

# MANNA matters

Newsletter of MANNA GUM.

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*"The way ahead to a truly lively Christian Church must be paved with genuinely unselfish service." Bill Cornford (1933-2021)*

## News from Long Gully

Since the last edition there have been two major events in my life: the first has been something of a transformative experience, which I reflect upon in a brief article here; and the second was the death of my father, Bill Cornford. Dad was 88 and struggling with Alzheimers, and in the end his passing was perhaps a mercy. Dad's (and Mum's) faith and life choices have significantly influenced my own. Dad was an ordained minister who always chose to place himself at the margins of the church where he could be of service to those at the margins in the world. He and Mum began ministry in urban mission in the downtrodden docklands of London's East End, where my brother and I were born. The bulk of his ministry (25 years) was spent in the Uniting Church Frontier Services, visiting remote sheep and cattle stations and communities in WA, then Nth Qld, and then Tassie. Dad's ministry was based on the conviction that Christian faith needed to be expressed in the practicalities of everyday life, a conviction that has been central to Manna Gum.

Manna Gum's work has continued steadily. Jacob Garrett has done a great job in compiling this edition and I have been mostly researching and writing for my thesis, interspersed with the odd teaching for TEAR or lectures for various universities. My current research has been case studies of how different Christian traditions in Australia have responded to capitalism, particularly Catholicism, the Uniting Church and the Radical Discipleship movement. I hope to share some of these insights in *Manna Matters* in the near future.

Registrations for the *A Different Way* course are beginning to fill, so if you want to come along, get yours in quick (see back page).

**Jonathan Cornford**



# An Experience of Resurrection

by Jonathan Cornford

A few weeks ago I found myself skiing down one of the steeper slopes at Falls Creek, my first time in 25 years. I remember thinking, “Wow, I can’t believe I am doing this”, just before I stacked it, massively and inelegantly. But the whole thing, stack included, was an experience of joy. Despite my reservations about skiing being the recreation of the affluent, it *is* bloody fun. But the even greater source of joy was the fact that I had been able to take my daughters on this adventure.

Not so long ago I was convinced I would never ski again – along with many other activities — due to a chronic back problem that seemed to be getting worse. This was a source of multiple griefs for me, keeping from me the activities that bring me joy, from sharing them with my daughters, and frustrating and limiting my work, both at home and for Manna Gum. But in the last few months all that has turned around: I’m chopping wood, playing tennis, climbing and working without discomfort. ‘It’s like a miracle’, Kim said to me. Actually, considering it began just after Easter, it has been something like a resurrection.

The revolution in my life has come through undertaking a course in ‘retraining my brain’. I won’t try and explain it in the short space I have here, suffice to say that the course utilises the growing scientific understanding of pain, neuroplasticity, the nervous system and endocrine system (hormones). In short, the more we learn, the more we confirm that the mind and body are fully integrated, each powerfully influencing the other: our mental and emotional states play out in our bodies and vice versa. What has perhaps not been properly recognised, though, is that there is a spiritual dimension to all of this.

I realised long ago that my back problems had some sort of relationship to my spiritual and emotional life, but I didn’t know what to do about it. The last seven years I have been in what the psalmists call ‘the Pit’. The dominant life theme for me over this time was seeing, again and again, and with ever deeper clarity, the brokenness of the world. In some ways, this has been central to my work: to try and understand things such as ecological crisis, economic injustice, political corruption and social breakdown, not just separately, but how they relate together. The deeper one looks, the deeper one is gripped by the tragedy of human sin; and it was clear that the tragedy was not just ‘out there’, but also in my own life, in my own repeated failures to love as I have been loved. Everywhere I looked I saw that life was a vale of tears.

I will not resile from either this work or these insights – they are fundamentally necessary for seeing into our condition. They are indeed *true*, but they are not *the whole truth*.

I had become trapped in a place of grief and despair and that manifested in chronic back pain. In an almost literal sense, I was embodying the pain of the world. Perhaps, in the mysterious economy of God, this was a necessary experience for me; or perhaps it was merely a product of my own mulishness; or perhaps both, who knows? But by early this year it was no longer tenable: I had come to the end of my tether and something had to give. And it did give.

I can’t fully explain what happened. The ‘brain retraining’ course I mentioned was the occasion for effecting a transformation, but it would have been useless without an underlying shift. For me, that came through Romans 8:

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death. [...] To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. (Rom 8:1-6)

For some reason, although I had been praying for it for seven years, this Easter I had something of a spiritual rebirth, a new touch of the Holy Spirit. For some reason, this Easter the words ‘There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus’ unlocked my sense of being trapped in the tragedy of sin and allowed the Spirit of Life to flow. And with it, my body has begun to flow again in the fearful and wonderful ways in which it was designed.

This life is indeed a vale of tears and we should not try to minimise that reality. But the wonder of Easter is that new life springs even in the midst of despair. As I have been refocussed from the brokenness of things (‘the flesh’) towards the work of the Spirit, I have been reminded that as well as pain, this life is punctuated by beauty and joy that is just as sharp and just as inexpressible. In a world of radical climate change we will need such insights. As we come to terms with a rapidly changing world, spiritual life really matters.



Jonathan with daughters Amy and Mhairi, and friend Talitha.



# Beauty and the Beast

## Violence & Economics in the Book of Revelation Part 3: The Lamb and the Witness of the Cross

by Matthew Anslow

In the previous two instalments of this series, I have argued that the Book of Revelation, far from being a book focused on a future 'end-time', is concerned with the historical condition of oppression faced by some Christians sometime toward the end of the first century. The book uses strange symbols to reveal to its audience God's perspective their current situation of suffering.

I have also discussed two of the malevolent characters that appear in the Book of Revelation: the Beast (Revelation 13) and the Great Prostitute (Revelation 17–18). The first, I've argued, represents the military might and violence of the Roman Empire, the second its luxury and economic exploitation. It is not difficult to imagine how such characters might function in a book written to communities of early Christians facing oppression and marginalisation at the hands of that very empire, or wrestling with the temptation to conform to its ways.

Revelation's depiction of these characters forms a critique that is undoubtedly powerful and illuminating. But critique does not on its own constitute faithful discipleship, nor does it unilaterally lead to hope or change. There must also be an embodied alternative, the substance of a different way, or at least a sign pointing in its direction.

With this in mind, what alternative does Revelation provide to the Beast and the Prostitute? What hope do we have in the midst of a world of violence and greed?

### Out of empire: The Lamb as a model then and now

Something worth recognising before going further is that, though Revelation is critiquing the Roman Empire, Rome is merely the manifestation of empire that is current at the time of Revelation's audience. In other words, the social and political reality to which Revelation is responding is not limited to one time period but is an ongoing reality in our world. 'Beasts' and 'Prostitutes' are not once-off realities, but can be discerned in many places at many points in history.

The challenge for us is to identify such realities and 'come out' of them, as Revelation insists (18:4). If we are called to come out of empire, what does this mean exactly? What models does John provide that we might follow?

Perhaps the most important image that Revelation offers as an alternative to the powerful and monstrous Beast and the seductive and inebriating Prostitute is the Lamb in Revelation 5.

We are first introduced to the Lamb when John is weeping because no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was

What alternative does Revelation provide to the Beast and the Prostitute? What hope do we have in the midst of a world of violence and greed?

able to open the scroll in God's hand (5:1–4). One of the elders says to John, 'Weep no more; behold the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and the seven seals' (5:5). By this description, which John *hears*, we are led to expect a lion, as many in Israel had expected—a nationalistic warrior messiah, a militaristic conqueror as envisioned throughout the history of Israel (like David), who will win God's victory.

This expectation is turned upside-down when what John sees contrasts to what he heard. The conqueror is not a mighty lion at all, but a lamb who has been slain (5:6). The death and resurrection of this Lamb is, as John will learn, how God's victory is embodied.

This image shakes up the assumption that God will be victorious through lion-like violence and power. It is the Lamb's *sacrificial death* that has ransomed the people from *all* nations (5:9)—the militaristic and nationalistic overtones are muted. Strangely enough, sacrificial death for others is the means by which God will conquer the world. This is a theme that will run throughout Revelation.

There are no doubt countless implications we could draw from the image of the Lamb. There are a few that I'd like to explore.

## 1. The Lamb tells us about what God is like

The portrayal of the Lamb is central to how Revelation portrays Christ. Indeed, given that the book equates Jesus with God (Rev 1:17–18, 'the first and the last', cf. 1:8), the portrayal of the Lamb can be said to be central to how Revelation portrays God. I don't think it's an understatement to suggest that the image of the Lamb is of great theological importance. If we want to know what God is like, we look at Jesus, the slain Lamb. God's nature, according to Revelation, is like the crucified Christ.

(This raises the obvious question regarding portrayals of divine violence in Revelation. While there is no space here to engage deeply with these apocalyptic-style images, what can be said is that we must view these portrayals of divine violence through the lens of the slain Lamb, the paradigmatic image of Christ in the book. They should also be viewed in light of the apocalyptic genre of the book which, as I outlined in the first instalment of this series, depicts things symbolically rather than literally.)

Given Christ is equated with God, it is unsurprising that worship forms a central theme in Revelation, particularly chapter 5. There, those in heaven fall before the Lamb in worship, as they do before God, and proclaim his glory.

There are many things we could say about worship, but two are striking in the context of Revelation. First,



Adoration of the Mystic Lamb, *bottom center panel*, by Jan van Eyck, *Ghent Altarpiece*, completed 1432.



worship is mimetic. By this I mean that we invariably conform to the image of that which we worship (as the saying goes, ‘you become like what you worship’). Revelation never says this explicitly, but it is assumed on every page. Idolatry is a problem, and indeed is forbidden, because the worship of idols leads to the distortion of the person in the image of the idol. To worship the Beast is to become like the Beast. To worship the Lamb, however, is to become like the Lamb, which is to become like God.

If worship is mimetic, our understanding of the nature of God and Christ is extremely important since distorted notions of God will lead to distorted worshippers. Revelation—in a way that would be shocking to us if not for the dulling effect of our familiarity—depicts worship first and foremost as glory and honour being directed toward a slaughtered Lamb who is the image of the divine. Moreover, it expects us to conform to this image as those who worship the Lamb.

Second, such worship is subversive.

Consider the content of the doxologies (short hymns of praise) in Revelation: they glorify God, yes, but they also challenge all other claims to sovereignty. For example:

‘Worthy are you **Lord** God, to receive glory and honour and power, for **you created all things**, and **by your will** they existed and were created.’ (4:11)

‘Worthy are you [the Lamb] to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from **every** tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a **kingdom** and priests to our God, and **they shall reign on the earth.**’ (5:9–10)

These are not merely pious statements; they are deeply political, challenging the claims to sovereignty and power of Rome and its emperor. The caesars, after all, claimed descent from the creators of Rome, saviourhood of the world, and lordship over all. They also demanded the loyalty (*pistis*; ‘faith’) of every tribe and nation under their dominion.

The worship of the saints in Revelation, however, subverts all such claims. It names the Lamb as the one by whose will all things were created, as the one who saves the world, and as the Lord of a kingdom that shall reign over the whole world. In urging the worship of this figure, and thus conformity to its image, Revelation is pointing to a completely new way of being human, shaped not by Roman power but by divine sacrifice.

## 2. The Lamb is the model for all disciples (or, ‘Witness Wins’)

One of Rome’s key myths was *Victoria*. Victoria was the goddess of (you guessed it) victory. She was particularly revered by the Roman military, for obvious reasons. It was thought that the Empire was founded on victory and that this was how order and prosperity were maintained. *Victoria*, then, was intimately related to the myth of *Pax Romana* (the so-called ‘Roman peace,’ discussed in Part 1), a peace that was established on military conquest.

The early Christians, in contrast, worshipped a crucified person. They had a counter-myth about what entailed true victory. What, for them, constituted such victory?

In Revelation 1:5, Jesus Christ is called ‘the faithful witness’ (also 1:2, 9; 3:14). Likewise, the most important title given to his followers in Revelation is ‘witnesses’ (*martyrs*; ‘martyr’). These followers hold ‘the witness (testimony)

of Jesus’ (1:2, 9; 12:11, 17; 19:10; 20:4). This does not only mean that they witness about Jesus, but also that they bear the same testimony that Jesus himself bore, namely a witness to God and God’s kingdom over-against all other claimants to sovereignty and victory.

The image of faithful witnesses is most powerful in Revelation 11. The two witnesses here are implied to be Elijah (‘They have the power to shut the sky, that no rain may fall during the days of their prophesying’; v.6) and

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Detail of the Agnus Dei, central chancel ceiling medallion of the Basilica of San Vitale, Ravenna, Italy, mid sixth century.



Two Witnesses to be Unbound, *Mortier's Bible* (1700), Phillip Medhurst Collection.

Moses ('they have power over the waters to turn them into blood and to strike the earth with every kind of plague, as often as they desire'; v.6). These two were the paradigmatic prophets and witnesses of the Old Testament. Further, in the Old Testament two witnesses were required for a truthful (faithful) testimony in a legal setting. It is no coincidence, then, that Revelation depicts two witnesses; indeed, witnesses as reputable as Elijah and Moses.

The two witnesses give their testimony and are then killed by the Beast, who comes to make war on them (11:7). The empire's actions, in other words, reflects its commitment to *Victoria*—peace and order by military conquest.

The bodies of the two witnesses lie in the street of the great city (11:8). They are not given a proper burial, that is, they are shamed and humiliated (as in near-Eastern culture; 11:9). The people of the earth rejoice over their deaths because the witnesses 'had been a torment' to them (11:10). Their testimony, by revealing the truth about the way things really are (as all good testimony does), besieged the people of the earth.

Though the witnesses are killed, they are subsequently resurrected to life (11:11). Their enemies watch as they are raised and as judgement comes on the earth. The people

of the earth are said to give glory to God in response, that is, they believe the testimony of the witnesses and become faithful to God and his kingdom, though not without there first occurring the consequences of their earlier actions (11:13).

This, according to Revelation, is the way in which true victory is won: not by military dominance, but by faithful witness to Jesus and his kingdom. It is utterly nonsensical from an earthly perspective, but from the perspective of heaven this is the way of things.

Of course, throughout the history of the interpretation of Revelation 11, the witnesses have been understood not as literal people but as symbolic of the church. The church's primary job is, according to Revelation, to be witnesses

of Jesus in the world, even under the shadow of violence and death. In word and deed, the church is meant to point toward and embody a different reality from that which exists around it, a reality that makes little sense unless the Lamb has truly conquered death through his own faithful testimony.

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### 3. The Lamb's fate unveils reality

This faithful testimony of the Lamb is most clearly shown in the crucifixion. The violent fate of the Lamb, slaughtered by the violence of the empire, reveals the true nature of that empire. Empire is violent, attempting to erase all who would witness to an alternative story. For it, victory comes through destroying the enemy.

The victory of God, on the other hand, is somehow won in death and suffering. Perhaps this is partly because suffering at the hands of empire without offering a violent response serves to reflect the true violent nature of empire and all oppressive power. This is why disciplined nonviolent actions in our world, including martyrdom, can be and have been so effective in changing public opinion in the long term—they reveal the true and terrible nature of oppressive regimes and open the way for alternative stories and possibilities.

The church's role has never been to emulate the violent power of the Beast, but rather to imitate the sacrificial witness of the Lamb. To be clear, this does not mean embracing passivism or political neutrality—Jesus certainly did not do so, as evidenced by his at-times scathing political critique and execution as an enemy of the state. Likewise, the two witnesses of Revelation 11 are anything but political sectarians hiding from the world; no, they were public in their witness and became targets of imperial forces as a result.

The example set for us by the Lamb and the witnesses is of rejecting the normal use of power in our world. For them, there is a different, sacrificial way of using power. But more than that, they witness to a different story, one in which love and truth overcome sheer strength and brutality. Only when we lay down our nationalism and culture wars and realpolitiking will we be able to participate in this kind of victory, the victory of God.

#### The end of the story

It is worth concluding this series by outlining what Revelation teaches about where the world is headed. Many people use Revelation as a road map for the future, believing that it gives a detailed account of what is to come in 'the last days'.

It is important to stress that this is not what Revelation is doing. As I said in the first instalment of this series, Revelation is not about the end of the world. Rather, it paints a picture of what was the case in its own historical period, even while it continues to speak to us about

imperial realities in our (and every) time and the ongoing need for faithful witness.

Still, Revelation does offer a vision of the end of empire, of a world in which 'the empire of this world has become the empire of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he shall reign forever and ever' (11:15).

The vision of the end in Revelation is not of a world destroyed, but of a world that has finally been freed of Rome and all other empires and that has been restored and transfigured into a new, glorious reality.

Indeed, Revelation 21 depicts a vision of a renewed heaven and earth in which the earth is joined together with heaven—the fullness of creation is finally united. This is what it looks like when things have been set right.

The point of Revelation, though, is not to encourage us to passively await this eventual transformation of creation, but to encourage us to live in light of this future reality now, as faithful witnesses testifying about it and as lampstands signalling in its direction. In the present, we are given the opportunity to enact the upside-down reality of God's victory, to embody the transformed creation in our lives here and now. Revelation, then, asks us to choose between:

- Worshiping the Beast or the Lamb
- Entering the luxury of the Prostitute, or being the Bride of Christ
- Living in the city of Babylon with its oppression and exploitation of the poor and marginalised (Revelation 17–18), or living in the city of the New Jerusalem in which the river of life flows for all people (Revelation 21–22)
- Embodying and enjoying the violence of the Dragon and the Beast, or being willing to nonviolently lay down our lives as witnesses of Christ

Or, to return to the question that has appeared throughout this series, a question that demands our loyalty and imagination: *how can the church be the church in the face of a powerful and seductive empire?*

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# Five Barley Loaves, Two Small Fish, and a Great Deal of Grass

by Deborah Storie

Spring 2020. Prohibited from gathering inside, Melbournians rediscovered city parks and gardens. Clusters of picnickers reclined on the grass, savouring food, drink and companionship. In some parks, white painted circles adorning the grass reminded picnickers to ‘social distance.’ This Spring was unusually wet and warm. There was a great deal of grass.

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We most often hear the stories of Jesus feeding large crowds as told by Matthew (14:1–23; 15:29–39), Mark (6:34–44; 8:1–10) or Luke (9:10–17). Yet, it’s only in John’s account of a miraculous feeding that we encounter “a great deal of grass.” Several other details are unique to John. Only John reminds us that the Sea of Galilee is the Sea of Tiberias (6:1) and tells us that Passover is approaching (6:4). Only in John do we learn that the loaves are barley bread (6:9, 13) and hear Jesus speak of “the bread of life” the following day (6:26–38). Let’s revisit the story as John relates it (6:1–15).

*After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, the Sea of Tiberias* (6:1). Herod Antipas constructed the city of Tiberias in 18 CE, strategically located on the South West shore of the sea to facilitate taxation of the fishing industry. He named the city in honour of Caesar Tiberius, emperor of Rome between 14 and 37 CE. Only Luke identifies Caesar Tiberius by name (3:1); none of the Gospels mention the city given his name. Only John mentions the imperial name for the sea, using it only in the stories of the miraculous feeding (6:1, 23) and, post-resurrection, the miraculous multiplication of fish (21:1).

Before Passover, five thousand plus people resting on a great deal of grass eat their fill of bread and fish. After Passover,

Before Passover, five thousand plus people resting on a great deal of grass eat their fill of bread and fish. After Passover, seasoned fishermen are surprised by a phenomenal catch. Idyllic scenes? Perhaps if viewed in isolation.







Jesus Mafa, Cameroon 1973, Vanderbilt Digital Library

seasoned fishermen are surprised by a phenomenal catch. Idyllic scenes? Perhaps if viewed in isolation. But John evokes the shadow of empire with a name: Tiberias. This is Roman-occupied Palestine, highly militarised, increasingly monetised, ruthlessly taxed. John reminds us that these feeding and fishing miracles took place in a world in which the realities of empire drove anxieties about daily bread, depleted fish stocks and eroded livelihoods. The Sea of Galilee was the Sea of Tiberias.

*A large crowd kept following [Jesus] because they saw the signs that he was doing for the weak. Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near* (6:2–4). Observant Jews celebrate Passover by remembering and re-enacting their liberation from slavery in Egypt, the giving of the covenant, and God’s miraculous provision of manna, bread from heaven, and quail—meat—in the wilderness. At the time of Jesus’ ministry, descendants of those freed slaves still lived in the Promised Land but were no longer free. Herodian, Roman, and ruling priestly demands fell heavily on the population. Everything was taxed: fish, fishing boats and fishing nets, salt and yeast, grains and breads, even barley and

barley bread, the basics of life. The land still flowed with milk and honey—there was a great deal of grass—but they no longer enjoyed its fruit. Rome, like Egypt, was an economy that enriched a few and impoverished many. Passover calls imperial pretensions into question, nourishes hope among the oppressed, and reminds us that God is a God who acts to liberate: the way things are is not the way they will remain.

*Seeing the crowd approaching, Jesus asked Philip, “How are we to buy bread so that these people might eat?” He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do.* (6:5–6). Jesus’ words echo a question Moses asked during the first Exodus: “Where am I to get meat to give to all this people?”

(Num 11:13). Whereas Moses’ used the language of gift, Jesus tested Philip with the language of market exchange. Literally, “How are we *to market* bread so that these [people] might eat?”

*Philip answered him, “Two hundred denarii would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.”* (6:7). A *denarius*, a Roman coin bearing Caesar’s image and inscription, was the coin with which each adult Jew rendered the annual head tax to Rome. Its monetary value was roughly equivalent to the amount daily

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labourers received for a day's work *if* they found work. Two hundred *denarii* was more than most families saw in a year. Philip instinctively assumed a transactional market-based response. He focused on scarcity, on what was lacking. He assumed that there would not be enough.

*One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to [Jesus], "Here is a boy who has five barley loaves and two small fish. But what are they among so many?"* (6:8–9). Although troubled by the arithmetic, Andrew draws attention to resources already present among the crowd. He does not assume a transactional market-based response nor focus on scarcity, on what is lacking.

The five loaves are barley bread; the fish are small. Barley bread was the staple food of those who could afford nothing else. A first century Jewish philosopher, Philo of Alexandria, considered barley bread "highly questionable," fit only for consumption by "animals and unfortunate humans." A Roman historian, Pliny the Elder, and the Jewish historian, Josephus, thought much the same. Barley bread was rough and plain, simple fare, the bread of the poor.

*Jesus said, "Make the people sit down."*

*Now there was a great deal of grass in the place and they sat down, about five thousand in all.* (6:10). A great deal of grass, an abundance of grass, grass that sprang from the ground when rains fell in season, grass that grew without human cultivation or calculation. The plentiful grass evokes the Psalmist's testimony of God's provision: "The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters." (Ps. 23:1–2).

*Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted.* (6:11). A boy (or a slave or a child, the Greek is not specific) offered what they had: five barley loaves, two small fish. Jesus blessed, literally *eucharist-ed*, the food and distributed it. How would those five barley loaves and two small fish feed the crowd of thousands? It was not immediately obvious. The food multiplied as it was distributed, as it was shared.

*When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that none may be lost." So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets.* (6:12–13). Living in contexts where food is too often wasted, we easily lose sight of

how amazing it was for people to eat as much as they wanted, until they were satisfied, and still to have food left over. The barley bread was precious as well as abundant; they gathered the fragments that none might be lost. Those who live with hunger know better than to throw leftovers away.

The gathered fragments of barley bread remind me of an Afghan proverb: *Rez-e-non om non ast*. Even a fragment of bread is bread. Bread has a special place in Afghan culture. It is holy, treated with respect. Bread is never put on the ground, never cut with a knife. Should a fragment fall when a small child eats, an older child or adult swiftly retrieves the fragment so that none may be lost. Even a fragment of bread is bread. *Rez-e-non om non ast*.

This feeding reminds us of *mannah*, the bread from heaven with which God fed the Israelites in the wilderness. The twelve baskets symbolise the twelve tribes of Israel. Yet John locates this feeding in non-Jewish territory on "the other side" of the sea (6:1), inviting those of us who identify as people of God to a broader, more inclusive vision. This story speaks about more than God's provision for *us*. It anticipates provision for all, enough for all, fullness of life for all.

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COVID19. A brief period in which cooperation displaced competition and the leaders of our states and nation put people before profits. At first, some dared speak of a season of levelling, of equalizing, of life and dignity for the poor. Others imagined that our sudden, dramatic reduction in consumption, particularly of air and car travel, might be first steps towards a more ecologically responsible way of life. Sadly, the equalizing aspects of our pandemic response did not last long. Those with insecure work were excluded from benefits. One in four single-parent families ran out of food and money during Victoria's first lockdown. Hierarchy even crept into public gardens as hospitality businesses 'pivoted' to provide sumptuous platters and lavish picnic settings—picnics for a price. People poured onto planes the moment state borders opened.

In Palestine, two thousand years earlier, a boy (or a child or a slave) shared five barley loaves and two small fish. By the grace of God, this gift fed a multitude: everyone ate as much as they wanted, until they were satisfied. No money changed hands. No profits were made. No taxes extracted. No business conducted. No monopolies forged. God's abundant provision beyond

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How would those five barley loaves and two small fish feed the crowd of thousands? It was not immediately obvious.

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the grasp of Herod and beyond the reach of Rome: a great deal of grass, five barley loaves and two small fish, willingly shared and miraculously multiplied.

This Gospel story reassures us. It addresses our deepest anxieties: that there will not be enough; that we will not have enough: that we will not *be* enough.

It also challenges and confronts us. The unique details John weaves through the story are significant: the Sea of Tiberias; Passover; five *barley* loaves and two *small* fish; a *great deal of* grass; the dialogue between Jesus, Philip and Andrew. Taken together, these details point to the fundamental conflict between the way of Jesus and the assumptions, habits and aspirations of Rome and more recent empires.

The questions voiced within the story deserve a fresh hearing: the question with which Jesus tested Philip (6:5); Andrew's question about how far finite resources could stretch (6:9). Two thousand years later, these questions press in upon us. How are we to market food so that the world's billions can eat? What are our resources among so many?

### How will we respond to these questions?

*Will we focus on scarcity, on lack, and instinctively assume transactional market responses?* I hope not. Jesus' description of the consequences of Herodian and Roman economics applies equally to contemporary global economic arrangements: "To those who have, more will be given. From those who have not, even the little they have will be taken away" (Luke 19:26). As markets channel more and more of the world's resources to provide products and services for those who can pay, vulnerable communities are dispossessed,

environments degraded, conflicts exacerbated, and inequalities entrenched. Pope Francis calls it "an economy that kills."

*Will we hold back, defeated by the arithmetic: What is so little among so many? Will we hold on to what we have, trying to secure our own needs before we begin to share?* I hope not. We experience grace, not when we cling to power and strive to secure our own futures, but when we relinquish control, let go, and trust God. This story calls us to resist the lie that what we have to offer—time, skills or friendship—is so small and insignificant that it's not worth sharing. It was not immediately obvious how five barley loaves and two small fish would feed the crowd, yet all ate as much as they wanted, until they were satisfied. Put what we have in God's hands, and it will be enough. Put who *we are* in God's hands, and *we will be* enough.

*Will we identify resources already present among us and offer to share whatever we have? Will we embrace the economic vision of Exodus?* I hope and pray so. 'As it is written, "The one who gathered much did not have too much, and the one who gathered little did not have too little."' (2 Cor 8:15; Ex 16:18). Five barley loaves, two fish and a great deal of grass. Manna and quails in the wilderness. God's provision: liberation for all, dignity for all, enough for all, abundant life for all.

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# Farming the 'burbs: Reimagining Lawns (and Local Trade)

by Simeon Ash



When I see lawns, I mostly wonder: why do we grow grass when we could grow food? There are millions of unused lawns in our cities these days. A few hundred years ago, lawns were specifically used as symbols of wealth and power: the larger the lawn, the more servants or slaves at their disposal to use precious land for a non-essential task. In my view, our wealthy suburbs still espouse symbols of status with varying levels of lawn care and no cricket being played. Call it 'beauty' but it is an expensive use of space. In other neighbourhoods, it's more likely you'd pass Commodores parked on the front lawn than any sprinklers. I first saw those cars from Google Earth when I was scouting for unkept lawns in Melbourne suburbs where Australians had a different kind of dream. I wanted to trial a crazy business idea... to grow market quantities of fresh food in multiple backyards I'd borrow. So I landed in Heidelberg West with lots of unused, brown lawns.

At a time when a lot of farmers ponder about profits over the next hillside, and when a farmer makes only a few hundred bucks per acre, the common perspective is to expand. But I have often wondered, how small can a farm be? Economies of scale follow a logic to a point, but they can also lead to a rat race zero-sum game.

My decision to pursue urban agriculture was guided by a few factors: gratification in the outdoor work, to learn how to produce something for a local customer, and to create positive, unique stories that would contribute to social change. This intersection of regenerative agriculture, home economics, and community inspired me to create 'Spoke & Spade', a community supported agriculture (CSA) urban farm.

## How

I started by digging up the front and backyard of a rental to show just how productive 20 x 7.5m veggie beds could be (I got permission). In the subsequent year, I'd be offered several other parcels of local land (and rural land in other states) to which I said

I wanted to trial a crazy business idea... to grow market quantities of fresh food in multiple backyards I'd borrow.



'yes' to just another two further plots nearby. In total, it made up 100 x 7.5m beds, just shy of ¼ acre of free land 10km from the CBD!

Happily, you don't need much space to be busy if you bio-intensively produce food. It can also be a source of income when done well, although, not easily. I chose to distribute most of my produce through an exciting alternative economic arrangement known as CSA. On this model, each week I packed on average a \$1000 worth of my veggies to 30 customers and they collected 35 weeks of the year—not bad for production around the hills hoist! My customers paid upfront for 12 weeks at \$30 a veggie box and took a share in the farm's abundance or failure. The CSA approach celebrates what a fairer food system could look like: the seller (i.e. farmer) receives an assured capital for upfront sunk costs (all the work preparing crops prior to harvest) and if the investment is lost due to unforeseen circumstances (i.e. severe hail or flooding), the members, informed and educated by their closer relationship to their farmer and food system, understand that they took part in the risk of agriculture... betting on nature.

### **The economics of (urban) farming**

After all, every farmer is a gambler: extreme optimists in the face of a lifetime of seasonal adversity. For time immemorial, we have bet prayers to the wind, hoping God or gods would make rain fall, enough and softly enough, when our plants needed it. For many farmers there are no security nets without such rain: unless you're in locations where crop insurance and government subsidies play Monopoly, only further spiralling the agricultural world into absurdity, and often leading to reckless land use. Fortunately, I had easy access to mains water and irrigation, but there was still a lot of guessing going on.

How often and how many carrots compared to tomatoes would my customers want and how many seedlings need to be planted each fortnight to stagger that harvest evenly? A lot of the learning came quickly and with many mistakes. It's harder to grow consistent carrots than it might seem!

Overall, I followed five key principles in deciding what to grow:

1. Easy to grow – I had hardly grown food before I started... there was a lot to learn! Grow simple things first (chard and spring onions before trying capsicums and cauliflowers).
2. Quick to harvest or a long period of harvest (i.e. cut and come again) – Japanese sweet turnips grow in just 30 days in summer and kale produces for several months!
3. Market demand –there'd be no point producing it if people wouldn't eat it, or worse, buy it and just throw it away. Grow what's wanted and in volumes that make sense.
4. High price point – some crops don't make sense to compete against with larger food system. I'd leave storage crops effectively grown with machinery (e.g. potatoes) to rural settings. My fresh salad, however, was excellent quality, and I could justify charging a premium for its crisp, nuanced and chemical-free tastiness.
5. Produce a high yield per m<sup>2</sup> – with such a small space, every 5m<sup>2</sup> needed to turn over \$400 of vegetables in a year. If a vegetable didn't make that cut in space and harvest period (e.g. broccoli), I couldn't afford to grow it.



For the most part, my customers received more ‘value’ than they actually paid for. Some weeks we’d overpack the boxes due to an abundant harvest. Other weeks, I’d be short or overestimate available shares, and each box held only \$20 of food. Overall, the customers were happy. We developed trust and sometimes even a friendship. I was their farmer and they were my friends to feed. It was beautiful (and small).

Of course, my prices were higher than the average grocery store (although sometimes not by much), but there is value in ‘real food’ when so little of our fresh food is actually now fresh. My salad mixes would last for four weeks in the fridge, only starting to look like that of what you get in the supermarket a fortnight on. My carrots tasted like what your grandmother remembers, not the watery imitation of hydroponics. My greens weren’t sprayed in a rotation of insecticide, pesticide, herbicide and fungicides. Instead, I fed the soil compost and it fed healthy crops which rarely needed intervention from pests or disease. I weeded with hand tools. For many reasons then, 30 families visited a cool-room next to a Commodore in the backwater ‘burbs of Melbourne every week, and that story continued to their tables. One might say it was very human scale agriculture.

## Meaningful work, meaningful challenges

Across the board, it seems that more and more jobs are a bit meaningless. I think one of our goals as Christians is to create new economies where work is meaningful and improves the state of society and biodiversity. My business was in some ways a success, but it also had a lot of failings, and many challenges.

One of the key challenges with small business is to make it financially viable. I’m not sure I ever reached that point in three years, but given a more time (i.e. by the fourth year), I believe I’d be able to achieve a profit of around \$35 000 p.a from backyard farming in Australia. I only reached \$30 000 sales in my last year with a 70% return, i.e. \$10 000 of expenses and \$20 000 of profit. It’s not a

great idea if you’re looking for financial stability. I worked 2-3 days elsewhere simultaneously (as many farmers do) to supplement my income.

Starting something new meant a more personal challenge. Without clear examples gone before, friends, family, and others found it hard to understand what I was doing. The hardest part for me was not money or comfort, but difficulty socially. I heard scepticism behind people’s encouragements, and in the first few seasons, I needed to push ahead without much to back my vision. That takes a lot of determination (and/or stupidity).

Slim profit margins also drew me into conflict with my values. Being a small-scale producer means that while I may want to support the poor, or those who cannot access my product, I was often struggling to make a living wage myself. In my first year, I would sell my produce to those who could afford it—for the most part white, educated, middle class, wealthy families—excluding poorer income brackets which, funnily enough, included me, the grower, in the first year! I would shop along with my neighbours for fresh food at Aldi because I couldn’t afford to eat my own food, unless it was the scraps for waste.

A lot of growers I know face this kind of ethical challenge: selling to the rich whilst wanting to pass their goods onto the poor. For my farm, I decided the ‘cause’ was to produce good, fresh food, not necessarily to tick every box of across my value chain.

Despite all this, I felt I’d found a vocation: where meeting a great need in the world interconnected with my own passion for regenerative agriculture in the age of the climate crisis: a system of farming that seeks to rehabilitate and enhance the ecosystem.

## Faith and business

It may not have been financially comparable to wages I could have earned elsewhere, but it was a fantastic, financially-ethical pursuit, at least in my view. Jonathan’s recent article (*Manna Matters*, April 2021) addresses the matter of commerce and faith, asking the question of how or if these intersect or are in conflict. In my business, I didn’t see a conflict with my faith: I considered and still consider my work to be part of the fruition of my faith.

On a practical level, this is how I tried to engage in commerce and/or business in a way that aligned with my faith and values:

- Producing/creating something that is needed (i.e. vegetables) rather than consuming or upselling unnecessary products.

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I think one of our goals as Christians is to create new economies where work is meaningful and improves the state of society.

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- Creating positive and significant environmental benefits through your work (i.e. reducing transport, inputs, and waste, increasing biodiversity, drawing down carbon, and contributing to social change through education)
- Facilitating a sense of community life beyond transactions, including through meaningful interactions and conversations, particularly with those experiencing isolation or doing it rough. While I often traded with a wealthier demographic, I based myself in a low socio-economic neighbourhood and spent a lot of time growing food in my front yard. I learned everyone's name for it. I made time to be interruptible and present to strangers. As it turns out, many people need something as simple as a chat or the occasional bunch of flowers.
- Trading through banking's most reputable ethical institutions to neutralise negative effects, or even have positive social and environmental impact.

I realise the rise in "green" consumerism can be greenwash and/or act as a placebo for real change, where individual behaviour, viewed through a systemic lens, does not change the systems at fault. However I believe our small actions are an integral foundation for a stronger, active political voice. They go hand in hand: both are needed for a just world.

As a consumer, I believe we need to carefully consider and spend more money on products from people and business that reflect our own values. As a business owner, I saw it as my responsibility to share about how I would use the money earned (including how it would earn interest) and felt accountable to my customers to spend it in a way that kept on creating a sustainable and fair economy. Some relatively 'poor' people bought my 'expensive' food, and I wonder if for some, this was part of their decision-making: it aligned with their values.

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We need great change from our food systems in the next few decades. The scale of that change may decide the future of biodiversity as we currently know it.

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## A pivotal role

Conventional agriculture is enormously complex, and provides a large portion of our food supply. But if I was to summarise my critique: it has and continues to effectively destroy the systems on which biodiversity, including humans, flourishes. We need great change from our food systems in the next few decades. The scale of that change may decide the future of biodiversity as we currently know it. Put simply, we need regenerative agriculture: it is pivotally involved in more than 25 of the 100 of the solutions Project Drawdown lists as methods to reverse global warming. A transition from conventional agriculture today to regenerative agriculture is not just for farmers to adopt as an answer, but for all of us involved with eating: from advocacy to which farmer you purchase from, even what food you compost.

There aren't enough farmers to voice the justice for which they're responsible. For my part, I shared wherever I could without a price tag and offered my voice through the media to greater influence eaters and growers alike. Everyone can be an advocate for the values of the Kingdom.

## Time and money, worth and work

It's funny that, for many of us, growing food is a form of leisure. From a wider historical lens and current global perspective, that sheds light onto some of our privilege. But it also points to something true: working in the ground or with nature is inherently good for us.

I spend my time farming to be involved in creating abundant life: to paint a moving picture over which I am not fully in control, only choosing some of the colours from which to paint. Gambling on sunshine, I am connected to God through my work.

Our engagement with money too can reflect God's Kingdom. This may come from where or how we work to earn income, or how we trade that money for goods or services in the home economy. Not just in farming, but in many areas of commerce, there is room to create, support, and bring about a great many beautiful things. Money and work hold power in that. If we engage with them without intention, we are drawn into a game with increasingly few winners. Personally, I'd rather plant carrots.

*Simeon Ash is a market gardener, who currently works at Collingwood Children's Farm and previously ran Spoke & Spade. He lives on Wurundjeri Country in Melbourne, studies Regenerative Agriculture and plays midfield soccer on weekends.*



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### About Manna Gum

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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