Staying Human

Reimagining the Spirit of the Commons

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Slides accompanying this text can be downloaded here and are indicated with [*]

I just moved to Oxford in January to take up a new post and am still unpacking boxes and finding my way around what is proving to be a singular and strange institution. I'm in that bewildered stage when it feels like I've gone through the back of a wardrobe and entered a strange land where everyday questions include "should I wear a gown to this meeting or not?" And "why is a working knowledge of Latin and the liturgical calendar necessary to know what is happening at any given point in time?"

However, two weeks ago I took a break from unpacking to go for a walk. It was a bright, crisp sunny day so my wife Caroline and I decided to stroll along the Thames through Oxford towards Binsey. And this led us on to Port Meadow which at the time was completed flooded. [*] It looked like a large lake. I stopped and asked an elderly gentleman who was fishing whether it was always like this and he told me with great enthusiasm that no, it only flooded occasionally. For most of the year it was a commons that the nearby villagers still had grazing rights to. In the spring and summer there were cattle and horses to be found [*] where I now saw an expanse of water. When I looked on google maps I saw that on one side, further along was Godstow Abbey and on the other, was Wolvercote meadow, another commons. After a brief discussion of the history of these commons with the fisherman, we walked on, returning to Oxford via Aristotle Lane which is the access road from the city to Port Meadow.

This Sunday perambulation marks the territory of my talk this evening. I will draw on three things: the history of the commons as a social practice, a tradition of thinking about the common good that originates with Aristotle, and Christian political theologies of a common life enacted in monastic and other communities to re-envision the pastoral and political mission and ministry of churches today.

Define commons

First let me define what is meant by the commons.

Technically understood, [*] a commons is made up of:

- a shared social and material good (such as a mountain pasture),
- a human community (shepherds and the villages of which they are a part), and
- a set of formal and informal customary practices, formal rules, social processes for governing and administering that good (e.g., practices for rotating access to the pasture between shepherds).

A commons is produced through the interaction of human cooperation, nonhuman ecosystems, and material and social processes. Commoning is a name given for the social practice that produces a commons.

Each commons is distinct and adapted to conditions in a very specific place, so that the moral and social norms for managing a commons cannot be easily transferred (e.g. a pasture commons in Oxford will be different from one in Switzerland or Nigeria or Indonesia).

There are three basic types of commons [*]:

1. The natural commons of fisheries, forests, watersheds, irrigation systems, and the like. Port Meadow and Wolvercote Meadow are examples of this kind of natural commons.
2. The cultural and knowledge commons of a community's language, ancestral wisdom, stories, scientific techniques, rituals, and cultural practices such as games; and, in the contemporary context,
3. The digital commons of open-source software, information, and technologies (e.g. Wikipedia, Linux, and TCP/IP protocols).

Each type of commons embodies a non-centralized authority structure. Rather than being controlled and managed by one or few people, its form and character is determined by many contributing to it. For example, Linux as an operating system is developed through highly decentralized decision-making structures that involve all those who contribute. This contrasts with Microsoft's operating systems which involve many programmers in its creation but ultimately the decision as to what shape and direction it should take rests with a few executives and is determined not by what will benefit everyone who contributes to its generation but what will most benefit the profit margins of Microsoft. As this example illustrates, as a way of provisioning human needs a commons is distinct from either state or market processes, and entails highly participatory, self-organized, and distributed forms of peer-to-peer governance. It is thus radically democratic and represents an ancient and universal democratic social practice.

The commons as a form of political economy

To draw out what is distinctive about a commons let me make a number of contrasts. **First**, and perhaps most obviously, [*] a commons stands in direct contrast to a market as a means of organizing life together to meet material and social needs. Like a commons, a market is a social practice with intrinsic moral ends the fulfilment of which entails the inhabitation of certain virtues. An absence of virtue leads to a breakdown in the reciprocity, trust, and cooperation a market needs to function (e.g., a breakdown in social trust leading to a run on the banks will quickly tank a national economy). Markets as a distinct kind of social practice are very good for organizing the production, distribution, exchange, and consumption of what we need to live and work and have our being. But humans cannot live by markets alone. Indeed, if markets are the only institutional mechanism for provisioning life and structuring work, then what is generated is an economy that serves the interests and desires of those with the most capital rather than the needs of all those who contribute to and depend on it. Diverse institutional forms for provisioning human needs are required if the monopoly of the market as the mechanism for producing, distributing and exchanging the goods and services we rely on to live is to be broken.

The second contrast is with the state, and more specifically, the shared goods the state produces which are public rather than common. [*] What is public and what is common is often conflated but they are different. Examples of public goods are law, roads, parks, sewers, public libraries, and social welfare provision. In contrast to the commons they are provided by the state. For example, in the Justinian Code from the 6th C, a legal code that became the basis of much European law, a port was a public thing or *res publica* built and maintained for the public good. However, its use was determined by and at the discretion of the public authority or state. The Justinian Code distinguishes between a public good like a port and the sea and seashore. These were a commons. As a commons they were neither owned nor controlled by a single authority. Instead, they were available for use by everyone at any time.[1] To use a modern example, Yosemite National Park is a public good, as its boundaries, institutional form, and access to it are determined and controlled by state, that is to say, public authorities.[2] In contrast, Maine lobster fisheries are a commons. It is recognized by the state in law but its scope, means of governance, and organization are not derived from or created by the state. Rather, the state responds to and sanctions something that already existed, and which is constituted independently of the state. The state is involved in its governance, but as only one interest in a broader coalition of those who contribute to and benefit from Maine lobster fisheries as a commons.

A third contrast to be drawn is between a commons and a household. [*] For much of history, households, great and small, nomadic and settled, have been the basic unit for organizing and providing the material needs and wants of humans. Even with the industrial revolution, and the separation of paid work from the household economy, households are still a primary means for organizing our material and social life. It is where we tend to eat, socialise, sleep, and care for one another. Through the common life of a household we produce basic goods such as intimacy, childcare, and a home. Like a commons, a household emerges from shared labour and represents a form of common life. But unlike a commons, a household is a more tightly bounded entity with clear

lines as to who is and who is not part of any given household (even as these are subject to constant negotiation).

Lastly, a commons can be contrasted with modes of association that take the form of societies and corporations. [*] Again, I am drawing here on the ancient legal distinction, codified in the Justinian Code and Roman law. Business conglomerates like Amazon, Koch Industries, Disney, Unilever, and Boeing are overwhelmingly associated with the term corporation, but alongside trading companies are corporations and societies such as monasteries, cathedrals, guilds, professional associations, universities, trade unions, and cities (e.g., the Corporation of the City of London). Corporations of various kinds have been a central feature of both the ancient and modern world, indeed their standing in ancient Greek, Roman, and Germanic legal traditions are the backdrop to their form today in the west. Corporate associations of various kinds stand between the household, market, state, and commons as another core institutional tool and set of social practices for providing, organizing, and governing the use of material and social goods and constructively addressing shared challenges so that human life can by cultivated and sustained over time.

Each of these entities – the commons, the household, the state, the market, and the corporation – is a political entity. And here I am drawing on but also extending Aristotle's conception of the human as a political animal. Humans cannot survive, let alone thrive, without others, and some kind of common life must be cultivated if human life is to go on. Politics is the name for generating this common life. The commons, alongside the household, the state, the market, and the corporation, is a way humans come together through politics to form a common life through which to live their life over time with others in a particular place.

As a way of generating a shared world or meaning and action through which to cultivate and sustain the material and social goods and services we need to live let alone live well, the commons shares characteristics with but, as a social practice, is distinct from the state, the household, the market, and the corporation. We need all of them in a mixed economy if human life together is to flourish. To echo what I said earlier, at present the market is too dominant and has largely coopted the household and the corporation. We need to reclaim the commons to provide a counter to this dominance. Arguably, all these forms of association and the way they enable human life to be provisioned and sustained depend on the commons. Think of language which is a commons, no other social practice or institution can exist without language. Yet through trade marks and intellectual property rights we constantly see an attempt to enclose language and render it either a property to be bought and sold or a public thing the state then administers, polices through bureaucratic procedures, or controls through censorship.

The enclosure of the commons as the engine of capitalism

[*] The conversion of the commons into private property controlled by market mechanisms and used for private benefit of the individual property owner or into public property administered by the state and used for its own, state directed ends is a constant threat in the modern period. The story I tell now will, I am sure, be familiar to many of you. It is a story most powerfully told by Karl Polanyi, but it is one also found in the other Karl, Karl Marx. The great Christian socialist, R.H. Tawney has another version of this story. And latterly, the anarchist thinkers Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, the radical feminist Silvia Federici, the historian Peter Linebaugh, advocates of Buen Vivir drawing on indigenous thought and practice in South America, and Indian environmental justice advocates such as Vandana Shiva have their own versions of this story. My version begins in England but there can be other starting points and there are many parallel versions of this narrative. For example, my student Hendrawan Wijoyo just completed a fascinating analysis of enclosure and forms of the commons in Indonesia from the independence from the Dutch onwards.

In England, the natural commons were crucial to the medieval political economy, particularly for the livelihoods of the common people. Their defence was a site of constant resistance to and revolt against governing authorities (namely, the king) and the landowning classes (i.e., the aristocracy and church). For example, a fruit of the struggle that culminated in signing the Magna Carta in 1215 (which largely protected the rights and privileges of the aristocracy and merchants) was the equally important Charter of the Forest, signed in 1217 at St Paul's Cathedral in London. It formally recognized the ancient rights of commoners to graze and forage in 'forests.' Forests was a technical legal term which included wood, heath, and wetlands that had been taken over by the king. The formal recognition in law of Port Meadow and Wolvercote meadow date from this time. Both pre-exist the Norman conquest and are recorded in the Domesday book. The right to graze cattle and sheep on them was confirmed in a charter in 1279.

Despite this confirmation in law there have been many disputes in which the right to the commons was contested as different powers tried to take it over for their own, exclusive benefit and thereby restrict the access of the villagers or sell back to them what was previously free. These powerful interests ranged from the mayor of Oxford, the crown, to local landowners. Some of these conflicts led to violent clashes, one such is known as the Battle for Wolvercote. In each case, the villages who defended the commons were resisting what is known as enclosure.

Through coercive often violent measures, enclosure takes what is common and shared by all and renders it into private property that is under the exclusive use of either a single user or an oligarchy. Historically the consequence of this is that, rather than cultivate the commons in a way that ensures it is not exhausted, those with an exclusive right to what is now designated as property can use the land, or wood, or heath, for wholly extractive purposes that benefit them materially but often destroy the environment on which everyone else depends. This is exemplified through the monocrops of plantations and the toxic wastelands produced by mining – both of which are central to industrial development.

Another less biologically toxic example of enclosure but one that was massively destructive of human life and local culture was the enclosure of the Scottish Highlands from the 18th to the 19th Century – often referred to as the clearances. Landowners forcibly removed local people from what was an ancient commons in order to use the land for sheep and now grouse shooting. It was facilitated by the Inclosure Act of 1773 that enabled the enclosure of land through removing commoners' rights of access to what was a commons.

Many see the increasing enclosure of the commons as a deliberate and widespread policy, which in England dates back to the fifteenth century, as a key driver of the emergence of agrarian and then industrial capitalism in England. It was also, as Black Marxist thinker Cedric Robinson and in parallel with him, the radical historian Peter Linebaugh contend, the training and testing ground for British colonialism – colonialism being a form of enclosure on a massive scale. An 1803 speech by one John Sinclair, [*] first president of the Board of Agriculture, makes this link explicit. He states: "Let us not be satisfied with the liberation of Egypt, or the subjugation of Malta, but let us subdue Finchley Common; let us conquer Hounslow Heath, let us compel Epping Forest to submit to the yoke of improvement."[3]

An essential part of suppression at home was expansion abroad. As Peter Linebaugh notes, the Scottish clearances, enslavement of Africans, Irish famine, and dispossession of American first nations are all of a piece and stand in direct relationship to each other as the fruit of what Marx delicately called "primitive accumulation" – which is really just confiscation and theft through brutal means. Primitive accumulation names the process by which one set of people violently secure the resources or capital necessary to invest in the means of production that drives forward capitalism.

Through enclosure, lords and monarchs removed the means through which the common people in Britain and the indigenous peoples in the colonies supported themselves. Unable to live off the land, and needing to make ends meet, they become available for working in mines, factories, plantations, or service industries. They are thereby 'proletarianized'; that is, their life is made precarious, they become dependent on wage labour to live, and are thereby subject to the control of those who pay them. Stripping people of their independent economic agency is always and everywhere the prelude to their political emasculation and domination.

Enclosure: the continuing story of capitalism

Today we are living through another equally rapacious process of enclosure. Again it is sold to us on the rhetoric of improving economic productivity, efficiency, and driving forward progress. Exactly as it was in the past, enclosure benefits the few, makes life more precarious and miserable for the many, and concentrates money and power while generating monopoly structures that control access to what was previously free and shared by all.

I am talking here of the enclosure of our cultural and digital commons by meta, google, Palentir, Chat GPT and the companies driving AI. These take our language, art, friendships, knowledge, and attention, enclose it, commodify it, and then sell it back to us, all the while making our shared life toxic and uninhabitable. Through this process we become dependent on them in what is now a massively asymmetric relationship where we are the surveilled commodity and they increasingly control the means of social and political reproduction (for example, neither elections nor increasingly buying and selling are possible without using their platforms)

The AI revolution – and that is what it is - follows the pattern of all revolutions driven by and in the service of capitalism beginning with the agricultural and then industrial revolutions. This pattern is one of enclosure, extraction, and exploitation. They enclose the commons. In the case of AI it is our knowledge, language, art, and social life which have been colonised by corporations such as Chat GPT without permission. It depends on highly extractive fossil fuelled energy production with massive carbon emitting data centres that use vast amounts of fresh water to cool them and extracting rare earth materials from vulnerable ecologies to make them. And all the accurate data sets they depend on are created by young men and women doing the monotonous tagging and labelling in places like Kenya working in exploitative labour conditions for very little pay just as the factory workers did in Manchester, Liverpool and London before them in the 19th Century. Meanwhile, the gig economy and the sweeping away of large sectors of employment makes life more precarious and difficult for everyone as well as cutting us off from each other and the ways we organize life together. And like the robber Barons of the 16th Century, the oil and rail barons on the 19th century such as Rockefeller and Carnegie, we now have the tech bro-ligarchy of Musk, Zuckerberg, Theil and others. There is nothing new under the sun.

Technocratic paradigm vs. humanity as a commons

Underlying and driving these shifts is the anti-humanistic vision of what Pope Francis calls the "technocratic paradigm."

- The technocratic paradigm has a wholly instrumental view of nature, separating and alienating us from creation. It operates with what Francis calls a "tyrannical anthropocentrism" (LS #68) as well as a hyper individualism.
- It equates scientific [*] and technological progress with human progress while
- [*] denying any moral and transcendent basis of life such that everything is subject to a will to power without moral limits save for a cursory utilitarian calculus.

All this is the demonic reverse of commoning. Indeed, in stark contrast to the technocratic paradigm, I contend that our humanity, understood not as a biological claim but as a moral and political claim, is best conceptualized as a commons. And it is precisely our humanity as a commons that post and transhumanist visions want to enclose and render into private property to be fired off to Mars.

And as with prior capital led revolutions, the result of this process is that, as Karl Polanyi summarizes it: “Instead of economy being embedded in social relations, social relations are embedded in the economic system.”[4] What Polanyi points to is how, in contrast to the commons as a way of organizing and sustaining the material and social conditions of life, a society solely organized around the pursuit of money and technology and administered to that end by the state become ruled by economic considerations rather than the other way around. But we cannot live by money and technology alone.

Whether one agrees with the specifics of Polanyi’s historical account his broader point stands. The production, distribution, and consumption of material and social goods, along with the use of money and debt to enable this, cannot be placed over and against everything else that makes up life with others. This is a point made repeatedly in lectures given on behalf of T4CG but bears repeating. Life together should not be subsumed within and made to serve market systems and reductively economic modes of valuation.

Counter movements to disenclose life and re-embed economy in a moral life

But Polanyi also argues that historically the formation of a system built on enclosure, extraction, and commodification inherently led to spontaneous counter-movements to re-embed economic relations within social and political relations. As we see today societies struggle to cope with the deleterious impact of an unregulated market and technology on society and nature and the enclosure of the commons. Some counter-movements are anti-democratic and authoritarian, such as fascism; others are democratic in form. Examples of the latter include political movements such as the labour and environmental movements which help generate regulatory checks such as employment legislation, the formation of welfare structures, and environmental protections. Whether authoritarian or democratic, each counter-movement seeks to prioritize society as having an independent and greater value than profit margins. And each counter-movement represents an attempt to reclaim agency from the plutocrats and the systems and structures that serve their interests. Authoritarian counter movement seek to remove the agency of the rich few and vest it in the one leader who takes on a messianic form as a saviour of the people. By contrast, *democratic* counter movements seek to generate *leaderful* organisations as well as new institutional forms that distribute agency and restore responsibility to the many. Oftentimes, and confusingly, such movements involve a combination of authoritarian and democratic impulses. In America, the Populists of the 1890s had William Jennings Bryan, the Great Commoner, the Labor movement had John L. Lewis, and today there is Trump. But before all of them was Oliver Cromwell.

But enclosure and its consequences also consistently generate radically egalitarian democratic movements and political theologies. An early modern example is that articulated by the seventeenth-century Diggers, who made reclamation of the commons the building block of their understanding of salvation. At St. George’s Hill in Surrey and a number of other locations around England, communities of Diggers occupied and started cultivating land they believed should be a commons. They took this work of cultivation to presage the return of Christ, ‘the true Leveller’, who

would bring about the restoration of creation.[5] Building on Genesis and Acts 2–4, they explicitly rejected wage labour and advocated holding all things in common as a means of restoring mutual fellowship and properly ordered relations with creation. Like other radical reformation groups before them such as the Mennonites, they advocated nonviolence as the primary means of bringing about social transformation and bearing witness to the coming kingdom of God.

Their experiment in radical democracy was short lived. However, it anticipated and prefigured several developments that would become central to Christian responses to modernization and the dislocations it brought in its wake. I would contend that one example of this is Christian socialism. Christian socialism can be understood as an attempt to apply commoning as a social practice to urban industrial conditions. Rather than being nostalgic, this helped generate energy, imagination, and great innovation that led to new, highly democratic institutional forms such as the cooperative and trade unions. The work and vision of William Morris is but one figure where we see this linkage (see *A Dream of John Ball,* 1888).

These institutional forms addressed not simply the material and social crisis brought on by enclosure and commodification but more profoundly, the crisis of agency. We have a parallel crisis of agency that also requires addressing through new institutional forms of commoning. In the contemporary moment this takes for the form of such things as time banks, community gardens, LETS schemes, and myriad experiments in the emerging solidarity economy.

As we all experience on a daily basis, our lives are now increasingly organized via impersonal, mostly dysfunctional systems and highly bureaucratic procedures so that we become either units of social administration to be managed in public or at work or units of data to be processed and surveilled with our relationships and emotions sold back to us as clicks and likes. Meanwhile, as Silvia Federici reflects: [*]

> The new enclosures make mobile and migrant labor the dominant form of labor. … Capital keeps us constantly on the move, separating us from our countries, farms, gardens, homes, and workplaces, because this guarantees cheap wages, communal disorganization, and maximum vulnerability in front of the law, the courts, and the police.[6]

The salience of what Federici says struck me as I walk through new developments such as that built around [*] Battersea power station or that are being built along the A5 and A40 corridor. They have no public let alone common space. They are entirely ruled by commercial and property regimes so that you can't gather without permission of the property developer (whether to protest or to evangelize) and surveillance cameras are everywhere.

As already noted, responses to the crisis of agency are seen in populist movements of left and right and a turn to authoritarian solutions, again, on the left and right, to secure a world that feels out of control. My proposal is the need to proclaim a democratic vision of a common life that restores human agency, one born out of the call and command of God who summons us to take responsibility for creation and for each other rather than give up responsibility by giving it over to a strong man to

secure us. Importantly, commoning opens up a different way of imagining the future and possible pathways for human development. Commoning points to a radically different and more humane way forward to one determined by capital accumulation and the ever more intensive intrusion of technology into our psychic and social life. It points towards new, creative forms of solidarity economy that enhance human agency and conviviality rather than diminish, enclose, or exploit it.

Commons as an embodiment of a theological vision of what it means to be human and the character and quality of relations needed to fulfil that meaning and purpose. [*]

This leads me to ask: so what has Port Meadow to do with Jerusalem? What does the social practice of the commons and its history have to say to the contemporary mission and ministry of churches?

A commons is a grounded, place based, radically democratic, nonviolent social practice that cultivates not only our humanity but more mutually adaptive forms of human-nonhuman relationship. In short, it is a practice for neighbouring ourselves and our nonhuman neighbours and thereby anticipating that communion we seek when Christ returns.

This line of argument can be summarized as follows: humans are created and redeemed to fulfil their personhood within and through a just and generous common life with each other and with creation. The realization of our personhood is best enabled through the kind of democratic, agency-centric form of social practices embodied in the cultivation of a commons.

The theological basis for this line of argument proposes that democratic social practices enable humans to realize their true natures as those created in the image of the triune God and redeemed by Christ. The implication of this theological confession is that each person has an intrinsic worth that must be honoured and that everyone matters equally, no matter their station or situation. A further implication is that to image God revealed in and through Christ and participate in divine-human relations, and thereby fulfil what it means to be human, requires participation in a just and generous common life here and now, not just in the age to come.

Commoning is a form of politics that honours the dignity of each person and the goodness of creation whilst also ensuring that everyone can participate in forming a common life and so fulfil their personhood. Rather than be acted on and have their world determined and controlled by the one, the few or the algorithm, all can have agency in cultivating and contributing to shared worlds of meaning and action both with and for others and with and for the rest of creation. Commoning thereby provides a means through which human personhood is actualized, in and through free and mutually responsible relationships with and for others. Rather than be rendered a passive client of others who over-determine the shape and direction of one's life, commoning makes provision for each person to have a hand in shaping and benefitting from the material and social conditions under which they live and work.

Within this framework, commoning as a democratic social practice accords with an understanding of the human as revealed in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, whose life, death, and resurrection represents the true likeness of the human. This Christological humanism (what Karl Barth calls 'God humanism') rejects both individualism and collectivism, advocating instead for humans as persons constituted in and through relationship with others. As Barth puts it:

> The Christian message is interested in the particular individual as well as in the fellowship of individuals, but it puts the emphasis always on the individual being *together* with other individuals. As far as fellowship is concerned, it is always meant to be constituted by the mutually free responsibility of different individuals. (Barth 1951: 162, original emphasis)

A Christological and personalist way of understanding commoning provides a direct link to Catholic Social Teaching (CST). CST distinguishes 'authentic' from 'inauthentic' forms of democracy. The magisterium contends that what passes for democracy too often undermines the realization of personhood. It has in mind here highly bureaucratic, state centric forms of proceduralism. In response, John Paul II outlined the conditions to be met by democracy if it is to be 'authentic':

> Authentic democracy is possible only … on the basis of a correct conception of the human person. It requires that the necessary conditions be present for the advancement both of the individual through education and formation in true ideals, and of the 'subjectivity' of society through the creation of structures of participation and shared responsibility. (*Centesimus Annus* 46; John Paul II 1991)

A commons embodies and enacts a relational, environmentally attuned, and place-based form of political and economic association, one that is just the kind of a structure of participation and shared responsibility that John Paul II called for.

Commoning also bears witness to the conception of integral ecology and a holistic vision of salvation that Pope Francis sets out in *Laudato Si'*. It is a way of enacting an understanding of personhood as constituted from within relations with other creatures and biotic life not away from or over against it. A commons thereby embodies in a particular time and place a creational vision of the common good. Within such a conception, the good life is one lived in convivial, reciprocal relations and mutual care between human and other-than-human beings rather than in pursuit of some combination of capital accumulation and the technocratic administration of life.[7] Such a life bears witness in the here and now to the Spirit's work of cultivating communion and shares in the Pentecostal labour of forming a people from an alienated mass or crowd in a particular place and time.

Commoning as a way of fostering shared life bears witness against two equal and opposite forms of sinful social pathology we see today. It stands in opposition to a demand that everyone become the same or subsume their identity into a single identity – whether that of the nation or a globalized consumer. Conversely, it stands against the assumption that there can be no shared life, or that polarization and division go all the way down. Rather, it is a way of participating in the reality that solidarity across differences of experience, structural location, and culture can be discovered and

that discovery is a revelation of a prior and more basic creaturely interdependency embodied in the practice of commoning.

The often-made contrast between Babel and Pentecost is instructive here. The former entailed a false unity based on a totalizing uniformity; the latter represents differences coming into a choir of many voices, each singing a different part while contributing to and receiving from what is shared. Babel symbolizes totalizing concentrations of power premised on the denial of difference by demanding everyone speaks and acts in the same way. By contrast, Pentecost entails forming a common life that can bear witness to the reconciliation of differences in and through Christ.[8] Such reconciliation generates communion not sameness, it produces difference in dynamic and fruitful association, not a one size fits all identity or static structure.

A more speculative theological claim that would need much further development is that the commons is a way of embodying this kind of Pentecostal fruitful association between humans and between humans and the rest of creation. It can be a way to bear witness to the new Jerusalem: a garden-city that signifies the healed and harmonious inter-relationship between human political economies and nonhuman ecologies. But in this age, before Christ's return, any such form of witness will be a severe struggle to defend and tend.

The commons as a form of mission and ministry

[*] So what might this mean in practice? Let me sketch a number of possibilities.

- **Parish as commons:** much church work, particularly in the Anglican world, operates out of either a sense of *noblesse oblige* or sits within an apolitical humanitarian service framework that does not address questions of power or agency. Reimagining and reworking the parish as a commons radically challenges this. Within such a frame the projects and initiatives build in co-governance and co-production (awful neologisms I know but they name something important). And rather than one way, top down forms of service provision, they would build in mutuality and contribute to the democratic formation of a common life. This kind of recalibration would involve taking the parish beyond simply being a community hub. I am grateful to Brooklynn Reardon for drawing my attention to local churches in North Carolina that are seeking to do this. For example, Blackburn Chapel, a church in Todd, NC, was located in a food desert, so the church turned their grounds into a community garden. They now run a CSA programme and a small farmers market booth called "Todd's Table". This is rather different to a food bank as it does not operate from a position of *noblesse oblige.* Rather it involves the agency of those who benefit in contributing to the production of food and, through a convivial process, those contributing also help develop a shared world of meaning and action.[9]

- **Industrial commons**: an example of the solidarity economy is the Industrial Commons. This is a coalition of cooperatives founded by Molly Hemstreet and others in a depressed area.[10]

- **Disenclosure of crown and church lands**: The last is a more large scale shift. It comes from Catherine Howarth who relayed it to me in a conversation we had on a train coming back from bearing witness to the foundation of a new community organizing coalition in Grimsby. Catherine directs something called ShareAction[11] that applies commons thinking to the realm of shares and pensions – a seemingly unlikely context for this kind of approach but she is doing remarkable work in that context. Having come of the very depressed coastal town of Grimsby she was pondering the fact that the seabed is owned by the Crown. Her proposal is to revision and repurpose the seabed as a commons held in trust by the king in common with the coastal towns and villages of England. The money generated from renting the seabed to windfarms generates millions and could be fed back into the renewal of Britain's coastal communities rather than into the coffers of the king as they are at present. Building on this, what about revisioning all the land owned by the Church of England commissioners as a commons - a radical act of disenclosure.

And on that note I end.

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Please note this is not a transcript. The full lecture as delivered, and the Q & A, can be found at www.t4cg.substack.com and at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=avCIyfc9NUI

NOTES

[1] Ibid., 36-37.

[2] This reflects the existing reality. Whether US national parks should have been understood as a commons developed in dialogue with and respecting the native Americans who lived there is another matter.

[3] P 142-43 Quoted Peter Linebaugh p142

[4] Ibid., 60.

[5] Gurney 2007: 177

[6] Silvia Federici, *Re-Enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons* (New York: Autonomedia, 2018), 29.

[7] Roger Merino, "An alternative to 'alternative development'?: *Buen vivir* and human development in Andean countries," *Oxford Development Studies* 44.3 (2016), 276; Joe Quick and James T. Spartz, "On the Pursuit of Good Living in Highland Ecuador: Critical Indigenous Discourses of Sumak Kawsay, *Latin American Research Review* 53.4 (2018): 757-769; and Marisol de la Cadena, "Indigenous Cosmopolitics in the Andes: Conceptual Reflection Beyond 'Politics'," *Cultural Anthropology* 25.2 (May 2010), 354.

[8] 1 Corinthians 12 can be read as a meditation on exactly this dynamic in how plurality constitutes the church. Riffing on a common piece of ancient political rhetoric, Paul does not see diversity as a threat, since different members with different gifts and experiences are constitutive of the body. These members are interdependent on each other, with special regard needed for weaker members and those who are dishonored or stigmatized (22–23). Unity requires the exercise of different gifts and how these give voice to different experiences of being embodied (Jew, Greeks, slave, free). Unity is a gift of the Spirit and expressed in mutual care (25–26).

[9] Spring Forest in Durham, NC is a local church that thinks about its mission and ministry in terms of the commons and use it as a framework for their ministries (refugee work, CSA shares, and they do monthly dinners and stuff too. https://www.springforest.org St. John UMC, in NC does Thursday night dinners for the entire little village throughout the winter, and it's entirely community run. They also, always, leave the doors to the church unlocked. It's just seen as a community space that anyone can use.

[10] Listen, Organize, Act podcast interview with Molly and Felipe in Season 1.

[11] https://shareaction.org/