

CCSY – Pentecost 5, 2021 – Craig D’Alton

Christianity is a religion of big challenging ideas that make a big difference to how we treat one another. Love your neighbour. Love your enemy. Forgiveness rather than retribution. Every life is of equal value.

The list goes on, and includes, as in today’s epistle, the economic as well as what we might term the strictly moral. St Paul writing to the Corinthian community, being careful to note that he is giving advice rather than a command, addresses the question of the distribution of wealth amongst believers and, by extension, the distribution of wealth within society. He suggests that the rich should help the poor: “I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance.”

A fair balance. To put the concept into the Australian vernacular, Paul is a fan of the concept of the fair go – and of the idea that that fair go should lead to those who have an abundance not giving everything away, but certainly sharing what they have with those who do not have enough. In order that, as it is written, "The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little."

In this, Paul is being consistent with the model of the earliest church communities provided by Luke in the Acts of the Apostles, where he tells probably idealised stories of the believers sharing all that they had in common, so that no-one lacked anything.

Yes, my friends, Christianity and a pure form of Socialism are not so much opposed to one another, as entirely cognate concepts.

This is something that has been recognised from time to time in the church’s history, as the disconnect between the wealth of some in the church and the poverty of some other of its members forced thinkers and leaders to re-assess their economic values systems. Famously in the English-speaking world, the Christian Socialist movement was prompted by the writings of F.D. Maurice, John Ruskin and the artist William Morris, along with many others. Here in Melbourne in the early and mid-20th century Canon Farnham Maynard of St Peter’s Eastern Hill, and Father Tucker of

the Brotherhood of St Laurence were prominent clerics unafraid of being tarred with the socialist label.

It may, however, surprise some here at Christ Church to know that the leading light of Christian Socialist thought in Melbourne in the later 19th century was in fact Fr Tucker's father, Canon Horace Tucker, vicar of this parish. And he applied his Christian Socialist thought beyond the church and into the wider realm of politics and society. Tucker was a Utopian reformer.

Allow me to plagiarise at length author Bill Metcalf in *The Encyclopedia of Australian Utopian Communalism*:

*The best example of a Victorian utopian text with clear connections to communal living would be *The New Arcadia: an Australian Story*, by Horace Tucker. Tucker's book portrays starving mobs of unemployed workers roaming the streets of Melbourne. A doctor berates them for doing nothing to help themselves overcome this political and social crisis. From an inheritance, this doctor donates land and money to start a utopian commune based on Christian Socialism. In it, members employ the latest technology, including steam-irrigation, to achieve a prosperous, egalitarian society. Gender equality is crucial in this scheme but, for women who prefer not to live with men, a separate commune, what we would now call a 'feminist-separatist' facility, is developed.*

In 1892 Horace Tucker led a group which really did establish seven communes in Victoria, at Jindivik, Wonwondah East, Red Hill, Moora Moora, Kilfera, Horsham and Croydon. Over the next three years, 700 families (about 2000 people) lived on these communes. Tucker intended that each commune should consist of five collective homes, or mini-communes, each consisting of a married couple (with children) and nine single men, but this never eventuated. Instead, most families lived in their own tents while single men dossed down wherever they could. Within Tucker's communes all work was shared, without pay, and any outside income went into communal funds. Everyone had equal access to collective resources regardless of their work, gender or age. Not surprisingly, these communes faced opposition from conservative politicians although many local newspapers were initially enthusiastic. Horace Tucker, unfortunately, was more a propagandist than a manager, and he continued to promote his communes even after serious flaws developed. Illness was frequent, with several children dying from

bronchitis, at least partially because of poor housing. Tucker maintained that his brand of communal living was 'opposed to the miserable, competitive, throat-cutting methods of society. It depends for success on a brotherly regard for each other ... [and] such efforts would result in a more far-seeing and a wiser race of workers'.

While these communes enjoyed some commercial success, members lived in cold, leaky tents, often lacking even boots and warm clothing. Horace Tucker, the optimistic promoter, tried to keep members cheerful with admonitions to 'carry on' but the communards resented being treated as serfs, and rebelled. All seven communes ran into serious trouble in 1894, and slowly collapsed.

[...] Tucker's book impacted on other rural communes forming in Victoria in the 1890s, as well as on communes in Tasmania and Western Australia.

What Metcalf does not say is that Tucker funded these adventures partly from his own and his wife's capital, and partly by hitting up the parishioners of Christ Church. Not just its vicar, but this parish, was the founder of Utopian Communities in the Christian Socialist tradition. This was the same spirit that led to the foundation of the satellite churches of St Martin, St Laurence and St Chad, each of them for the poorer communities at that time present around South Yarra. In the 1890s – at the same time as the church was being completed - the spire built, the Chancel screen installed, and the school founded – incidentally a school for poorer children, not for the children of the rich – this parish sought through its vicar to bring about social change on a grand scale. It failed. But Tucker and his friends and least tried.

By living out the big challenging ideas of the Bible.

The Bible, especially the New Testament, gets this big ideas thing so right: Love your neighbour. Love your enemy. Forgiveness rather than retribution. Every life is of equal value. But also: The one who has much should not have too much, and the one who has little should not have too little.

What Godly challenge, I wonder, would both St Paul and Canon Tucker set Christ Church and its parishioners in 2021?