

MANNA matters

Newsletter of MANNA GUM.

This edition:

BIBLE & ECONOMY

Living in Babylon

Part 1: The meaning of the city

Jonathan Cornford (p.2)

UNDERSTANDING THE TIMES

Cheese

G.K. Chesterton (p.9)

EVERYDAY PEOPLE

Reflections on 'A Different Way'

Susan Miller-Vulling & David Cook (p.10)



News from Manna Gum

After a scorching summer in Bendigo, with 13 days over 40° C in three weeks, we have moved rapidly into autumn, with morning chills, the leaves turning to gold and rust, and the hint of wattle in the air.

Since leaving Melbourne in January, we have settled quite quickly into the Bendigo suburb of Long Gully. Our girls, Amy and Mhairi, have settled into their new school and made new friends more easily than we could have hoped for; Kim is still working three days a week in land restoration; and Jonathan is slowly getting a feel for what the new location means for Manna Gum's ministry. This was somewhat hampered by a frustrating back injury early in the year, however, things are in full swing now. We are currently renting a house while figuring out how

to build on a block of land we bought here last year. It has been a slow process trying to achieve the most environmentally sustainable home we can at a price (ie. mortgage) that will not alter how we feel called to live. It has been eye-opening to see how little acquainted the building industry is with the principles of sustainable design and building.

This *Manna Matters* is a bit of a special edition with a significantly longer than usual article beginning a two-part series on the city. We will return to the more usual length next edition.

Manna Gum work in the first quarter was largely focussed on the launching of a Household Covenant network via

(cont. on back page)

LIVING IN BABYLON

Part 1: The Meaning of the City

by Jonathan Cornford

Babylon,
Born in your walls
Bred in your will
Captive, but still ...
I hear the heavens cry.
Babylon,
This is goodbye.

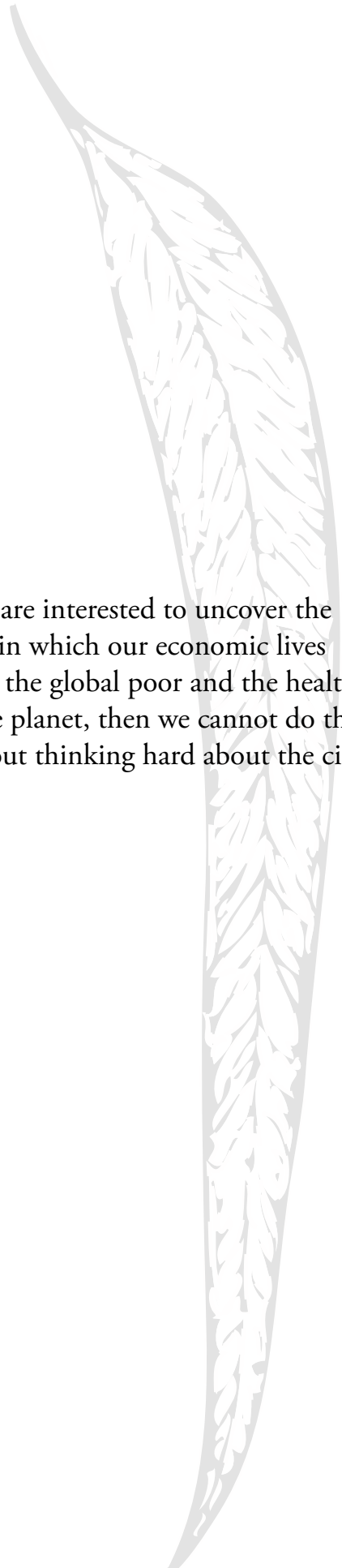
Steve Talyor, *I Predict 1990*

When driving to Melbourne from Bendigo, there is a point where the freeway, as it descends down the range, sweeps around and gives a first sight of the city in the distance. It is an impressive sight. Out of the midst of a great plain rise the towers of the city, dominating the landscape. On a foggy day, it can even look as though the towers rise out from the clouds. The sight still grips me with a mix of awe and horror. And most times, a single thought impresses itself on my mind: *Babylon!*

Cities are incredible achievements of human ingenuity and they are amazing places to be. When I am in Melbourne's CBD my pulse always runs a bit quicker. The scale of the human project on display in the city is just so impressive, and, well, awesome. The presence of so much money and power, and of so much activity and ingenuity, cannot leave you unaffected.

There is a lot of superficial talk about cities. Probably the dominant voice is the one that proclaims how wonderful cities are as places of culture, creativity, possibility and freedom. Of course, there is much truth in all this, however, its celebratory key also serves to obscure deeper truths about the city. At the other extreme, less common but perhaps getting stronger, is the characterisation of the city as a place of evil, of untold damage – a place we must get away from. Once again, there is much truth in this story, but on its own, this story offers little hope or guidance.

Most people reading this article live in a city, and those who do not are reading it by virtue of developments in organisation and technology only made possible by the city. As Jacques Ellul says in his seminal work, *The Meaning of the City*: 'The city is everywhere.' However, there has perhaps never been a time in human history when we have more needed to think clearly about the city: about what it is; about how we live in it; and about what it could be. If we are interested to uncover the ways in which our economic lives affect the global poor and the health of the planet, which is central to the purpose of *Manna Matters*, then we cannot do this without thinking hard about the city. And if this task is critical for humanity then, of course, it is critical to the concerns of the Christian gospel. So it should not come as any surprise that the Bible has something essential to say about cities. Essential, because we need to hear it, but also essential in that what the Bible illuminates is the very *essence* of the city. But before turning to the Biblical story, it is worth putting the city of today more clearly into focus.



If we are interested to uncover the ways in which our economic lives affect the global poor and the health of the planet, then we cannot do this without thinking hard about the city.



An urban species

In 2008, very quietly and with little fanfare, a momentous point in the human story was reached: we became an urban species. In that year, we reached the point where more than half of humanity lived in cities. By 2050, it is estimated that about 75% of the world's population will live in cities, and about one-third of these city dwellers will live in slums.

The face of the globe has been irreversibly altered by cities. The planetary crisis now facing us – the changing climate, species extinction, the loss of arable land, resource depletion, the plundering of the oceans – has its source in the city. Even the very considerable impact of agriculture upon the earth is, by and large, the product of the types of agriculture required to supply cities. Similarly, wherever it is found, the existence of poverty and inequality cannot be properly understood without understanding the role of cities in shaping all human relations.

Indeed, we may simply say that most products of human civilisation, whether glorious or appalling are at heart, the products of the city. The word 'civilisation' derives from the Latin *civitas*, meaning city, or city-state. The very beginnings of what historians call 'civilisation' in the Fertile Crescent (modern day Iraq through to southern Turkey and northern Egypt) of Neolithic times, is really the beginnings of the rise of the city in human affairs. At the heart of this project were a number of developments in Fertile Crescent urban settlements that remain foundational to urban civilisation, although they are somewhat obscured from our eyes today:

- (i) the development of an organised military enabling social control and coercion, protection from external threats, and the ability to expand and dominate new territories;
- (ii) the reorganisation of agriculture through large-scale, centralised infrastructure (primarily irrigation) producing greater surpluses and greater elite control over surpluses;
- (iii) the refinement of royal, city-based 'state religion' that legitimated power structures and provided the social glue which is everywhere necessary to ensure the survival of any complex system;
- (iv) the rise of trade between urban centres, each trading goods exploited from their own hinterland;
- (v) and finally, last in the historical process was the

we may simply say that most products of human civilisation, whether glorious or appalling, are at heart, the products of the city.

development of writing, which enabled the more efficient administration of such a complex social, economic, political and religious system.

[It is worth noting that while we are here focussed on characteristics and developments that are *central* to the city, we should not make the mistake of assuming that they are *exclusive* to the city.]

From this early development of a few city-states amongst the vast morass of unorganised and 'uncivilised' human communities, cities have gone on to exert their dominance over the Earth's entire landmass, its oceans, and even the regions of space surrounding us. One way of looking at a map of the world is not to see a division of nation-states, separate and competing, but to see a global network of urban centres exerting their dominance and control over the resources of the planet. Indeed, modern cities have now come to assume a *scale* that adds new dimensions to the city (there are now a number of mega-cities around the world with populations greater than the Australian continent):

- (i) they are places that can no longer live off their hinterland, but must draw resources from the planet;
- (ii) they are places where any broader cohesive community is impossible;
- (iii) and, more controversially, they are places where ugliness has gained a final triumph over beauty.

So far, this description of the rise of cities seems to paint a dark picture. However, it is from this very basis that humanity has also attained all those accomplishments that most of us would want to celebrate: accomplishments of art and

architecture; science, medicine and engineering; literature and philosophy; and, ever so slowly, the development of new ideas about the structure of society, economy and government.

This is where there is often so much difficulty in understanding human affairs; when things we like and value are so closely connected to things we dislike and disown, it generally seems easier to either ignore or deny the darker elements (the status quo option) or to ultimately reject the tainted good things (the purist option), rather than to try to see and hold together the whole messy story. And it is indeed the whole messy story about the city that is presented us in the Bible.

The meaning of the city

It is common to refer to the story of Adam and Eve and the forbidden fruit in Genesis 3 as ‘the Fall’, identifying this as the point at which Eden is lost. It is probably truer to say that the Biblical narrative of ‘The Fall’ begins in chapter 3 and extends to the end of chapter 11. ‘The Fall’ account of Genesis is indeed a succession of stories that lay bare the human condition, and the city occupies a prominent place in this story.

In the Genesis account of primeval history, the city has its origin with Cain, the killer of Abel, the first murderer. The progression of the story is significant: when Cain kills his brother his act of violence simultaneously upsets the ecological order and unleashes a state of permanent insecurity upon himself and all his descendants (Gen 4:10-12). Unrepentant, Cain’s defiance continues: he turns away from the presence of God and enters the land of Nod – the land of *wandering*.

It is from this place, the place of wandering insecurity in a wounded creation, devoid of God, that Cain begins his own project for permanency and security – he fathers a child and builds a city. Both the child and the city are given the same name, Enoch, which means ‘initiation’ or ‘dedication’. With Eden lost, Cain is inaugurating the new project that we have come to call ‘civilisation’ – city building. To quote Ellul: ‘For God’s Eden he substitutes his own; for the goal given to his life by God, he substitutes a goal given to himself.’ In this story of origins, the city is a response to the insecurity and ecological uncertainty that man has unleashed with his own violence, but even more importantly, *the city is the manifestation of humanity’s attempt to live independently from God*.

From this point, the Genesis narrative recounts the plunge of humanity into ever more violence and discord, until ‘the whole earth was filled with violence’ (6:11). After the Noah story, the city comes into prominence again with the activities of Nimrod, the first ‘mighty warrior’ (10:8). Most translations rather oddly cast the next description of Nimrod in a rather positive light, ‘He was a mighty hunter before the Lord’ (10:9). The sense of the meaning is much more likely negative: he was *before* the Lord in the same way an accused criminal stands before a judge. In other words, in God’s judgement this ‘mighty warrior’ (and note, so far in Genesis, violence has only been seen as a sign of distance from God) was essentially a *hunter*; but what did this hunting look like? The next line is striking: it tells us that Nimrod was a city-builder – the city is something that exists by preying upon its surrounds. It is no surprise then that the list of cities attributed to Nimrod is a roll-call of the cities that will form the Babylonian and Assyrian empires later responsible for the cataclysmic overthrow and exile of God’s people. In these very concise verses, what is being described is the next stage of the human project: domination, subjugation and exploitation. And according to the Genesis account, the city stands at the heart of it all.

Genesis’ primeval history of the city does not end there though; it has one more dramatic tale to tell, which brings the narrative of the Fall of humanity to its climax – it is, of course, the tale of Babel.

The confusion of the city

To put this story in context, there is now a fair amount of scholarly consensus that the final form of the stories we have received in the first five books of the Bible (the Books of the Law, or the *Torah*) was completed either during, or soon after the period of Hebrew exile in Babylon in the 6th century BC. Thus, to gain the full power of the tale of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11, we need to imagine in the background the world’s largest city at the time – the living, breathing, all-dominating city of Babylon – itself dominated by the great edifice of the real, historical Tower of Babel, the Great Ziggurat of Babylon.

In the Babylonian tongue, ‘Babylon’ means ‘Gate of the Gods’, and in their own creation story, Babylon is created after the violent and gory triumph of Marduk as ruler of the Gods. Babylon was Marduk’s seat, and the Babylonian king his representative on earth. In the shadow of this awesome city-empire, the Hebrew exiles write a very different account of what is going on.

**The city is the manifestation
of humanity’s attempt to live
independently from God.**

Strikingly, in the Genesis account, the building of the city and the tower is a project of *all of humanity* (11:1-2) – everyone is implicated in this story. The story goes on to describe how people agree to ‘build a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens’. As ‘the heavens’ in the ancient world was where God was thought to reside, this was from the outset a challenge to the supremacy of God. But even more significantly, the story records the people’s deeper purpose: ‘let us make a name for ourselves’. This is not, as it would seem in our idiom, a reference to becoming famous, but something more profound. In the ancient world a name was bestowed upon someone by their progenitor, and in the Bible a person’s name often says something essential about their character. Here, humanity wants to make a name for itself – that is, humanity is rejecting its creator and attempting to engage in an act of *self-creation*.

There is perhaps no better way of capturing the spirit of modern (and post-modern) humanity, than to describe it as hell-bent on the project of self-creation. This is evident in the ways that identity has become endlessly fluid and increasingly staked to consumer fashions; it is evident in the use of social media to present a constructed version of yourself to the world; it is evident in the belief that modern science can and should embark upon manipulation of the human genome to ‘improve’ the species in the ways that ‘we’ desire.

But while humanity is endlessly impressed with its own project, the Genesis tale highlights the hubris and irony of it all. Although to the people, the tower seems to rise to the heavens, God in the story has to ‘come down’ even to see it (v.5). And in the end, the whole project – like so many bad building jobs – is scuttled by the breakdown of



communication. But, of course, the point is deeper than that – the human project of independence from God and self-creation is ultimately undermined by the inability of people to construct a truth that is valid for all. The city that called itself the Gate of the Gods (*Babili*) is renamed in Genesis as *Babel*, meaning ‘confused’.

And with the story of Babel – the confused city – so ends the Genesis account of ‘The Fall’ of humanity. City-building is certainly not the cause of this fall, but it is a prominent manifestation of it. In essence, these ancient stories from Genesis are telling us what we should already know from our day-to-day lives in cities: whatever the profession of our faith, the city tends to render all of us practical atheists. The city is the outworking of all our attempts to live independently from God and nature, and to fashion life in this world according to our own purposes. To quote Jacques Ellul once more: ‘Just as Jesus Christ is God’s greatest work, so we can say, with all the consequences of such a statement, that the city is man’s greatest work.’

in the prophets there is a new note,
a new vision of the city: ... the city as
 a place where man’s work has been
 joined to God’s.

God enters the city

One might think that with such an introduction, the biblical stance towards the city is therefore one of rejection and opposition. Not so. How surprising that after concluding the story of the Fall with Babel, the story of hope and salvation for humanity moves inexorably toward another city: Jerusalem!

The story of Jerusalem in the Bible is perhaps the hardest of all to tell. It is so full of contradiction: a story of grace and judgement; of unutterable despair and of soaring hope. Jerusalem’s name means ‘City of Shalom’, but has there ever been a city in human history that is such a lightning rod for conflict? And perhaps it is the starkness of the contradiction between the vision of Jerusalem as the Holy City and the earthly reality of her plight that makes Jerusalem so significant. At its deepest level, Jerusalem is a sacrament: that is, *Jerusalem reveals the truth of every city*, the whole horrible and wonderful truth.

The Second Book of Samuel (5:6-12) tells us that David chooses and conquers Jerusalem to be his new capital after consolidating his kingship over Israel and Judah. The subsequent secular history of Jerusalem seems to confirm everything that Genesis has instructed us to expect from the city: the growing domination of people and the land, economic exploitation, excess, violence and idolatry. The prophets are full of lamentations waxing lyrical about the depths to which Jerusalem sinks: ‘How the faithful city has become a whore! She that was full of justice, righteousness lodged in her – but now murderers!’ (Isa 1:21). Indeed, the prophets are full of condemnations of cities – Babylon, Nineveh, Tyre, Sodom – but all of these pale compared to the condemnation that ultimately falls to Jerusalem. The prophet Ezekiel proclaims that next to Jerusalem, Sodom and Gomorrah appear righteous (Eze 16:43-52). So at one level we can say that in the Biblical narrative, far from enjoying any moral superiority, Jerusalem *typifies* the character of the city, and it is not a pretty picture.

But with David’s choice of Jerusalem, something else truly startling happens. For we are told repeatedly that despite all her subsequent history, *God chooses Jerusalem*. (Eg. Deut 12:4-7; Eze 16: 1-14). Although, as a city, Jerusalem represents the culmination of man’s choice, man’s work and man’s rebellion, God nevertheless says ‘yes’. God comes into the city. In a move that prefigures the incomprehensible grace of God’s movement towards us in Christ, God enters into the heart of human fallenness and says ‘I will make you Holy’. And so, confusingly, parallel to all those texts denouncing the sin of Jerusalem, the Hebrew scripture also contains a host of texts extolling her wonders and delights. And in the prophets there is a new note, *a new vision of the city*: the city as she could be; the city as she ought to be; the city as a place where man’s work has been joined to God’s:

For out of Zion shall go forth instruction [*torah*], and the

word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between many peoples, and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more; but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid; for the mouth of the LORD of hosts has spoken.

(Micah 4:2-4)

This is a vision of the city in harmony with the country-side, a place of peace and justice, a place of shalom. And ultimately the salvation and redemption of Jerusalem is the salvation of every city. Jerusalem is every city.

These parallel, seemingly contradictory, attitudes to Jerusalem are continued in condensed form in the New Testament. Perhaps nowhere is God's grace and the tragedy of the city more poignantly captured than in Jesus' own confrontation with Jerusalem:

But as they came closer to Jerusalem [*City of Shalom*] and Jesus saw the city ahead, he began to weep. "How I wish today that you of all people would understand the way to peace [*shalom*]. But now it is too late, and peace [*shalom*] is hidden from your eyes."

(Luke 19:41-42)

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones God's messengers! How often I have wanted to gather your children together as a hen protects her chicks beneath her wings, but you wouldn't let me. And now, look, your house is abandoned and desolate."

(Matt 23:37-38)

As we know, the whole dramatic tension of the gospels is built around Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, the place where he will die, hanging on a gibbet outside the city.

Despite God's reaching out to her, the Jerusalem of Jeremiah's time and the Jerusalem of Jesus' time are both brutally destroyed (by Babylon in 587 BC and by Rome in 70 AD). It almost seems – and this is reinforced by Jerusalem's history to the present day – that if we are to see Jerusalem as a sign of hope for the city, then we must also be confronted with its history as a sacrament of suffering. Perhaps we cannot see one clearly without the other.

But, of course, the final pages of Christian scripture do end in hope. More than that, they provide a ringing, climactic, endorsement of the possibility of the city. The city may be man's greatest work, but God has joined with that work and brought it to a completion that man could never envisage on his own: 'And I saw the holy city, the *new* Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven *from God*' (Rev 21:2). It is in this ultimate city that God makes his home among mortals (v.3), a city where human suffering has ended (v.4), and a city of ecological harmony, where both the river of the water of life and the tree of life bring healing to the nations (22:2-4). Beautiful. But what is that to us? That is a vision of what is to

be – it is not where we live now. It is given in the concluding chapters of the Book of Revelation as a joyous, beautiful and inspiring confirmation of the end to which all good things work, but it is not where John's letter has its rhetorical punch. That comes a few chapters earlier, when this letter to the churches reveals to us the place in which we are living right now. We are living in Babylon.

Exiles in Babylon

It is not too much to say that the shadow of Babylon hangs over the whole Bible. Like Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, the Hebrew scripture as it comes to us was largely refined and finalised in the furnace of the Babylonian exile. The stories of humanity's fall, of Abram's call, of liberation from Egypt, all bear echoes of the later exile in Babylon. Indeed, it is not too much to say that these stories represent a *refutation* of Babylon and all that it represents.

For the Hebrew people, the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile to Babylon is a crisis like no other. It is what the crucifixion of Jesus was for the disciples – the seeming utter defeat and trampling of all that they had come to hope for and see as good in the world. It seemed to be the very overthrow of the God they had worshipped.

For this reason, the image of Babylon – the Great City – has in the Bible assumed a special significance as the archetypal enemy of God. Actually, viewed with some historical objectivity, Babylon was no worse, and a probably a good deal better, than many other city-state empires that have arisen over the aeons. But because of its particular relationship to Israel, the name Babylon comes to be a potent symbol of power, violence, wealth, oppression, greed, excess and the culmination of human arrogance and rebellion. Wherever in the Bible it is mentioned, or even echoed, we should pay attention.

It is not too much to say that the shadow of Babylon hangs over the whole Bible.

For this reason, it is hard to over-emphasise the significance of the appearance of Babylon in the final pages of the New Testament. Contrary to much supposition, the purpose of the Book of

Revelation is not to give us a Nostradamus-like prediction of how the world will end, but rather to lift the veil on reality and show us clearly the world we inhabit now. It is in the form of a letter to the churches, calling them to see the world from a God's-eye perspective and to stay faithful to the good news they have received. It is addressed to churches in seven cities of Asia Minor (modern day Turkey), then a very prosperous, comfortable, secure, loyal and highly urbanised corner of the Roman Empire. It used to be thought that Revelation was written during a time of persecution of Christians, but that no longer seems so certain; rather, the internal evidence of the letter suggests that the churches in these seven cities occupied varying social positions, some marginal, others comfortable and prosperous (see chapters 2-4). Whatever the case, they all lived in a region where belief in the beneficence of Roman Imperial rule was deeply held. How significant then that the letter reaches its climax with the



"The Fall of Babylon" by John Martin, 1819

angels crying out to the churches:

Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! ... Come out of her, my people, so that you do not take part in her sins, and so that you do not share in her plagues; for her sins are heaped high as heaven (Rev 18:2-5).

Here the churches are told that their 'relaxed and comfortable' lives were being lived in the very midst of the enemy of God – Babylon the Great! The sins of Babylon (and the Beast with whom she is associated) are listed in explicit detail: she is a dominating power; she demands worship and allegiance; she 'blasphemes' God – that is, she takes God's position to herself; she seduces the earth with her wealth and luxury; she deceives the earth with her amazing wonders; she oppresses the poor; she enslaves the very human soul; and she undergirds all of this with violence (see chapters 13, 17 & 18). Ring any bells?

And the implication of John's letter is that, somehow, God's people have become party to these sins! Ring any more bells? Of course! It is Babylon that *we* have been living in all along. When we rip back the veneer of our progressive liberal democracy we can see that we are in fact living in a global network of urban humanity that has been plundering the earth, enforcing its will with violence and caring little for the human toll. And the people who today are looking clearly and unsentimentally at this system are indeed crying 'Fallen, Fallen is Babylon the great ... do not take part in her sins so that you do not share in her plagues!'

Indeed, if the message of the Book of Revelation had to be boiled down to one quote, then it would likely have to be this: 'Come out of her, my people, so that you do not take part in her sins!'

But how? How do we depart from Babylon? What is clear in Revelation is that Babylon is no longer just a place, and it is even more than a system; it is the towering project of humanity challenging the heavens, seeking to be the authors of our own creation. How do you leave such a thing? *Babylon is everywhere.*

While the Book of Revelation is effective shock treatment to wake us out of our apathy, it is not a very practical book. All that titanic struggle between light and dark is not much like everyday life. Interestingly, perhaps one of the most useful Biblical texts for helping us come to terms with our situation is the letter of the prophet Jeremiah to the actual exiles in the real, historic city of Babylon (Jer 29). Here, the prophet is writing to a people in the midst of that crisis of faith discussed above: 'By the rivers of Babylon, we wept when we remembered Zion ... How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?' (Ps 137). They are trapped in a place not only foreign to them, but entirely hostile to their faith. Put simply, they are not at home – they do not belong. But, startlingly, the prophet's advice seems, superficially at least, to be almost the opposite of that given in Revelation:

Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease.

(Jer 29:4-6)

Of course, in Revelation we are called to depart from *the spirit* of Babylon, not a physical place, while Jeremiah is talking to people who do not have much choice about their physical

location. Rather than plunge into existential angst, he advises them to do something so simple that its profundity can easily be missed: *live life and live it well*. The things he calls to attention – homes, gardens, food, love, children, community – evoke the simplest and the fullest blessings this life has to offer. To those in the midst of Babylon, the great destroyer, is given the call to *nurture* whatever is good, whatever is wholesome.

But in case we haven't caught the full significance of this, Jeremiah goes on: 'Seek the *shalom* of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its *shalom* you will find your *shalom*' (v.7). Even as exiles in a city foreign to their faith, they are instructed to live for, to work for, and to pray for the *shalom* of the city – everything in right relationship, even Babylon the Great.

Although the period of exile was, in historical terms, not all that long, it has come to be a defining motif in the Bible, and especially so in the New Testament. When the letters of Paul, Hebrews, Peter and John are read with this idea front and centre, they take on a whole new light, as do the teachings of

Jesus about being salt, light and leaven in the world. And for those trying to follow the way of Jesus in 21st century urban consumer culture, this is precisely our position. We are exiles.

However we might conceive of the ideal life, the reality is that most of us are bound to the city in some way. As humanity moves deeper and deeper into the urban world in the coming century, more than ever we need people who can re-conceive what it might mean to live well in cities. If we take the Biblical testimony seriously, than this must require a deep recognition of the spirit and essence of the city and a preparedness to engage in a relentless spiritual struggle to resist both the seduction *and* the intimidation of Babylon.

But the struggle is also over the minutiae of our daily lives. What does it mean for us, in our time, to heed the call to depart from the sins of Babylon? What might it look like to follow Jeremiah's instruction to live abundant lives, while working for the *shalom* of the city? These will be the questions we will wrestle with in the next edition of *Manna Matters*, thinking in relation to the mental and spiritual worlds we inhabit; the physical geography of our lives in cities; church; food; and housing. Like Abraham, we will seek what it means to live faithfully in the world as we find it now, all the while 'looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God' (Heb 11:10).

Next edition:
LIVING IN BABYLON
Part 2: The task before us



Illustration by Liz Taylor.

To those in the midst of Babylon, the great destroyer, is given the call to *nurture* whatever is good, whatever is wholesome.

Cheese

by G.K. Chesterton

My forthcoming work in five volumes, 'The Neglect of Cheese in European Literature,' is a work of such unprecedented and laborious detail that it is doubtful whether I shall live to finish it. Some overflowings from such a fountain of information may therefore be permitted to springle these pages. I cannot yet wholly explain the neglect to which I refer. Poets have been mysteriously silent on the subject of cheese. Virgil, if I remember right, refers to it several times, but with too much Roman restraint. He does not let himself go on cheese. The only other poet that I can think of just now who seems to have had some sensibility on the point was the nameless author of the nursery rhyme which says: 'If all the trees were bread and cheese' – which is indeed a rich and gigantic vision of the higher gluttony. If all the trees were bread and cheese there would be considerable deforestation in any part of England where I was living.

Except Virgil and this anonymous rhymers, I can recall no verse about cheese. Yet it has every quality which we require in an exalted poetry. It is a short, strong word; it rhymes to 'breeze' and 'seas' (an essential point). It is ancient – sometimes in the individual case, always in the type and custom. It is simple, being directly derived from milk, which is one of the ancestral drinks, not lightly to be corrupted with soda-water. You know, I hope (though I myself have only just thought of it), that the four rivers of Eden were milk, water, wine, and ale. Aerated waters only appeared after the Fall.

But cheese has another quality, which is also the very soul of song. Once, in endeavouring to lecture in several places at once, I made an eccentric journey across England, a journey of so irregular and even illogical shape that it necessitated my having lunch on four successive days in four roadside inns in four different counties. In each inn they had nothing but bread and cheese; nor can I imagine why a man should want more than bread and cheese, if he can get enough of it. In each inn the cheese was good; and in each inn it was different. There was a noble Wensleydale cheese in Yorkshire, a Cheshire cheese in Cheshire, and so on. Now, it is just here that true poetic civilization differs from that paltry and mechanical civilization that holds us all in bondage. Bad customs are universal and rigid, like modern militarism. Good customs are universal and varied, like native chivalry and self-defence.

So it is with the contrast between the substances that vary and the substances that are the same wherever they penetrate. By a wise doom of heaven men were commanded to eat cheese, but not the same cheese. Being really universal it varies from valley to valley. But if, let us say, we compare cheese to soap (that

vastly inferior substance), we shall see that soap tends more and more to be merely Smith's Soap or Brown's Soap, sent automatically all over the world. If the Red Indians have soap it is Smith's Soap. If the Grand Lama has soap it is Brown's Soap. There is nothing subtly and strangely Buddhist, nothing tenderly Tibetan, about his soap. I fancy the Grand Lama does not eat cheese, but if he does it is probably a local cheese, having some real relation to his life and outlook. Safety matches, tinned foods, patent medicines are sent all over the world; but they are not produced all over the world.

Poets have been mysteriously silent
on the subject of cheese.

Therefore there is in them a mere dead identity, never that soft play of variation which exists in things produced everywhere out of the soil, in the milk of the kine, or

the fruits of the orchard. You can get a whisky and soda at every outpost of the Empire: that is why so many Empire builders go mad. But you are not tasting or touching any environment, as in the cider of Devonshire or the grapes of the Rhine. You are not approaching Nature in one of her myriad tints of mood, as in the holy act of eating cheese.

When I had done my pilgrimage in the four wayside public-houses I reached one of the great northern cities, and there I proceeded, with great rapidity and complete inconsistency, to a large and elaborate restaurant, where I knew I could

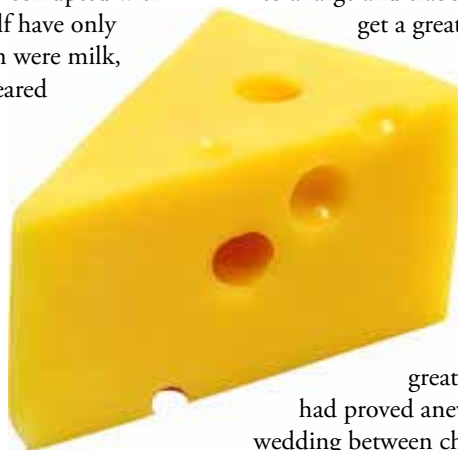
get a great many things besides bread and cheese.

I could get that also, however; or at least I expected to get it; but I was sharply reminded that I had entered Babylon, and left England behind.

The waiter brought me cheese, indeed, but cheese cut up into contemptibly small pieces; and it is the awful fact that instead of Christian bread, he brought me biscuits. Biscuits – to one who had eaten the cheese of four

great countrysides! Biscuits – to one who

had proved anew for himself the sanctity of the ancient wedding between cheese and bread! I addressed the waiter in warm and moving terms. I asked him who he was that he should put asunder those whom Humanity had joined. I asked him if he did not feel, as an artist, that a solid but yielding substance like cheese went naturally with a solid, yielding substance like bread; to eat it off biscuits is like eating it off slates. I asked him if, when he said his prayers, he was so supercilious as to pray for his daily biscuits. He gave me generally to understand that he was only obeying a custom of Modern Society. I have therefore resolved to raise my voice, not against the waiter, but against Modern Society, for this huge and unparalleled modern wrong.



(Published in 'Alarms and Discursions', 1910)

Reflections on *A Different Way* 2013

'A Different Way' is a live-in intensive week run by Manna Gum and TEAR towards the end of each year, exploring Christ's call to a new way of living. The week follows a rhythm of singing and prayer, Bible study, issues-based discussion and practical, hands-on work. The week covers issues such as creation, work, money, food, standards of living, the poor, living in the city, and more.

Susan Miller-Vulling

During my time on the *A Different Way* course I found myself absorbed in the community living. It caused me to reflect more deeply about what kind of lifestyle we wanted to lead with our young family (we took our one-year-old son with us on the course). As each topic was studied I found myself keen to create an action plan which brought our lifestyle more in line with what we had learned. As an introvert I was challenged by the focus on community but found myself very attracted to it at the same time. I was constantly inspired by the members of our group living their lives simply. Something I struggled with before the week, as well as during and after, was what a privileged life we lead consuming much in safety and wealth without thought of the impact of that consumption. The reality is that everyone can't live as I do (in terms of consumption, waste, pollution) so why do I think it is ok for me to live this way?

Now that it has been a few months I realise the key thing is to make sure you have others around you to encourage you in your journey. The words of one of the songs we sang are so true: 'our return is small, our work is slow and humble, and the world does not give its praise'. I find this often as I try to engage people in discussion on ethical purchasing, living with less, giving more generously, spending quality time with people, acknowledging the links between our purchasing and modern day slavery, etc. Most people don't want to think about these issues, which can dishearten you to wonder why you do choose to think on them. Then I remember what the Bible says and also that I am not alone on the journey.



Susan and Miriam deconstructing e-waste at the Green Collect warehouse.

David Cook

A different way – but which way? My wife Anna and I were keen to go on this course because it addressed various life issues we were already exploring: food, shopping, sustainability, finances, work and community. We'd started to realise just how much our lives were built on the culture around us, but didn't know what to do next.

It can be tempting to want to join a new kind of trendy, like putting a milk crate on the back of your bike because that's what hipsters do. Or to elevate yourself above others, like I sometimes do when riding past a whole lot of petrol-guzzling cars with no passengers in them. But I think the truth is that making changes in your life should only flow out of your beliefs and convictions.

This course was the perfect setting to cut back our lives and look afresh at how we might live our lives as God intended. As a small group, we were invited into safe, family environments. As we shared our daily lives, we bonded and could frankly discuss radical questions together. It was a real privilege to have families invite us into their lives, sharing a lot of detail for our benefit.

During Bible studies I learnt that we are descended from the Earth. Yes, I knew that God had created Adam from the Earth, but hadn't before considered it my heritage. Did you know the name 'Adam' sounds very much like the Hebrew word for Earth ('Adama')? To unpack that concept deeper has changed the way I see it, and also changed how I expect God wants me to behave.

An issue I particularly wrestled with was my occupation. I had recently left my office job to spend six months exploring opportunities for a more meaningful vocation – one that could honour God more and help make the world a better place. So this dominated many of my thoughts while on the course, tying in with questions such as: what am I working for, or whom am I working for? What is money really worth, and how much do I really need? And still more radical questions: can I actually depart from this economy of money?

Another struggle, particularly for Anna, was other people's opinions (or our perception thereof). We were fairly afraid of what those closest to us would think. (From experience) we expected antagonism toward things like choosing organic, not driving, and the way we used our money. But it's been quite encouraging to be able to connect at least one element with



At the Hewson's place in Cudgee (l. to r.): Anne, Miriam, Elvira, Greg, Jonathan, Anna, Dave, Susan, Jeremiah and Justus.



Dave separating waste for upcycling and recycling at the Green Collect warehouse.

most people, and it's started many fruitful conversations that I hope will leave others thinking.

Going away on a course can be inspiring and exciting, but I did wonder how I would ensure it made a lasting impact. The best thing is to have somebody on the journey with you. I'm proud to say Anna and I are on the same journey together. Although we're individuals from different starting points, we try to do everything together so we'll continually become more and more aligned. And so we continue the never-ending (and often challenging) conversation on how we should live our lives.

Plus, it wasn't as hard as I would have thought. Being connected in to people who have dealt with these sorts of issues already is a huge encouragement and motivation.

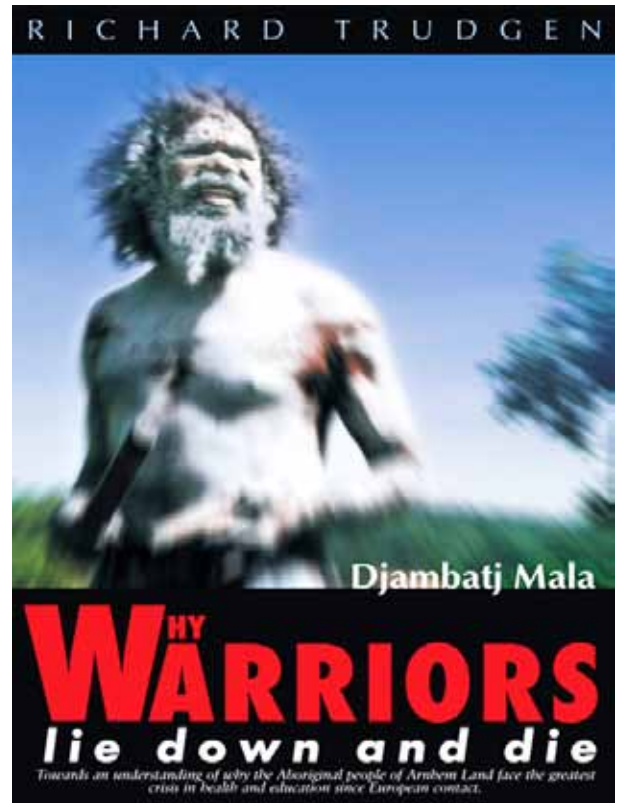
So why live in a different way? Sometimes it feels like it's for the health of the Earth. Other times it's better for us, to make us happy. But I choose not to worship the Earth, or the people who live on it; instead I worship the creator. So then we must live God's way.



News from Manna Gum (cont.)

a Lenten study series delivered over the internet. About 50 households signed up to take part and there has been some good feedback now that it has completed. People have generally appreciated the content, however there are limitations to an internet-based medium. Next year we will continue to refine and adapt the idea and process to make it more useful. So watch this space!

Another exciting and significant undertaking has been working with the folk from AHED (Arnhem Human Enterprises Development) to hold a day conference in Melbourne: *Future Dreaming: Purpose, Power & Passion in Remote Indigenous Communities*. This is just about to happen (24th May) as we go to press and we are hoping that this will add a new, ultimately more hopeful, note to public discussion on what is happening in indigenous communities, as well as raise the profile of the great work being done in Arnhem Land by AHED. If you couldn't make the day, then I highly recommend that you buy the much acclaimed book by Richard Trudgen, *Why Warriors Lay Down and Die*, which provides the foundation of AHED's work. If you only ever read one book on what has happened, and is happening in indigenous communities (and you should read at least one), then read this one. Purchase from www.whywarriors.com.au or through your bookstore.



Support the work of MANNA GUM



About Manna Gum

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

1. Provide resources for Christian groups to understand and practise the social, economic and political implications of the Gospel of Christ; and
2. Stimulate critical thinking on issues of aid and development, poverty and wealth, and to undertake research and advocacy on matters concerning Australian aid and development involvement overseas.

Please contact us if you would like more information about our work or to find how we could support you and your group/organisation to explore some of these issues.

www.mannagum.org.au

MANNA GUM seeks to live within the economy of God – frugally, ethically and through the generous sharing of abundance within the community of faith. If our work resonates with you, please consider becoming a financial supporter.

- I would like to make a donation to MANNA GUM.
 I would like to become a regular financial supporter of MANNA GUM

Name: _____

Address: _____

State: _____ Postcode: _____

Email: _____

CONTRIBUTIONS per month once off donation

Amount: \$20 \$30 \$50 \$100 Other \$ _____

Electronic Funds Transfer (EFT)* **Cheque/Money Order**
BSB: 633 000 A/c No. 134 179 514 (payable to Manna Gum Initiatives Inc.)
A/c Name: Manna Gum Initiatives Inc.

* We can send you information on how to set up an EFT.

**Post to MANNA GUM, 25 Holmes Road, Long Gully VIC 3550
call (03) 5463 5223 or email us at jonathan@mannagum.org.au**