

# Luke Lerner in Conversation with Alex Fry – Part 2

## Transcript

Alex: And I'm really struck by your comments on the institutional culture. But also your comment on there have been times where you've been at risk of moral injury through denying your very self. And I I just wondered if you could speak to that a little bit more. What might that look like as someone from a working-class background in the Church of England?

Luke: Sure. I mean there's lots of layers to that. Some of it comes down to kind of, you know, I don't know that we have a particularly robust whistleblowing policy within the Church of England. I mean, how can you even it's so hard to even talk about the Church of England as a monolithic institution because it's not really. It's more like a system of of feudal barons, you know, in in, in how it runs. So what you experience in one place might be very different to what you experience in another in terms of how that directly relates to class. I mean, I could tell you a bunch of stories about, you know, my dad walking out of jobs and things because he was asked to do bribes and and stuff like that. And this sense of not being for sale is core to to my sense of who I am, I suppose. And there are times when that feels tested. The other side of it is, of course, we are the institutional church, which is quite wedded to the status quo in many ways. You know, we have our our Lords Spiritual in the House of Lords. We're sort of part of the framework of this country, and therefore the Church of England is part of that web of structures, relationships and institutions which maintains and reproduces class injustice in this country. We can't avoid that fact by being part of the status quo. Inevitably, we are in some way a part of maintaining those unjust class relationships, so there is a sense for me at times where you know, I I call it what it is. I probably get told off for this, but we'd have things like a a high sheriff's justice service. And you know, I'd come from a meeting of learning horrific injustice perpetuated on on people experiencing homelessness and cover ups and both charities and state institutions failing in their statutory duties. And then have to sit there quietly while those same people are parading around in their you know, funny wigs for a justice service and talking about justice in the church. Meanwhile, I'm sitting in front of a statue of of of of a a, you know, Palestinian revolutionary who was murdered for his participation in class struggle and religious struggle. So the the it just felt so insane to me at times, you know, and and that's part of life, you know, life is life is almost always participation in institutions, which in some way are unjust and wedded to the status quo. That is part of what human life in this modern age means. But there are times where that is drawn into such stark contrast with the life of the revolutionary Jesus of Nazareth, who I follow, who asks me to follow. He doesn't ask me anywhere in the Gospels to worship. Obviously I do worship him because I'm a Christian, but primarily what Jesus asks us to do is to follow. And yet we seem to be very bad at doing that. Um, yeah. So does that make sense? You know, it feels in such stark contrast at times, and I'm I'm I I try not to be an idealist. You know, in reality, if you want change, you've gotta learn to sit across the table from people who are decision makers. You know, it's very easy just to throw stones at glass houses. It's a lot harder to sit and build community power and negotiate for change. It's the old saying goes, the trouble with speaking truth to power is you keep the truth and they keep the power. You know, we've got to move a little bit beyond that and I think that's what we see throughout the Old and New Testaments. But there are times when my position just feels so in insane and the perspective of others outside.

Alex: I really appreciate your candour there, Luke, and really linking this question with or your answer with something you said previously. You mentioned that as the church is diminishing in power and wealth, it seems to be more open to diversity. And I, I just wondered if you could also

unpack that a little bit as well because I sense it might be related to what we're currently talking about.

Luke: See the question for me in a lot of this at the moment as we talk about you know the the, the big struggle, you know how we gonna get the parish share paid and keep bums on seats, I mean the church commissioners are doing great at the moment. What are we up to, 10 billion now? I think something like that. So, you know, the the church isn't short of cash. It's about how that cash is deployed in a sustainable way. And I'm not saying that it's a smart investment to just sell the family silver and blow it on one last hurrah. But there are some profound questions for me about this narrative of decline. And what I think we're actually seeing in some senses is the proletarianization of faith labour. So Rosa Luxembourg talked about, about 100 years ago, this idea that under capitalism all sorts of different types of labour would become proletarianised. They would become more precarious. You know, we'd be moving towards these like zero hours contracts and we see that very much in academia of course at the moment and and and big solidarity to all our comrades involved in that labour struggle within academia at the moment. But I actually in in in a very different wa I think we're seeing that within the church in in this move towards house for duty priest in charge 0.5 you know short term contract all of this stuff in a slower way. I'm not trying to say that in any way my struggle is is as hard and dangerous as as even the academics never mind the all the other workers that are having to strike at the moment. But there is a sense in to what it used to be. Our labour is our our our faith labour is beginning to be proletarianised in a sense. So I think you know I mean we've had a record low number of ordinands come forward for ministry in the Church of England this year and one commentator I forget where I read this suggests because people are worried there aren't gonna be enough jobs or the or the jobs are going to be in conditions and pay that are not sustainable. I personally am of a proud member of the United Faith Workers branch and and part of trying to struggle for good conditions. I have no complaints about my pay. I think I'm paid very well. I'm on a 0.5 post. I get a house and I don't have any complaints about the level of pay. But I think the working conditions, the impact on well-being the number of clergy I know working seven days a week never see their family, number of people in positions like mine that are 0.5 that are effectively working a full time job for half pay. It's a it's not a great time and and I think we need to address that and we need to address this narrative about everything having to work on congregational giving. We need to address the kind of funding models that are being used for ministry. I would say both in my experience as a charity trustee and working in the charity sector and in the church we are moving towards deeply capitalist models of funding both charity work quote unquote and ministry. And you know as Clement Attlee famously said charities are cold and grey thing I think is is the quote and I would say that you know to be honest with you making churches bid for money to do the things they should be getting the the resource to do anyway feels like a very cold and grey thing you know. Yeah, I feel, I feel deeply uncomfortable about the trajectory of things, let's put it that way. I'm not sure we're quite in nightmare scenarios yet, but it certainly feels like we're heading that way. This is where it comes down to this material analysis again. Right. And some people might say I'm not being very super spiritual as a priest. For me, my, my doctoral work is in theology to the Holy Spirit and mission. And actually, there is a profoundly material aspect to the work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit has an affinity with the material world, the womb of Mary, the waters of creation, you know, the waters of Jesus' baptism and his body. And I could go on. So I think we need to really stop all this pie in the sky when you die talk and get into some material analysis if we're going to tackle these problems.

Alex: And I think that's an excellent point to segue into your book. But just before we do, I wonder whether some people listening might hear you talking about capitalism and material wealth and so on and think, oh, is is this guy, you know, a totalitarian communist? And I wonder whether you

could just unpack really in a bit more detail what you mean when you critique capitalism. And what your theology behind that is.

Luke: Sure. I mean the short answer is, if you want to know what my theology behind that is, go buy the book which. But if you can't afford it, let me know. I'll sort something out, but I used those terms in a shorthand. I'm getting lazy being in an academic environment a lot, because people know in an academic environment what I mean by that. And that's a that's a bad habit to be falling into when I talk about those terms. I mean most people familiar with and will know I'm using a sort of Marxist analysis here, using the tools of Marxism to do some material analysis because I find those tools very useful. It's just the same as, you know, if I wanna fix the oil filter on my car, I'll go get my Haynes manual out because it's a good, it's a good tool. Having said that, I'm no, I'm unashamed in saying yes, my politics probably are somewhere left of Marx, but the totalitarian thing is really interesting point that you make. I very much am shaped by the principles of Catholic social teaching, one of which is subsidiarity, which is that decision making should happen as local as possible. You know these are, these are, these are long held, well argued and written principles of Catholic social teaching. There isn't the time or place to go into that. Now there's plenty of books on the subject. Simon Cuff is a particularly good writer on that within the Anglican tradition, I don't believe, you know, I'm not out here campaigning for the Labour Party or any other political party. I believe in power being in the hands of the people. And I would say that that is is a theme that we see throughout woven through the Old and New Testaments. The centralisation of power seems to be something which, you know, there's a lot that's that's written in the Old and New Testaments that's quite suspicious of that. The old saying goes, if you've got a Jack boot on your neck, you don't care whether it's the left one or the right one. So I think we have to be, we have to be careful in recognising that any kind of fascism or totalitarianism is a bad thing. But I really do believe in people power and and I think that that is rooted very deeply in my understanding of the Holy Spirit, the person and work of the Holy Spirit. There just isn't the time to go into it now but by using those terms as a shorthand. It's a lazy shorthand. But I do have some strong theological wrestling going on within that. And. And yeah, I guess have a look in the book. Let me know what you think.

Alex: Sure. Great. Thank you. And as we segue into your book *Confounding the Mighty*, I think some of these themes are going to be teased out anyway. Sure. So I wonder whether you could just give us a summary of the book structure and its themes and even a bit of the inspiration behind them as well.

Luke: Well, to start off with, the, the way that the book came about, there was an article in the *Church Times* a few years ago. It was called something like *Is the Church of class riddled act?* I was invited by Madeleine Davies, the editor, to contribute some thoughts to that. And you know, had a little bit of interesting to and fro with a few folks about that. It's a positive feedback. But David Shervington from SEM Press got in touch with me and said, look, we've been wanting to Commission a book on class. Are you interested and enjoyed what you were saying in that that article. And I very nearly turned it down because it was bad timing. I was busy. I'm trying to get my PhD finished. I was trying to get my curacy done, trying to find time to get involved in grassroots practise alongside that and have a family life and hobbies and things like that. You know, I also was keenly aware I have one experience of social class and class struggle which is profoundly shaped by my gender, by my whiteness, by other factors too. And I thought, if we're going to write about class, we need a multitude of intersections of class contributing to this. So I agreed if I was going to do it, I'd do it as an edited volume, which stupidly I thought also meant it would be less work, which I soon learned wasn't the case. But actually, you know what I found it more energising. I found it very energising process. If I'd had to write the whole book, I don't think I

would have. I'd probably found it too overwhelming. but yeah, so that that's how it came about. In terms of the structure of it, it, it, the title takes its inspiration from the first chapter of First Corinthians. But you know the the kind of the, the, the the Corinthian churches were addressed by saying, you know think about your own background. Not many of you are from high state and not many of you come from to use modern parliament sort of privileged and powerful backgrounds. But God has chosen the weak things of the world to confound the mighty in in the King James translation, I I like, I I just kind of liked the poetry of that phrase in the King James translation. It's not one I usually use. So that's where the title comes from then the the the cover image and the actual structure of the book really is grounded in Mary's song the Magnificat. And so I picked on really 3 movements in the Magnificat, which were people's stories, you know, kind of starts with Mary saying that God has regarded her in her lowly estate. And and I really wanted to give us the chance to share a bit of our own stories all throughout the book but particularly in those first few chapters. And then the second section really is about the lifting up of the lowly. So it's about education, ministerial training and the empowerment of working class people to lead both in the church and the Academy and and in wider environments. And the final part of the book is, is the casting down the mighty from their Thrones, which really is about what does this look like in terms of our praxis? How do we do this? This isn't just a theoretical book. What kinds of stuff can can Christians and churches get involved in alongside their their allies and friends of all faiths and none? How can we go about the work of God's mission? And how can we join in with what the Holy Spirit is doing in the world, which in my mind is upending these unjust structures and these these class suppressions.

Alex: can we talk specifically about your chapter, Feckless faith. Can you unpack what what the title means? And we'll pass through your argument.

Luke: Absolutely. I like writing poetry. I love to write. I like playing with words. It probably comes from being the son of a salesman and I've got a bit of Irish blarney in my blood. But the idea of feckless faith. It came first of all from a quote from Boris Johnson, who'd said in an article years ago he'd written, he was writing about the blue-collar men of Great Britain. In his words and he describes, the blue-collar men i.e working class men of Britain as as something along the lines of aimless, feckless and hopeless and and feckless meaning etymologically useless basically like, you know, without effect. Feck is for effect, so to be feckless means to be without effect. So what I wanted to do in the opening chapter of the book, which was based on a paper I gave at the European Academy of Religion last year or year before, I can't remember. But it it, it was really this idea of critiquing the approaches to social class that I'm seeing in theology in the church, which I see as feckless, frankly, where there is even any conversation about class because frankly there is very little. And one of my great inspirations, Professor Vanderbilt from the States, talks about the long silence since the liberation theology of the 60s, the long silence of talking about class and where I am seeing stuff written or spoken about in class. There was some of it in that Church Times article I mentioned by some of the voices that were quoted in that I suggested it relates to one or two different, one or two or both of two different, two different attempts to do to do something with class. The first attempt is a kind of whataboutery. So the first thing that people try and do when they talk about class and church, I find, is it's, well, what about the working class? Let's stop talking about race and gender and sexuality and decolonizing. And what about the working class? What about them? You know, why can't, you know, let's stop being distracted by that other stuff. I'll try and argue. You can't talk about decolonising without talking about class, and you can't talk about class without talking about decolonising. And look at the work of people like Frantz Fanon and you know, the great voices of these decolonising movements that saw how capitalism and colonialism that are mutually dependent on one another. So for me it's like we need to talk about all of this stuff and how materials class analysis needs to be rooted in and present in these

conversations. That's the first. The second one is this kind of inclusion and diversity approach to class, which says one of two things. It either says we haven't got enough working-class people in the church or the Church of England. And so where have all the working-class people gone? My argument is we'll go to your local Pentecostal church and you'll find plenty of working-class people. They just might not be white. And so it's often a whiteness thing where the white working class in our churches is what's really meant. The second, which is a little bit more progressive than that, is how can we have more working-class leaders in the church and the Church of England in particular, And and you see books and articles and things written about we should have more working-class leaders so that the church leadership reflects the diversity of the church and the diversity of God's Kingdom. Or we should have more working-class people and working-class leaders in church because that's inclusive. Now, I draw my theology of class very much in particular from Yurgrigor who who really underlines this relational notion of class. And he's very critical of the language of inclusion when it comes to class. Because if, when if what we're talking about with social class isn't just an aspect of identity, but it is a set of unjust relationships which result in wage theft from workers, which result in resources going up to a very, very, very wealthy and elite 1% while everybody else suffers. And they're also that that economic relationship with classes is kind of destroying the planet that we live on and affecting workers overseas that are trying to farm all of that stuff. What we don't really want then is inclusion. We need to overthrow those unjust relationships. So for me, it's not that we want to include the working class. I gave a talk at at Bristol Cathedral recently at a festival of inclusion, I think it was called, which was really good. And I'm all for, you know, the the, the, the plight of LGBTQ people and the kind of decolonising stuff that we were doing at that conference. But I started my talk by saying This is why I don't want working-class people included in the church, because we should be working towards a classless society if if the class structures are unjust. So it's not inclusion, it's revolution, is what what I think we're talking about. And Jesus is talking about. Jesus doesn't say blessed are the poor and the rich. As long as we can all sing kumbaya together, Jesus has blessed of the poor. In Luke's gospel, the Magnificat says the mighty will be cast down and the rich sent empty away and the lowly lifted up and the hungry filled with good things. You know God has a preferential option for the poor and there should be a recognition that the current system is unjust and needs to be changed. The other, the other bit of the feckless faith thing that I was looking at was there's a book by, is it D.A Carson, one of the American evangelicals who wrote a book on discernment. And he basically said, if you're a real Christian, you'll vote for Trump, which is. And the books called Reckless Faith. And I found that all very ironic. So I was kind of playing on that a little bit as well.

Alex: So just off the back of that then, and you've already begun to answer my next question in quite a full way. But how might you respond to Christians who could object to some of what you're saying and say, but surely our identity is in Christ alone. What do you mean that? You know, we have various identities, whether it's class or gender and so on, that make us us.

Luke: Yeah, this is a kind of narrative I've heard a lot, whether it's talking about class or, you know, one of the books I critiqued has a note on the front cover that says, you know, this is a book, a book of brilliant book for people saved from working-class backgrounds. And to paraphrase something similar to that Anthony Reddie said about race, what is it about being from a working-class background I need saving from? Do you know what I mean? So there is this kind of this strange move that people do with that we talk about our identity in Christ. Well, Christ isn't just Jesus's surname. You know what we're talking about Jesus Christ. I would say that that Jesus of Nazareth, who is the Christ whom I follow, Lived a Life of class struggle is an excellent book about that came out recently. James Crossley, one of the authors? that's called Jesus, Jesus, a Life in class Struggle. I would say Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ calls for me to follow in his footsteps by living a life of class struggle. So there is something about this Christ which is a universalising

invitation to participate in a life that was lived out by Jesus of Nazareth in the place that we now call Palestine. So to try and somehow spirit away all of that by saying, well, my identity is in Christ. Yeah, your identity is in Christ. So, you know, put your boots on and let's get to work. You know, there's there's a, there's a, there's an old union song and called the preacher and the slave. That's all about preachers trying to kind of stop the union movements back in the day. And it's where the phrase pie in the sky when you die comes from. And and the critique of that really is that that the religious leaders were kind of trying to take away from that material analysis into our world. You'll have pie in the sky when you die. So don't worry about any of this practical stuff. It's very easy to say that when you've got a full stomach and a roof over your head and you know you're not fighting and struggling every day and it's that is a is an unfaithfulness to Jesus of Nazareth, that kind of rhetoric, I would say. So what do we mean my identity is in Christ? Well, I'm quite comfortable with that phrase. But as I've already said, I'm not talking about identity. I'm talking about how I live my life faithfully to follow Jesus. So it isn't really got anything to do with identity. In my opinion, sure.

Alex: So it sounds like that the importance of the incarnation, of the way that Jesus lived his life on earth is the the foundation for your understanding of how we live in a class society.

Luke: Yes, Yes. Thank you. Yeah. That language of incarnation is really important. What a lot of the liberation theologians of the last century did was rooted in that. Therefore in in this talk about historical Jesus, which I've just done in talking about Jesus, why I refer to Jesus as Nazareth. But in my own work, I'm wanting to go further than that. Because actually, in a religiously plural society, just talking about the historical Jesus probably isn't enough, because you know, my some of my neighbours would not be all that interested in this talk of a historical Jesus. But if we start to talk about the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God, what God is doing actually the Incarnation is rooted profoundly in a theology of the Holy Spirit. We see that in Philippines chapter 2, and elsewhere, and for me as an Anglo Catholic, the invocation of the Holy Spirit on the communion elements and this raising up into transformed life. I draw a lot from the Orthodox idea of theosis, that the Spirit is transforming the whole world, lifting up the whole world into the kind of dance of God's love, that perichoretic dance of the Trinity. And there are few theologians like Sergei Bulgakov and others that I draw from for that term. So I would say this is actually about who God is and what God does. And you know, that's what God is in the business of doing. God is in the business of incarnating, and God is in the business of raising us up into the life of God. And therefore, if we have raised up into this life of God and the Trinity, will there be class hierarchy within the Trinity? Will there be class stratification within the life of the Trinity? Will there be class hierarchy and stratification in the Kingdom of God? I don't think so. I don't think there will be, but the last will be first and the first will be last.

Alex: Thanks Luke. That's incredibly rich and incredibly thought provoking. And just a moment ago you used the phrase of there being a long silence in talking about class. And in your chapter on feckless faith, you also say there's not a lot of literature exploring class and faith, especially in Britain. And I wondered what it, why you thought that was. I mean my mind is just going to the relationship between the Church of England and wider society and whether there's a wider cultural issue that can be found outside the church that is perhaps influencing the lack of class based action within the church.

Luke: Umm, yeah, I think that's right. I did my my bachelor's dissertation on working-class leadership in early Methodism, which almost has a sort of after John Wesley's time anyway, almost a kind of protest movement really and and and a lot of the roots of the labour movement and class struggle and chartism etcetera in this country have their roots in in Methodism. However, that feeling of class struggle I think was lost very quickly within Methodism. So it is quite easy to point

fingers at the Church of England and quite, quite right to do so as well. I'd say there aren't really that many churches, you know, even the Methodists who should be more than any, where that is is really front and centre. So I think when we talk about class, we need to talk about something more than identity. As I already just said. And as I've said a few times already, we need to talk about material analysis. And a lot of the people who get to do that talking and that leading and that visioning and that funding of projects et cetera are materially invested in the status quo as it is. Those of us who've joined in the academic or the church's kind of pyramid scheme as it often feels. Hmm. We're waiting to cash in on our time and our investment. You know, we're like well, you know if I could say to myself I'm kind of doing OK now. You know I'm working towards my pH. D and put a lot of time and money and effort into all this and and into the church. You know, I don't want to make too many waves. Now my life comfortable. I get to live in a four bedroom house, you know, and you don't burn down a street that you just bought a load of property on and that you just invested in. And so I think a lot of the people who have a voice to speak, a lot of the people who have the power to make decisions, are deeply invested in the way things are. Now, if we want to faithfully talk about class as Christians in a way that is faithful to Jesus of Nazareth, who was an oppressed and colonised worker living under exploitation, we've got to talk about making all things new. Uh, you know, this is a profound rupture of the status quo. And Marika Rose writes beautifully about this in her book *Theology as Failure, This kind of rupture*. It's kind of revolution at the at the heart of it all, the the lectionary readings for Sunday talk about this first being last and the last being first. You know, there's profound rupture to the status quo, which comes with talking about class. And I think that rupture is is what we in the CofE probably feel profoundly uncomfortable about because we seem so invested in maintaining the status quo. It's almost sort of inimical to the the stereotypical image of what it means to be Anglican is to be wedded to maintaining the status quo.

Alex: And when you say that you know Jesus was effectively under oppression, that's not quite the language you used. But I I assume you're referring to the fact that he was under Roman occupation.

Luke: Yes, so we have this very daft glamourised white Jesus that we worship in the Church of England. According to our artwork. Even the idea of Jesus as as a Carpenter, you know, quite quaint. The words we translate usually is Carpenter is tecton. It's probably quite likely Jesus was some kind of house builder and there were massive building projects going on by the Roman Empire as they colonised that part of the world. And they'd been various uprisings and entire cities were levelled and new Roman cities were being built in their place. So it's probably quite possible that Jesus' labour was being exploited to build these structures for the Roman Empire to to, to further its colonisation. And even if he physically wasn't involved in that building, he certainly would have known a lot of people who were. He came from a family of house builders. So you know, let's let's do that material analysis about what Jesus' life was like in those hidden years between his childhood and and his beginning of his public ministry. I find it fascinating that in the creeds. Well, here's a little pop quiz for you. If you like Alex, there's there's one human being mentioned in the creeds who doesn't belong to the Holy Family. Who is it?

Alex: Ohh Pontius Pilot

Luke: Pontius Pilot. The one human being mentioned in the Creed is not a member of the Holy Family. Is that interesting? He gets a special mention, not the chief priests. And you know, it's it's this, this and and who? Who, who do I probably look most like? Who do most of our leaders in the Church of England probably look most like out of the New Testament narrative? Probably Pontius Pilot. You know this representative of European empire and colonisation. So there's a part of I like to do imaginative contemplation sometimes when I'm preaching to help people really get into the

story, it's helpful to think, well, who am I in this story? For many of us in the Church of England, the answer is I'm probably Pontius Pilot. This is why I'm so critical of of with due respect, I'm very critical of these ideas of like being with in the Nazareth manifesto because you know, being with well, if if we recognise who we are in the story that we're Pontius Pilot, Pontius Pilots. Being with Jesus ended with him being nailed to a cross. So you know, our being with the oppressed doesn't always end very well for the oppressed. At the end of the day.

Alex: in your book you write about how others perceive you and sometimes they see you as being adversarial or even aggressive. And I just wondered, why do you think some people reading what you have to say or listening to what you have to say might end up thinking in that way? And and what would be your response to that assumption or that interpretation of your message?

Luke: I know I'm not the only person who finds this. And one of the wonderful things about writing this book and doing this work is I meet more and more people, um, that have a lot of shared experiences, this being one of them. Saul Alinsky was the godfather of community organising at a brilliant quote I always use at times like this, said that liberals are the people who leave the room when an argument turns into a fight. And I, I, I, you know, we, we often want to talk in the Church of England about we got the Conservatives on one side and the liberals on the other, you know, and and and the conservatives think we just need to go back to some sort of pure kernel of what we're supposed to be. The liberals just want us all to hold hands and sing kumbaya and be nice to each other. You know, about being exaggerating a little bit here. This is my characteristic bluntness that causes people to find me a bit material. Maybe liberation is a bit different to being liberal and I would consider myself a liberation theologian. And to do the work of liberation, sometimes you gotta be able to stay in the in the room when an argument turns into a fight. And I've had experiences like I'm a trustee of a housing and homelessness advocacy charity. I've had experiences of negotiating with decision makers where the the cover ups, well the failure of statutory duty followed by cover ups as decision makers and power holders in a certain situation including representatives of local government and of charity sector too including faith-based charities has resulted in severe harm of people, of individuals, of vulnerable people. Now when somebody's trying to cover that up, when someone's trying to claim innocence, trying to sweep under the carpet stuff that could result in a vulnerable person dying. Sometimes I get a little bit aggravated and have to use some quite strong language to describe a strong situation. I think it's, I can't believe I'm doing this, but I'm gonna quote Bono here. I think Bono once said you need a dirty word to describe a dirty situation sometimes. And I found it in those conversations that response rather than dealing with anything that I've just said about the cover up of injustice and gross negligence and illegal behaviour, person will say oh oh you're being a bit negative, you're being a bit adversarial. You know, we, we, we do things like to, having exhausted other options, show up to the housing committee of a local council and and say we know you've done this, what's your response? And one time the person chairing the meeting went off into a 5 minute long tirade. How dare we speak that way in this council meeting? How dare we criticise the local council? And I thought, how dare I, you're not doing your job and people are dying, That's how dare I? So there's this kind of unspoken rule, I think in this in British establishment society of which the church is part. But it's like it's not really cricket to say it how it is. You know and people are sort of you know someone does somethin outrageous and they're sort of quietly kind of sideways promoted and the thing is brushed under the carpet. It's not really the done thing to really go there and and again to quote quote I keep quoting Anthony ready today to quote Anthony he says sometimes what we have to do is tell the truth and shame the devil and and that doesn't that doesn't always go down very well. Now within that I have to do a bit of critical self reflection here and say my body has been shaped by 10 years of hard manual labour. I'm quite a big guy. I've got tattoos and beard and all the rest of it. So there are environments where my physical presence can



make people feel nervous or unsafe. You know, I've done a lot of work in the past supporting sex workers and fixing their front doors and stuff when they've been kicked in. And I have to carry myself in a certain way in that environment so as not to be perceived as a threat, which is very is that that would be a very just reaction for that person to perceive me as a threat. However, when I want to zoom meeting with the local council who are telling me off for criticising them for gross negligence and corporate manslaughter potentially. Allegedly. To then use words like aggressive and adversarial. You know, when they can just mute me and they have done, you know, they can just hit the mute button and stop me from speaking in this so-called democratic meeting where they're meant to be public representation. So find it fascinating. You know, there's there's there's a balance here. And again, you need to learn how to negotiate. Alinsky was clear on this. You know, it's easy to just sort of walk around saying F the man it's takes a little bit more chutzpah to learn how to negotiate for change. But it is that disruptiveness of the status quo. You see it through the, you know, all through the the biblical stories, very honest about human nature and society and you see this stuff happening all the time.

Alex: So implicitly really in in what you're saying. There's also this challenge to those of us who are more middle or or upper class, who might prefer a less, uh, direct or confrontational approach that actually are our preferences, can make us complicit in the suffering of others.

Luke: Yes, Yeah. To be silent is to choose the side of the oppressor, you know? I think that's the reality, isn't it? There is no neutrality in any of this. I don't think so. I think the kind of talk about discomfort. What kind of discomfort are we talking about? You're feeling a little uncomfortable in a meeting compared to somebody languishing on the streets being attacked and and and all the rest of it. So yeah, I think there's a reality that and I've seen this time and time again in the work of trying to you know like the old phrase used to hear a lot in social justice circles about being a voice for the voiceless. I think that's crap cause as Arundhati Roy said, there's no such thing as the voices as the silenced and the preferably unheard. So in my own work platforming and amplifying people's voices who have lived experiences of the issues that I'm working on is really important. And actually there's quite a danger, I've learned in doing that because so often when you give someone with lived experience chance to speak, they will immediately be written off as adversarial, aggressive, unfair, shouted down, which comes at a tremendous personal cost to them. And I've seen that time and time and time again with these political leaders that are very polite and nice when they need to be. But behind closed doors, they they shut you down and be rude. And so yeah, there's some danger, there's some danger in some of this stuff about how we look after ourselves and we look after the voices of lived experience when we call on them to speak.

Alex: And again, there are those well-being implications that are so important for us to get our heads round.

Luke: Yeah. And that is the danger. I mean, I think you guys are doing a great job in this project, but that is always the danger in projects like this is what is the well-being impact on those who speak out and those who've been the victims of abuse and injustice of many kinds. To speak out can sometimes be a profoundly re-traumatising experience.

Alex: Yeah, I think that that's a very personal and sobering point. Luke. I thank you for making it and you've already used a phrase like this about God's preferential option for the poor and you write about it and you've unpacked it quite a lot in our conversation so far. But I just wanted to give you the opportunity to underscore it because it it's very present in Catholic social teaching, but it might not be as familiar to some of our listeners. So I just wondered if you could speak to that as well.

Luke: Sure. So I think, I think firstly I wanna say it's important not to equate poverty in social class as being the same thing, or to be poor and to be working class aren't always the same thing. You know you can be doing OK and still be having your labour exploited. But in terms of this, this language of the preferential option of the poor, which really comes out of the Latin American liberation theologies, you know of the last century and the vast majority of which were Roman Catholic. Not all. Really draw out the fact that in in the Old and New Testament narratives and teachings, it is very clear that the God of the Bible has eyes fixed upon the poor. Now to reassert my definition of class earlier that class is a set of labour relationships in the web of institutions and culture and other stuff that reproduces those labour relationships, labour relationships were unjust, which mean people's labour is exploited. That that resources are always going upstream to the top and away from the workers who actually produce wealth and tools and technology, et cetera. Those are unjust and the Bible is extremely clear in many places that the accumulation of wealth, the exploitation of the poor, angers God. And that's not something we're always talking about, Again, talking about liberals. We're not talking about an angry God. We've done away with that, haven't we? You know, I mean, I, I, I kind of believed in a very angry God for a long time. But he was mainly angry about what people did in their bedrooms and stuff like that. And there are about 2000 verses in the Bible specifically addressing in a very material way the life of the poor and the oppressed and that God is on their side way more so than the verses about what we do in our bedrooms. So I would say any remotely faithful reading of the Old and New Testaments can only lead us to that conclusion that the eyes of God are fixed upon the poor. And when we look at the summary of Jesus ministry, which his mother uses in the Magnifica, in in in Luke, when we look at the summary that Jesus gives of his own ministry and quoting from Isaiah, it is all to do with material change for the poor and the oppressed, not all to do. Sorry, I and I don't know. There's a danger in all of this talk. I'm a priest. That's my job. There's danger in all this talk that I try and paint out Jesus as some kind of communist revolutionary who wasn't really that interested in religion. He was more interested in politics. That's not true. You know, there's a distinctly religious element to all of this and then liturgical element to all of this. For me, this is about who God is and what God does ultimately. And and and that's, you know that that we we, we have to maintain, that we need to remember, particularly at the Old Testament, that the life of a just community and the worship of God are completely intertwined. When you read through the Old Testament laws and the prophets, you know it's a verse about poverty followed by verse about how we do, how we worship. And that has an effect on how I go about my ministry as a priest. And so I'm not, I'm not trying to take away from the religious aspect, but it is to say the God. I believe in that God's eyes are firmly fixed upon the poor and on the liberation struggles of the poor, whether it's the book of Exodus or the prophets or Jesus or Revelation, or the overthrowing of the Roman Empire, all of these things.

Alex: And of course, in the New Testament, there is this what's called in inaugurated theology, whereby all the thing that God wants in his Kingdom or the reversal of sin starts in the here and now. As you say, it's not about that pie in the sky when you die.

Luke: Yeah. And that's what's so great about reading the Gospels through a more materialist lens, is it can help us living under the empire of neoliberal colonialism, to think about, well, how would I act and what would I talk about? Well, let's look at what Jesus' example is what he acts like is he spends time on the wrong side of the tracks in solidarity with the poor and the oppressed and the outcast. And what he talks about is uses. I'm talking about this in my sermon on Sunday. You know, one of the most common themes of Jesus' teaching is land and labour, and the relationship between land and labour and it constantly coming back to that all the time.

Alex: And by neoliberal, uh, you're talking about the particular kind of capitalist economy that we currently have.

Luke: Yeah, this kind of global empire of capitalism, which is trying to remove as many safeguards as possible to allow what kind of, you know what what do we allow through our borders today? We stop small boats and allow private jets. You know, you know what I mean? Like we, we value the economy over people and the capitalist economy is allowed to cross boundaries and borders all around the world where people aren't. That seems like an insane, unjust and intolerable situation to me.

Alex: Thank you. And then just thinking about the future, I don't want you to give away too much from your conclusion because I want people to go out and buy your book. But just thinking about, you know, the issues we've spoken about at length today, what needs to change and how can it change?

Luke: I mean, as I've said already, I think there needs to be an almost complete upending of the status quo and of those relationships. And that's not something that happens overnight. In the book I talk about some practical steps in the here and now that churches, Christians and faith communities can get involved with alongside their mates and comrades of all faiths and none. I talk about well the other contributors to the book. Eve Parker has an excellent chapter on education. Sally Mann has an excellent chapter looking at kind of the precarious situation of workers and jobs. Victoria Turner has an excellent case study looking at the Iona community in how Churches engage in mission ministry among working class communities. I then turn to three examples of potential practises that churches and Christians can get involved in. The first of which is broad based community organising which essentially is building alliances of people power in local communities and I think faith communities and churches are really well placed to do that. Secondly I've talked about involvement in the trade union movement how the churches can support the trades union movement historically. You know during the Durham miners strike years ago the Bishop of Durham was highly involved in negotiating for for the the miners to get what they were asking for. Also, I'm a member of the United Faith Workers branch. And I I I love to see faith workers themselves getting organised both for the the working, the paying conditions of faith workers, but also to help us enter into a deeper solidarity with our local trades union Congress is to rub shoulders with these folks here from the workers, hear what their situations are like, listen, ask what can I do to help? What can our faith community do to help, you know, want to turn up on the picket line or more than that. So we have really good union representation in my diocese, about 33% I think, or something like that. And among our clergy and our diocese, which is fantastic, and I'd love to see that increase and continue. Then finally, this isn't something I've been involved in myself, but take inspiration from others in the involvement in cooperatives, worker cooperatives and the Commons. How can we set up more democratic organisations, businesses, um, parcels of land, housing structures. How can we set them up in more democratic ways which do empower people so that people learn the hard skills of how to live in a more democratic, communal, relational way? Actually it's not that easy. Anyone that's lived in intentional community will tell you it's not as romantic and glamorous as people make out. It takes learning some hard skills like how to have one to ones, how to build relationships, how to negotiate. And we need to learn those skills, God forbid with what some of the more negative people are predicting with the impact of climate change in the next 50 to 100 years, we really are gonna need to learn those skills. And because the whole fabric and structure of society could shift, I think robotics and artificial intelligence have the potential to do that too, in what some people are calling the 4th industrial revolution, which I mentioned a bit in the final chapter. So we, you know, this isn't, this isn't just hypothetical stuff. This is a book that I hope that people read and and and it

makes them add a sentence about class in their diversity and inclusion policy. I want to see people getting their sleeves rolled up and getting their hands dirty in this struggle.

Alex: And that's a very clear outline of what people can be doing in society and this is perhaps a more difficult question but what needs to change in the church and who might be responsible for helping ensure that happens?

Luke: The Church of England is such a complex beast it's very hard to say. But based in that that kind of commitment to subsidiarity I mentioned earlier and the commitment to the local, of course the sort of the atom of the Church of England, the lowest common denominator is the parish and other institutions too, like chaplaincies and theological education establishments and stuff like that. So for me, I think it starts with a reengagement with local contextual praxis in those contexts, in the parishes, the theological education institutions, chaplaincies, it involves the transformation of our training towards the practise of how to engage in justice movements in your area. What are the hard skills? How do you pull people together into a house meeting? How do you have a one to one with people? How do you negotiate change? You know, you can have as many degrees as a thermometer and not actually be able to do any of that stuff. So I think we do need a much greater shift towards praxis and one of the things I love from the liberation theologians, particularly Gutierrez and Gutierrez, said that theology happens as a second act. Our first act is our practise, it's what we do, it's our engagement in liberation struggles. We then do our theology after the sun goes down and we reflect on our day's labour. And I love that image. That is for me what it means to be a theologian is to do my theology after the sun goes down, metaphorically speaking. And I'd love to see a shift within. I'd just love to see some establishments where people can go and train for that kind of ministry within the Church of England. There are colleges out there doing this stuff. You know this The Nazarene College in Manchester, which is a Methodist offshoot church. They're doing some really exciting stuff about how to train people in praxis and how to be more democratic and even how the journey of theological education works. I find that very exciting. I've enjoyed teaching a session with them not long ago, but I think it really starts with the local press. I'm not sure that I'm not sure this can happen from the top down. I think it needs to start from the ground up. But it will mean those key holding permission givers to make the space to experiment. You know will mean releasing some of that humongous resource of money and people that we have in the and property and land that we have in the Church of England to experiment with this stuff and be ready for it to fail or be ready for it not to result in a congregation of 500 at the end of three years of front loaded funding. You know we've got completely reversed kind of economics education and labour that we're talking about it. It's just so profoundly shaped by this unjust class structure, the way that we're going about trying to make change. It's like the old story goes about two fish in a goldfish bowl. One says water's nice today, isn't it? The other one says, what's water? You know, we can't even see the waters that we're swimming in cause we're so profoundly wrapped up in it all.

Alex: And I'm sure you'll be pleased to hear this is my penultimate question. But you've spoken about imagination, the use of imagination in your sermons, which struck me because you also talk about it at the end of your conclusion as well. And I just have a sense that actually for some people, the some Christians, the role of imagination is underutilised and actually very important. And I just wondered whether you could speak into the role of imagination in all of this.

Luke: Bob Dylan once sang. If my thought dreams could be seen, they'd probably put my head into a guillotine. You know, I think our capacity to imagine a better future is deeply important. But when I talk about imagination, what I'm talking about really is an invocation of the Holy Spirit. So in the book, I end with the Veni Creator Spiritus, which is a traditional prayer that's used at baptisms and and and Pentecost. And it is an invocation of the Holy Spirit to enlighten our dull

minds. And I feel that's what we need in the Church, is for this Holy Spirit to enlighten our dull minds, expand our imagination of the possible. And that, you know, if you can't see it, you won't be able to build it. Is it my view on it. So it really is an invocation with the spirit of God to expand what we think is possible, Brennan Manning once said. The God I believe in, the God of so many Christians, is just too small, and I resonate with that. Yeah, it's an expansion of the possible and and and a call upon the Holy Spirit. The Father of the Paul is the Father of the poor, as the Holy Spirit is referred to in in another traditional prayer. And so that's kind of where I'm headed with this talk about imagination, what Walter Brueggemann calls a prophetic imagination, you know,

Alex: Sure, Great. Thanks. And my final question for you, if this is even possible, But if if you had up to a minute to to deliver your headline message on Christianity in class, what would you want the church to hear?

Luke: If I had 30 seconds or a minute, all I could say would be come to my community, come to my parish, meet my people, meet us, see our struggle, come and see, come and suffer, come and feel. Because anything I can fit into an elevator pitch is already there in the Law and the prophets and the Gospels. There's nothing I can add to any of that. It's all there for those who have eyes to see, to use Jesus's words. So just reading and listening doesn't work because we've been reading this stuff for 2000 years and not doing it. So I'd say my capacity to do anything worthwhile in an elevator pitch, other than invite people to come and put their hand to the plough alongside us, he's very limited. Come and be evangelised by the poor as I have been, is what I would say.

Alex: Thank you. That's incredibly profound. That's Luke Lerner, author of *Confounding the Mighty*. Thank you very much.