely associated with the economic system of 'endless accumulation'? Any plain reading of the texts of the New Testament and the 'texts' of capitalism would judge the two systems as diametrically opposed. Yet, on the whole, the Christian church has proved remarkably accommodating to capitalism and, to this day, parts of the church remain fervent propagandists for it.

The very term 'capitalism' has been a lightning rod for conflict. The polemic overtones of the word have tended to recommend it to both left and right wing ideologues and discouraged its use by many others. For a long time, more moderate thinkers preferred to use terms such as 'globalisation' or 'free market economics' or 'neoliberalism', rather than the more inflammatory language of 'capitalism'. But since the Global Financial Crisis all that has changed – capitalism is firmly back on the agenda. In 2009, the then Prime Minister of Australia, Kevin Rudd, declared that 'the international challenge for social democrats is to save capitalism from itself'. In 2014, Thomas Picketty's dense 600-page *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* became Amazon's No.1 bestseller almost immediately on its release.

These days, there is little doubt that there is something called 'capitalism' that is driving the behaviour of the global economy, but there is still not much clarity about what 'it' is and certainly no agreement about what to do about it.

There are plenty of serious-minded Christian thinkers who have a strong critique of capitalism, but who have nevertheless come to the ultimate conclusion that capitalism is the only economic system worth supporting. In particular, we are told that no other economic system has been so successful at lifting people out of poverty and that, therefore, if we have a basic concern for the poor then we must accept a capitalist economy. The job of Christians should not be to try to abolish capitalism, but to make it nicer. For example, the widely respected theologian, Miroslav Volf, wrote this in critiquing a book he felt was too harsh on capitalism:

This is the hour of capitalism's triumph, and it is now that capitalism most needs a critique. ... [but] for all its grave inadequacies including a trail of tears in its wake, capitalism is also helping feed and make life easier for the great majority of the world's population.

This is a powerful argument and one that cannot be dismissed lightly. Nevertheless, this series of articles will argue that capitalism is indeed a project which Christians need to reject if we are to be faithful to the way of Jesus and if we are choose life for ourselves, our neighbours and all the earth's creatures. However, to come to this position responsibly, without resorting to a glib radicalism, requires doing some hard work of

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clarifying and disentangling a dense confusion of ideas, beliefs and assumptions that have all been knotted together to form a powerful moral justification for capitalism. We need to clarify what we mean by the word 'capitalism'; we need to disinter its history and its behaviour over the course of five centuries; we need to examine its historical relationship to Christian faith; we need to discern the *meaning* of all of this through the lens of the gospel; and finally, we need to ask what *rejecting* capitalism actually means and just what it is that the gospel calls followers of Jesus positively *to do* in light of these facts.

This is a lot of intellectual labour, but it is not an abstract exercise; rather, it cuts to the heart of many of the most personal challenges of modern existence faced by all of us. Capitalism is a force that holds the world and us in its grip, with implications for planetary survival as well as the spiritual and material outcomes of our own individual lives. If we take the call of Jesus seriously, then capitalism is something about which we must make some choices.

What is it?

Unfortunately, there is no settled definition of capitalism or account of its origins. A common assumption is that capitalism merely describes natural human economic behaviour free of constraints from governments. This idea is often joined with a bastardised concept of Adam Smith's 'invisible hand', to suggest that when people are free to pursue their economic lives in peace, then everyone is better off. In this telling, capitalism doesn't have a history, as it has always been intrinsic to human behaviour; rather, history tells the story not of the rise of capitalism but of the gradual process by which human society has freed itself from the restrictive shackles of domineering government and religious superstition, to finally reach its apogee in secular capitalist liberal democracy. Coinciding with this story is also the story of how human civilisation has raised itself from the mire of widespread poverty and hardship to widespread prosperity. This is, in fact, the story told by Francis Fukuyama's famous *The End of History* (1992), where capitalism and democracy are described as evolutionary forces inexorably bringing about the moral and material betterment of humanity. In such versions of history, capitalism is therefore fundamentally linked to 'natural' human behaviour, individual freedom, political democracy and rising prosperity. It's a nice story, except that, as we shall see in a moment, it's complete bunkum.

Another common assumption is that capitalism merely describes the opposite of communism or socialism. Karl Marx did not invent the term capitalism, but it was his description of 'the capitalist mode of production' in *Das Kapital* (1863) that has in large part set the terms of the debate ever since. Marx made an enormous contribution to broadening the lenses by which we look at economics, for which he should be credited. However, the political project which Marx so fervently advocated – that of revolutionary communism and the abolition of private property – also had the unfortunate effect of weighing down much future discussion with the assumption that one ultimately had to

choose between capitalism and 'the spectre of communism'.

Now, at the beginning of the 21st Century, this is no longer a problem – communism is a dead project. However, this has also left something of a vacuum in challenging capitalism, with a widespread assumption that, as Margaret Thatcher famously proclaimed, '*There is no alternative*'.

To try to see capitalism with a little more perspective, we need to take it down from its twin ideological pedestals – 'the font of all freedom' on one hand, and 'everything that is wrong with the world' on the other – and to come to understand it as merely one more product of human history. It is not some universal human phenomenon, but rather a very particular form of economic organisation with a very particular story.

The story of capitalism

Debates about the origins of capitalism amongst economic historians are almost as pedantic and heated as debates about atonement amongst theologians. Nevertheless, the broad outlines of the story are fairly clear and agreed upon and that is all that need concern us here.

Our story begins in Europe in the 15th Century at the end of the mediaeval period. This was a time when Europe was settling down after a couple of centuries of turmoil caused by plague, peasant revolts and endemic warfare. The perplexing tangle of principalities, dukedoms and kingdoms was gradually forming into the modern states that we now recognise, governed by a centralised kingship. Towns were growing, trade was on the increase and there was generally rising prosperity. I say prosperity was rising *generally* because the striking fact about this period of history – contrary to our highly distorted perception of the Middle Ages – is how prosperous peasants had become and how much the economic gap between peasant and lord had *narrowed*.

In this new environment, a series of economic changes began to take hold, which, over the course of a couple of centuries (roughly between 1450-1650), amounted to a complete transformation of the economic order. Perhaps one of the most profound changes

was the end of the old feudal arrangements between lord and peasant, in which the peasant had protection and guaranteed access to land in return for giving the lord a certain amount of his labour each year. This was a fixed arrangement and, in a time of rising peasant prosperity, lords were losing out on the deal. In response, they began to settle for a new deal – peasants were granted their freedom (they were no longer under the legal bondage of serfdom) and the lord (or landowner) would pay for their labour when it was wanted, but in return peasants needed to pay rents for land they wanted to farm. What had once been a *social* relationship was transformed into a *commercial* relationship. Where once there was some understanding of a mutual obligation, now rents could be raised as high as the market would bear and labour could be dispensed with when it was not needed. In short, land and labour had become commodities to be exchanged on the market.

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The feudal manor system. Peasants worked their own land and had certain rights of access to commons of rivers, forests and pastures; they also worked the lord of the manor's land for a stipulated number of days each year, for which he owed them protection and the maintenance of justice. Capitalism replaced this system of customary obligation by one of wages and rents.

At about this same time, a number of northern Italian city-states – Venice, Genoa, Florence – began to become fantastically wealthy from the profits of long-range trade between East and West. As well as financing the artistic flourishing of the Renaissance, these Italian cities also invested their wealth in two distinct areas. Firstly, they became very shrewd international financiers, underwriting merchants and kings across Europe, and everywhere using their credit to win commercial advantages for themselves.

Secondly, they began spending vast sums on what we would now call a military-industrial complex, developing the new gunpowder technology of warfare – artillery and firearms – and paying for professional mercenary armies. As well as successful trading enterprises, these cities became remarkably formidable war-making states. Looking on, the newly-centralising larger states of France, Spain, England and the Netherlands began to realise that if they were going to be able to compete *militarily* in this new environment, they too would need to become *commercially* successful states, advancing the interests of trade and privileging finance. Trade flourished and Europe gradually became the site of a stable international market. Where once the challenge of kings was to win the loyalty of lords who could supply knights for his armies, now the challenge of kings was to foster an economy that could generate enough revenue to pay for the new style of warfare.

Alongside these deep changes in the structure of social, economic and political relationships, there were a number of other factors that added fuel to the fire of change. The 'discovery' and then pillaging of the Americas by Spain and Portugal brought a vast new quantity of gold and silver into circulation which generally stimulated economic activity and contributed to the new and perplexing economic phenomenon of perpetually rising prices – what we now call inflation. Also at this time, the world of business was being transformed by new techniques. The adoption of 'Arabic' numerals suddenly made multiplication easy (it is fiendishly difficult with Roman numerals) and opened up a new and revolutionary vista to the world of finance: the miracle of compound interest. The

adoption of double-entry bookkeeping allowed a businessman to weigh the exact cost of things against their exact return, thus providing a very close calculation of overall profit. This began to sharpen business understanding of commercial *efficiency* and *rationality*. Finally, closely related to these techniques of accounting, merchants had developed sophisticated means of joining together to undertake large-scale, high-risk, high-profit ventures – the beginnings of the joint stock company.

Together, these changes had transformed the social, economic and political landscape of Europe by 1650 and constituted what we retrospectively describe as the beginnings of a capitalist world-economy, or capitalism for short.

Defining capitalism

We are now in a position to begin to define this term a little more closely. To become clearer about what capitalism is, it is perhaps helpful to first clarify what it is not, as this has been an area of some confusion.

Firstly, it needs to be pointed out that capitalism is not simply a synonym for the pursuit of profit. Everywhere and throughout history there have been people who have engaged in commerce and who have pursued profit. Indeed, East Asia (China, Japan, India and even through to Persia) in the 15th Century had a highly developed international trading economy which was much larger, and in some ways more sophisticated, than that of Europe. Nevertheless, Europe went on to develop capitalism and East Asia did not. Alternatively, it would be meaningless to think of the struggling local fish and chip shop owner as a capitalist, simply because she is engaged in commerce.

Certainly, both commerce and profit are absolutely central to capitalism, but they are by no means unique to it. While it may be legitimate at times to describe a person or firm, or even a country, as 'capitalist', the language of capitalism has its strongest descriptive power when it is used to describe *an economic system as a whole*. Thus, a capitalist economic system surrounds and involves and even determines the lives of many



who could never be described as capitalist. Moreover, capitalism was from the very beginning an *internationalised economic system* which has never been under the control of a single government. As an economic system, it has governed governments and not been governed by them.

This is central to what makes capitalism unique amongst all other forms of economic organisation in human history. In all other social systems in history (whether tribal, feudal, despotic or even the great imperial ‘super-economy’ of China), economic structures have ultimately served the needs of social and political structures, usually hierarchic and military. The new world-system that emerged in 16th Century Europe – what we are calling a capitalist world-system – accomplished a historic inversion: in a capitalist world-economy, social and political structures ultimately came to serve an economic structure that was beyond the scope of any political authority to control. As Karly Polanyi famously observed, ‘it means no less than *the running of society as an adjunct to the market*. Instead of economy being embedded in social relations, social relations are embedded in the economic system.’

The other common misconception about capitalism that needs to be clarified – and perhaps the most surprising – is that capitalism is not synonymous with general economic freedoms, ‘free trade’, nor with the economic ideology referred to as ‘neoliberalism’ or ‘economic rationalism’. While there have indeed been times and places in the history of capitalism when the economic elite have seen it as in their interests to promote free trade, there have been just as many times and places when economic elites have felt it in their interests to maintain monopolies and restrictions on trade. Similarly, rather than just emerging from free individuals exercising their economic inclinations, capitalism has nearly everywhere been fostered by the state and frequently relied on state intervention to assist it (just think of the post-GFC bail-outs). The equation of capitalism with simple economic freedoms becomes even more ludicrous when you realise that, from the very beginning and to this present day, the capitalist system has always given impetus to various forms of slavery in more regions of the world than we would care to admit.

Having clarified what capitalism is not, we are now in a position to say something more concrete about what it is. There are three things which are common to virtually all definitions of capitalism:

1. The use of capital to make more capital.
2. The mediating role of the market.
3. The importance of rights in private property.

The first of these elements, the endless accumulation of capital, represents the governing principle of capitalism. A capitalist economy *must continually grow*. The constant search for growth – fuelled by competition – is the incredible dynamism which has been the driving success of capitalism and has led it to displace all other economic systems. The role of competition in driving growth – what Joseph Schumpeter referred to as ‘creative destruction’ – has also made capitalism remarkably adaptable and resilient.

The relationship between the second two elements – the role of the market and the role of property rights – is what makes them significant. The point about property rights is that they

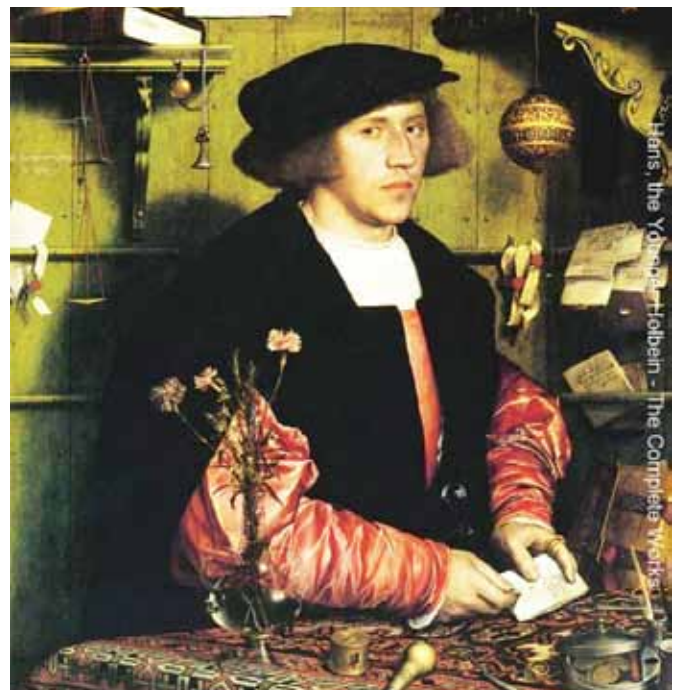
allow you to use your property to produce for the market in whatever way you choose. You can also trade that same property on the market. As we have seen, a key shift in Europe was the transformation of land and labour from a heritage and a commitment into property that could be bought and sold on the market. Thus we can simplify our definition of capitalism to two things:

1. The process of endless accumulation.
2. The commodification of all things.

There is much more that could be said to describe the behaviour of a capitalist economic system in contrast to others; however, this is perhaps enough for our purposes here. In brief, we can say that capitalism is not ‘natural’, it is not inevitable and it is not universal, in the sense that not everyone behaves like ‘a capitalist’. Rather, capitalism refers to a very particular form of economic organisation that rose out of very particular historical circumstances, and it is governed by a very particular set of principles.

The question now becomes, ‘What should be the Christian attitude towards capitalism?’ And what about Weber’s supposed contention that capitalism was a product of the Protestant Reformation? Does that mean that Christianity is in some way directly responsible for capitalism? It is to these questions we shall turn in the next edition of *Manna Matters* ...

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embedded in social relations,
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Portrait of the Merchant George Grisze (Hans Holbein, 1532)

Saying the Story

Poverty and the image of God

by Dave Fagg

Poverty, the Poor and the Church in Australia (Part 1)

Early morning, I scramble up one of the sagging hillocks of slate that circle the west of Long Gully. They are silent now, but once they echoed to the din of huge batteries of crushers and down their dark shafts and tunnels the deafened miners crawled. The gold they extracted made Bendigo rich and turned Long Gully into a bustling township. That world is gone now.

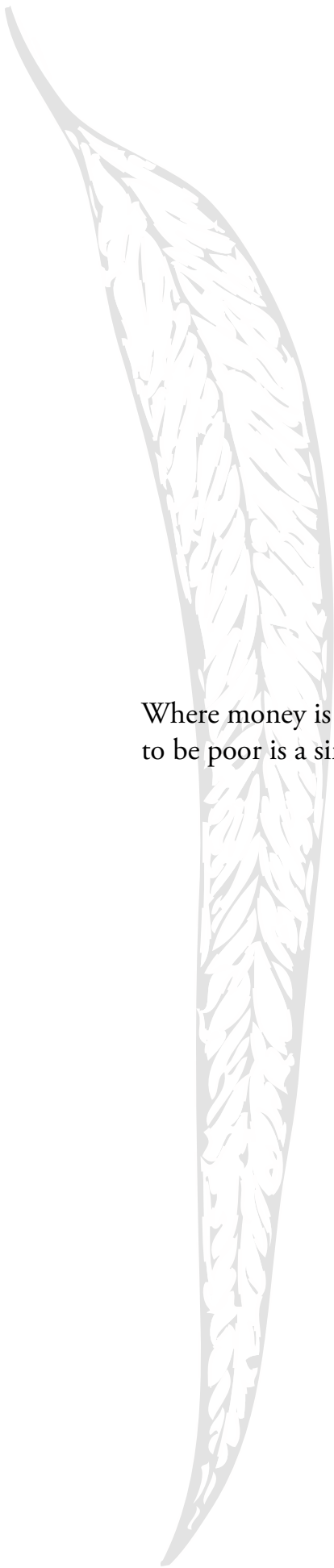
West of Eaglehawk Road, I enter Sparrowhawk Estate, a public housing area built on 'reclaimed' mining land. The homes are brick, some with immaculate gardens tended since the estate was built in the late 1970s. Most of the residents are white, with a few indigenous people and a growing Karen community. Many struggle with the anxieties of insufficient income, debt, illness, disability, unemployment and stigma. Some carry the added handicap of abusive parents who cared little and more whose parents didn't know how. They share with wealthier neighbourhoods a mix of personalities: the vindictive, the forgiving, the compassionate and the cold-hearted. What they don't share is the stress of poverty; that in the land of promise, they have failed. As William Stringfellow said, 'Where money is an idol, to be poor is a sin'. Like many 'sinners', some have turned to salves to make the shame and boredom bearable: drugs, alcohol, violence, crime. But others live heroic lives: caring for sick family, fostering nieces and nephews rather than allow them to enter the dubious system of child 'protection' and giving hours of service to their neighbourhood.

The people of this neighbourhood are often referred to by terms such as 'battlers' or 'the marginalised', or 'those experiencing disadvantage'; but in the biblical lexicon they are 'the poor'. How do we make sense of the Bible's teaching about 'the poor' in relation to the real people and the real places we encounter? Who are the poor? What defines the experience of poverty? Who are we in relation to the poor and who are we together?

This is the first in a series of articles trying to grapple with some of these questions. It is an exercise in situating myself within a larger story: both the story that we inhabit as Christians and the story of Long Gully. This is my neighbourhood and it is the ground from where these reflections spring. Later articles will delve more deeply into the experience of disadvantage in contemporary Australia, look at what divides us from 'the poor' and, finally, ask most pointedly, where is the Christian church in all of this and where should it be?

What story are we in?

I met Robbie a decade ago. Robbie's mother died when he was 11 and from then his elderly grandmother cared for him. Robbie had an intellectual delay and rarely attended school. Robbie's grandmother died two years later. His uncle, though he cared deeply for Robbie, could not support him. Robbie was soon in trouble with the police and spent time in youth detention. Too young, he became a father and soon his children were taken into foster care. He is young, jobless, with scant education and mountains of anger and grief. His story is not strange in Long Gully.



Where money is an idol,
to be poor is a sin.



What should we do about this? Stanley Hauerwas writes:

Morally speaking, the first issue is never what we are to do, but what we should see. Here is the way it works: you can only act in the world that you can see, and you must be taught to see by learning to say.

If we can only act in the world that we see, and we learn to see by saying, then we need to say our story. The first story is that of the reign of God, whose central and defining character is Jesus Christ. When Christians see poverty, we do not first see a problem of policy, social structures or personal values, but a problem of our identity as Church, the body of Christ. The second story is that of the places where we find ourselves, the places where we must somehow live out the story of Jesus.

Seeing the image of God

What is our story? As I have wrestled with these essays, I find myself trying to paint a fair image of my neighbourhood that is true to the hardship, yet does not harden the crust of demonisation. When I look to Jesus for clarity, he points not to simple explanations, but to God's glory revealed in the midst of poverty. The poor in Long Gully are not obvious examples of 'everlasting splendours' (as CS Lewis put it) and it's tempting to put them on a pedestal against the slanders they daily suffer. But for every person ennobled by poverty, dozens are diminished. Poverty has not been kind to Robbie.

Yet God insists that the poor are vehicles for glory. Think of the story of the blind beggar in John's Gospel (John 9:1-41). 'Who sinned that this man is blind?' The disciples' request for a villain is rebuffed: 'He is blind that the glory of God may be revealed'. Jesus' statement messes with our verities about poverty. Surely, there must be something to blame; either his own sin or his family's or social injustice. Such is the way that we attempt to

For every person ennobled by poverty, dozens are diminished.

resolve the trauma of poverty - find a villain and then relax, safe in the knowledge that nothing is required of us. As the Pharisees say, 'Surely we are not blind, are we?'

But maybe something is required of us. Maybe our task is not to solve poverty, but to take to heart Jesus' prophecy that 'you will always have the poor among you'. The church will always be the companion of the poor, never desiring poverty's extension or existence, but simply to be friends of God and friends of the poor, in the pattern of Jesus and in the power of the Spirit. As Dorothy Day knew, the task is personal and spiritual. Jim Forrest, her biographer, learnt this from her:

The most radical thing we can do is to try to find the face of Christ in others, and not only those we find it easy to be with but those who make us nervous, frighten us, alarm us or even terrify us. 'Those who cannot see the face of Christ in the poor,' she used to say, 'are atheists indeed.'

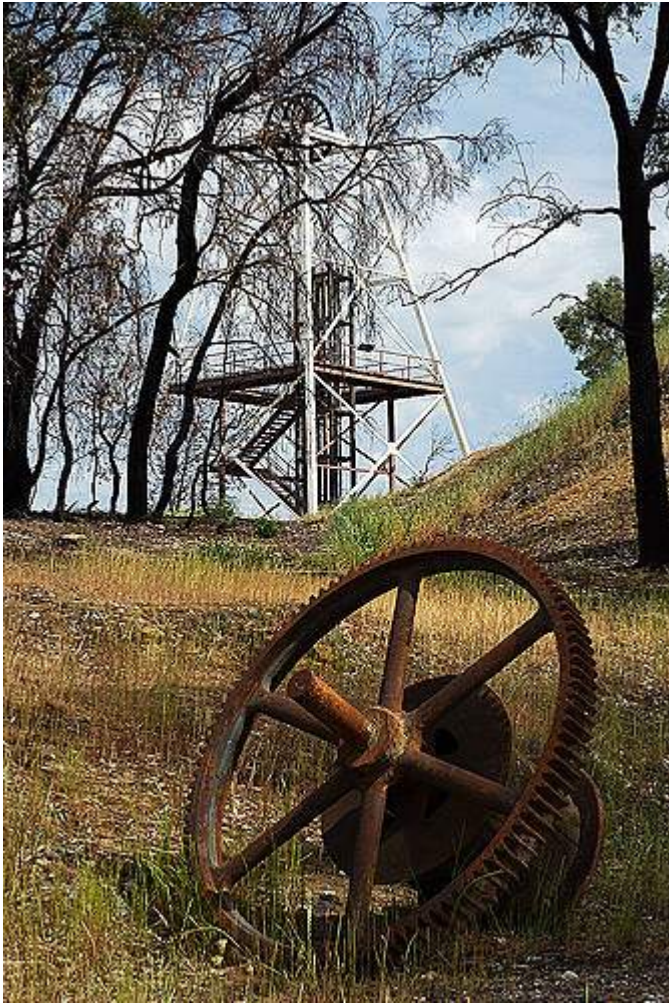
Perhaps that is where the glory is revealed. We all bear the image of God and the Church's task is to see that image in all, to seek out those who have not been treated as image-bearers. The Church is to be a present sign of the future promise of the Reign of God, where all people are seen and loved and known as they really are - as image-bearers of God.

The story of Long Gully

The gold rush of the 19th Century made Long Gully a busy place and some of Long Gully's children grew to be significant people in Bendigo and Australia. Long Gully boasted many successful sporting teams, a vibrant fire brigade and an active civic culture.

But the gold ran dry, its promise stretching out beyond the fingertips of the technology available. Along with enormous wealth, gold had created a large population of fatherless families





as miners died painfully from phthisis, a vicious disease caused by inhalation of the silica dust that filled the mine tunnels. The land also suffered: countless trees were cut down to feed mining machinery and for construction. By the turn of the 20th century, poverty already existed in Long Gully. In 1907, *The Bendigo Independent* reported on the Long Gully Aid Society, and quotes Miss Rowe, a member of the Society:

We help everybody, irrespective of what denomination they belong to...We find out where people are in distress and relieve them. For instance, some people may not be able to purchase firewood and when we find that out send a load round, have it placed quietly in their backyard, pay the man and say nothing about it.

Such charity is typical of the time, when church people went into battle against poverty. One of these was F. Oswald Barnett, whose passion for social reform found its target in the 'slums' of inner city Melbourne. Historian Renate Howe comments that 'Barnett drew on a Christian Socialist tradition in Methodist theology...Barnett criticised the church for not asking enough: 'What's wrong with society? Why haven't we the brotherhood that Christ preached?'. In the wake of the Great Depression, which halted much construction and created a housing shortage, Barnett was appointed as a Commissioner of the newly created Housing Commission of Victoria (HCV).

The HCV had an 'environmentalist' philosophy: transplant the poor from slums to suburban comfort and they would improve

in physical and moral health. The HCV demolished the worst slums and encouraged home ownership through low-cost loans. However, the HCV's focus on social welfare shifted after World War II: the surge of European migrants and returning soldiers led to a housing shortage and the purpose of the HCV became less about the poor and more about those who needed a house. Gradually, the problem of lack of housing shifted onto the 'market' rather than the government and, once again, housing policy focussed on those with low incomes.

This resulted in Sparrowhawk Estate predominantly being tenanted by the poor. At the same time, globalisation began to bite. In October 1979, Latrobe University published a report by Dr Paul Langley which showed a serious slump in jobs in Bendigo: for young men aged between 15-19, the jobless rate in Bendigo was 33.2%. John Fisher, who ran the Bendigo Community Youth Support Scheme (CYSS), said that:

Sparrowhawk Estate, and other Housing Commission areas, really need work done on them among the unemployed...If anyone did a survey on unemployment in the Sparrowhawk estate, you would find it much higher than even Dr Langley's survey, which is really frightening.

From the very beginning, Sparrowhawk Estate was filled with people who suffered the stresses of poverty, along with the realisation that the one road out of that life (a stable job) was becoming blocked. In short, it contained a recipe for a host of social problems. This is not to say that Long Gully is only a tragic place. But it is simply to say that the troubles of my neighbours do not come from a void, but that they have a history which gives them depth and colour.

The task of saying our stories, both biblical and historical, is a key discipline of the people of God in places of hardship and poverty. Saying these stories keeps them in our mind's eye, steering us away from solutions based on illusions, both about our world and about our own capacity to change that world. The task of memory keeps our feet on the ground as we encounter our neighbours; an experience as disorienting and painful as it is hopeful and heart-warming.



This is one of the dominant images of Long Gully in the media, but is it the real story?



A month without plastic

by David Cook

The following is a compilation of excerpts from David's blog. You can read his full blog account of Plastic-Free July, including David's full list of plastic-free alternatives 'for everything', at <https://cookda.wordpress.com>

Is it possible to go a month without single-use plastic? This month I find out.

As I become more and more conscious of the effects of my lifestyle on the Earth and other people, I've made several changes to what I buy. When I was introduced to the Ethical Buying Guide, I started choosing supermarket products based on company ownership and avoiding companies with bad ethical track records. When I learnt about the terrible conditions people are forced into in the tea and coffee growing industries, I chose Fairtrade certification to ensure my dollar voted for a better world. When I read about the effects of large-scale modern farming practices, I sought out organic produce and dairy. After discovering bulk-food shops, I started bringing my own containers to fill them up with dry goods and avoid the packaging you would normally buy them in.

And now it's July, bringing a challenge proposed by a Perth city council: attempt to refuse single-use plastic during July. The rules I'm following are simple: avoid using any disposable plastic, but if you do end up with some, keep it until the end of the month.

Changes mean thinking and thinking takes extra effort.

To get an idea of how much we'll need to change our lifestyle, we collected all plastic waste from our house in the month of June. As we've been working to reduce our waste for the last couple of years or so, we thought there wouldn't be much ... but we easily filled a large tub with it all!

So in reality it's a huge undertaking to be (single-use) plastic-free. With a 15-month-old, and a busy calendar, we've needed to think ahead about a lot of things. For the last couple of months, my amazing wife has done a huge job in preparing us for every aspect of life, including meal menus, baking a birthday cake, giving me a birthday present and planning a family holiday. We've also converted a lot more things in the pantry to re-filled jars (with nice homemade swing tags).

What's the big deal about plastic?

Plastic is an incredible material. The plastics we use today are mostly derived from petroleum and, because of their durability and cheapness to produce, are used in so many applications. Plastic is so good, in fact, that it never fully breaks down. (There are different types of plastic, of course, including biodegradable plastics, but they are not used for most packaging, and require certain conditions to degrade.) When left out in the natural environment, it inevitably breaks up and spreads around, finding its way into animal diets or the sea — having a devastating impact. I dare you to search for 'plastic inside of dead bird carcass' or 'how much plastic is in the ocean?'

That's why we signed a petition last month to ban single-use

plastic bags from being distributed at shops in our state. And that's why we're taking up the challenge this month to reduce the amount of plastic that leaves our house as waste.

Debrief

July is well and truly over now and daily life continues on. We made a lot of changes in July — will they stick? Were they enough to ensure our month truly was plastic-free?

Changes mean thinking and thinking takes extra effort. So where possible, I naturally try to come up with a good choice once, then just keep repeating it. Therefore, after a month of living plastic free, the path of least resistance should simply be to keep repeating it! That's been my aim for July all along: to make lasting change by working on each of our daily habits. It wasn't about going cold turkey, which would lead to frustration and probably not even last a month. Instead, it's about changing the impact our lives are having, both now and for the many years to come. In fact, my honest intention was mainly to be a model, to get those around me thinking about what they need to do. This helped us keep things in perspective and not beat ourselves up so much when we made mistakes.

But July was still hard, because we had to continually question things we'd taken for granted our whole lives. So many times we'd look at a product we'd like to enjoy and have to ask, 'What will we do with the packaging?'

We had started asking this question some time ago, but when you have to deliberate about it every day, it takes up a lot more mental and emotional energy. But I think it's a really important question, one that should be asked much earlier on than bin night. It should be considered by everyone (especially manufacturers, distributors and retailers). However, it's a question that's so easy to avoid when there is an established



Plastics left over at the end of Plastic-Free July.



system to regularly truck every piece of rubbish out of sight. But by holding on to all of our plastic waste for a month, we were forced to face it. And even after so much work, we were surprised to see how much there was!

A month can be a long time. Towards the end of the month I helped a neighbour who was locked out get back into their house. They rewarded me the next day with a box of Cadbury Favourites. Of course it's a pretty standard gift and, let me tell you, I was very happy to get it. But ... look at how much packaging there is inside — none of it even recyclable! Oh no!!

Inventory

At the end of the month, we sat down and emptied out the tub to see what was inside. The broad categories, from left to right, are: household items (broken, or related to repairs); gifts or mail sent to us; medical-related; food and drink; and plastic bags (all of which were given to us).

- Broken items were something I hadn't really thought about before. These were certainly not single-use (plastic containers could be, but, believe me, we gave them plenty of uses!), yet the plastic still needs to be dealt with eventually. Thankfully, recycling is available — this is what recycling is for! It was also a great reminder to choose new products wisely and look after them to ensure they last.
- Mail and other items given to us are generally out of our control. Or are they? In June, we ended up with several envelopes with plastic windows, so we redoubled our efforts unsubscribing from mail-outs (in what seems to be a never-ending challenge) and opting for email delivery. But even so, there will always be new reasons for mail to be sent to us.
- Apart from plastic bags, we received very little other gifts with plastic packaging. Which is pretty amazing considering my birthday was in July! By talking about the Plastic-Free July challenge we had hoped that people would consider our position when buying us gifts, and it seems to have worked. As a bonus, it's another sneaky way to get other people to participate in the challenge!
- Medical items seem impossible to avoid. So we won't even bother going there.
- Considering all the food and drink we consumed over a month, I'm pretty happy with this tiny pile! Still, the few items there seem obvious. I guess it just shows unless you're relentlessly focused on avoiding plastic, it finds its way in.
- Consider a paper cup of hot chips: at first glance it seems perfect, until you look closer and realise it has a plastic lining.
- And almost every piece of fruit we bought has a little plastic sticker on it. Presumably this is to hide blemishes more than anything — do I really need to be told that a green apple is a Granny Smith?
- Plastic bags: it just goes to show how entrenched they are in our society. Even when we were trying our hardest to be prepared and avoid situations where we'd need them, we were still handed them numerous times.
- We usually wash and re-use any type of plastic bag, for example, at the bakery for a new loaf of bread. But we are growing weary of dealing with all this plastic and are finding alternatives for more and more things. We now have five home-made cloth bags for our bread which are working great.

After going through it together, my wife and I discussed whether we could realistically aim to reduce this pile to nothing. We

agreed that some things would be staying. We'll keep using band-aids, pain-killers and prescribed medication. I needed to fix that broken window blind and if that meant ordering a part to be shipped in bubble-wrap from Hong Kong, then so be it. There's no way we would have taken that cute balloon dog away from our daughter. And that bucket of hot chips? It was totally worth it.

Lessons learnt

We had to come up with so many alternatives for our daily lives, and feel like we've achieved so much. Look out for a future post with a complete list of plastic-free alternatives for every household product.

One thing we learnt was to savour the old ways of doing things (for example, cooking a meal from raw ingredients), which are more satisfying in the end.

As I've alluded, we also learnt that plastic is in more places than you might expect! We were particularly challenged by packaging made with a mix of materials (plastic, foil, paper). Things such as milk cartons are labelled as recyclable, but they require specialised facilities and more energy to process, which now makes us think twice.

We realised just how much we don't know about how recycling works and still have many unanswered questions. We hope to go on a tour of a recycling plant one day, but so far haven't had the time to organise one.

So we were very happy and proud of our almost plastic-free July, but come 1 August, there were some things we full well knew we would be eating: Weet-Bix. Pasta. And Cadbury Favourites. Mmmm...

One thing we learnt was to savour the old ways of doing things



Dave, Anna & Evelyn.



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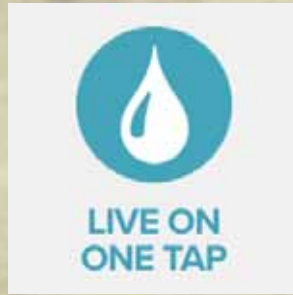
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POST: 27 Albert Street, Long Gully VIC 3550

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Manna Gum is an independent non-profit organisation that seeks to:

1. *Help Christians reclaim and practise Biblical teaching on material life; and*
2. *Promote understanding of the ways our economic lives impact upon ourselves, others and the earth.*

Manna Gum is motivated by a vision of renewal of the Church in Australia as an alternative community that witnesses to the Kingdom of God.

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