

St Mark's Lent Course 2026

Exploring Social Justice: Critical Issues Defining our Time

Week 3: Disability

Please select from these resources to explore the interests of your group.

3.1 Visual



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3.2 Gathering

Gathering together, we are invited to be open and to listen to each other with respect and love. Here lies the path to new insights, new ways of being. Let us begin by calming our thoughts and becoming aware of our companions as we hold silence together.

But the silence in the mind
is when we live best, within
listening distance of the silence
we call God.

R S Thomas.



Photo by Shri on Unsplash

Now is the time to be silent and still
Now is the time to tune into Love's will
Now is the time to abandon all fear
Now is the time to let time disappear.

Now is the time for awareness of grace
Gifting each breath and anointing each space
All time and no time – together they're bound
By mystery beyond us, yet sensed all around.

Thanks be for Love, that most pure precious gift
Anchored in Love we shall not go adrift,
Wakened by Love we'll be fully aware
Wherever our path leads, then Love will be there.

*Eve Saunders;
Eve is a long-standing member of St Mark's.*

3.3 Briefing

The [Equality Act 2010](#) defines disability as ‘a physical or mental impairment’ that ‘has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on a person’s ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities’ (Part II.6.1.a–b). This definition incorporates an important distinction first articulated in the 1970s ([Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation](#)) between an *impairment*, which can be physical, mental, intellectual or sensory, and *disability*, which relates to the impact of an impairment upon a person’s ability to participate fully within all aspects of society on an equal basis.

This distinction reflects a movement away from a *medical model* of disability in which it is understood as a defect of an individual requiring remedial attention onto a *social model* which focuses on the societal and environmental factors, such as inaccessible infrastructure, discriminatory attitudes and exclusionary policies, impacting detrimentally upon a person with an impairment. In reality, both aspects of disability, the medical and social, are important, but the latter, by recognising a person with an impairment as an equal member of society, both normalises such people and places the emphasis upon the removal of barriers preventing their full participation.

The World Health Organization has estimated around 1.3 billion people, approximately 16% of the global population, currently experience significant disability. According to the [2021 Census](#), the percentage in England and Wales is slightly higher, 17.8% or 10.4 million people. Recent research undertaken by the Office of National Statistics confirms that there are still significant disparities between disabled and non-disabled persons in all the areas investigated (educational attainment, employment, home ownership, well-being, victim of crime). The only exception was social participation where there was parity. Disabled persons also face higher living costs (eg assistive technology, transport, home adaptations, etc) estimated at £975 per month.

The [Equality Act 2010](#) remains the cornerstone of disability rights in the UK, supported by the [Public Sector Equality Duty](#) which requires public bodies to promote equality and eliminate discrimination. The UK is a signatory to the UN [Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#), although the UN has consistently criticised aspects of UK welfare reform in this area (cf Equality and Human Rights Commission 2023). Government initiatives and programmes such as Access to Work, Personal Independence Payment (PIP) and Disability Living Allowance (DLA) provide limited financial and practical support, but have been widely criticised for bureaucratic complexity and inconsistent application.

Disability is increasingly understood as an aspect of identity and diversity, intersecting with other dimensions such as race, gender, class and sexuality. The field of disability studies has expanded academic and cultural appreciations, emphasizing disabled people’s voices and experiences. In addition to challenging prejudice and stigma, the ‘Disability Pride’ movement celebrates disabled identity through art, sport and activism – reframing it as a source of creativity and enrichment – while organisations such as ‘Disability Rights UK’ campaign for the full inclusion of disabled persons within society.

Although some descriptive nomenclature is necessary to identify members of society facing particular challenges, the language of disability or impairment can be problematic. Firstly, it implies 'second best,' namely that there could have been a 'better' version of the person who was able or unimpaired – this can have far-reaching implications for identity and self-worth, as well as for shaping social attitudes. Secondly, it categorises someone as abnormal within society, encouraging an 'us' and 'them' outlook, which can compromise social cohesion and perpetuate fallacies about normalcy. Thirdly, by 'othering' someone, it fosters prejudicial or patronising attitudes, potentially exposing them to abuse or pity.

3.4 Voice

Laura Hershey (1962–2010) was born with muscular dystrophy and lived in a wheelchair. She became a renowned disability-rights activist, writer and poet, based in Colorado, USA. Here is one of her poems, 'Telling,' reproduced with permission from Laura's Estate.

What you risk telling your story:
You will bore them.
Your voice will break, your ink
spill and stain your coat.
No one will understand, their eyes
become fences.
You will park yourself forever
on the outside, your differentness once
and for all revealed, dangerous.

The names you give to yourself
will become epithets.
Your happiness will be called
bravery, denial.
Your sadness will justify their pity.
Your fear will magnify their fears.

Everything you say will prove something about
their god, or their economic system.
Your feelings, that change day
to day, kaleidoscopic,
will freeze in place,
brand you forever,
justify anything they decide to do
with you.

Those with power can afford
to tell their story
or not.

Those without power
risk everything to tell their story
and must.

Someone, somewhere
will hear your story and decide to fight,
to live and refuse compromise.

Someone else will tell
her own story,
risking everything.

© Laura Hershey

Robin Story has been a valued and deeply appreciated member of St Mark's for decades. For most of that time, he and Joan, his wife, have been fully involved in church life and its pursuit of social justice. Latterly, they have been more home-based. Here, Robin shares a little of his story.

'Disabilities and their consequences take many forms: I can speak only of my own experience and feelings over the last 40 years. Maintaining my quality of life through this period is due to the love and kindness of so many people: principally Joan, my wife, supported by family, neighbours, friends and strangers.

In 1986, four months after taking up my appointment as Field Director Nigeria with Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO), I suffered a detached retina. Following four unsuccessful attempts to repair it, I was left with no vision in one eye and macular deterioration in the other. I was filled with uncertainty over my future. However, VSO reassured me that I could return to Nigeria to try to do the job with my poor vision. My wife, Joan, was asked to be my personal assistant and reader; I was provided with a driver, James. We rose to the challenge and completed my three-year contract plus an extra year. I shall be eternally grateful to VSO for the opportunity they gave me.

As my sight deteriorated further, I was registered blind in 1989. In the years that followed, I was still able to undertake consultancies in Nigeria for Leonard Cheshire International.

Being unable to read was the cruellest twist of all.

Keeping fit was important. With the aid of a white cane and my knowledge of Sheffield, for the next 16 years, three times a week, I caught the 7.00 a.m. bus to Pond's Forge for a gym session and a swim. I was kindly offered a free personal instructor. Then, in March 2020, Pond's Forge was closed by the COVID epidemic and I reverted to long walks to maintain fitness.

All this time, my son, Philip, encouraged me to make use of screen-reading software for communication. I was also able to pursue my passion for bellringing. Then, when we were

permitted to resume bellringing post-COVID in July 2021, in my enthusiasm, I fell down the thirty-two stairs leading to the belfry at St John's, Ranmoor, resulting in crushed fractures in two vertebrae that severely restricted my mobility. For several months I suffered nightmares and PTSD. Now I need a walker to get around.

For me, of my two disabilities, the restrictions on my mobility and accompanying pain are worse. Being largely housebound and going out only with a guide are hard to accept. Having to rely on taxis instead of walking or driving to appointments can be frustrating. As for pain levels, the doctors do their best and I am grateful for all their efforts.

Has my faith helped? Yes. As a member of a loving community, I feel supported with that Love that was in Jesus of Nazareth. In spite of all these frustrations, I feel I have come to accept my disabilities. After all, there are so many much worse off than me.'

In this blog [\[LINK\]](#), Julie shares her experience of becoming physically disabled overnight and what happened as a result.

In another blog [\[LINK\]](#), Elaine tells her story of how she managed once Multiple Sclerosis had rendered her unable to walk.

3.5 Response

Take time to reflect on what you have seen, read and heard so far. What questions come to mind? How does it make you feel or want to respond? Does it resonate with your own experience or understanding?

Why not share your reflections.

Here are some further questions you may wish to consider.

- In what ways is disability a social justice issue?
- How do you instinctively respond when encountering someone who is profoundly impaired? Why do you feel that way?
- Do you consider yourself to be disabled?
- How could our church community become more inclusive for disabled persons?
- Does Jesus' parable offer insight into the value and status of disabled persons within God's economy of grace (see 3.6 below)?

3.6 Biblical Insight

Overview

As with inequality, the Bible does not speak with one voice on disability. One conviction represented in both Old and New Testaments is that illness and impairment are either the consequences of or God's punishment for transgression (eg 2 Sam 12.15–18; Psalm 107.17–20; John 9.20). God was also believed to be the author and instigator of disease and misfortune (eg Exod 4.11, 9.1–12; Hosea 6.1–2), as well as of healing and good favour (eg Exod 15.26; Psalm 30.2; Sirach 38.1–12). By way of contrast, all these beliefs are systematically challenged throughout the Book of Job. As the passage from Leviticus below illustrates, convictions about ritual purity could also impact upon disability and whether an impaired person was deemed acceptable in God's eyes. Jesus' attitude towards illness and impairment is ambiguous. On the one hand, he earned a reputation for healing and exorcism, suggesting that dis-ease was an 'evil' to be vanquished as a demonstration of the emergence of God's kingdom (eg Mark 1.32–39; Luke 7.18–23; 11.20); on the other, his praxis of compassion as illustrated in the parables of the Great Dinner (see below), the Good Samaritan (Luke 10.25–37) and the Sheep and the Goats (Matt 25.31–46) reflect a readiness to reach out and minister to people as they are, in their current condition.

Leviticus 21.16–23

'The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to Aaron and say: No one of your offspring throughout their generations who has a blemish may approach to offer the food of his God. For no one who has a blemish shall draw near, one who is blind or lame, or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long, or one who has a broken foot or a broken hand, or a hunchback, or a dwarf, or a man with a blemish in his eyes or an itching disease or scabs or crushed testicles. No descendant of Aaron the priest who has a blemish shall come near to offer the LORD'S offerings by fire; since he has a blemish, he shall not come near to offer the food of his God. He may eat the food of his God, of the most holy as well as of the holy. But he shall not come near the curtain or approach the altar, because he has a blemish, that he may not profane my sanctuaries; for I am the LORD; I sanctify them.' (NRSVA)

Luke 14.12–24

'Jesus said also to the one who had invited him, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbours, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous." One of the dinner guests, on hearing this, said to him, "Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!" Then Jesus said to him, "Someone gave a great dinner and invited many. At the time for the dinner he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, 'Come; for everything is ready now.' But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, 'I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my regrets.' Another said, 'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try

them out; please accept my regrets.' Another said, 'I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come.' So the slave returned and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and said to his slave, 'Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.' And the slave said, 'Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room.' Then the master said to the slave, 'Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner.'" (NRSVA)

3.7 Closing Reflection

As our time together draws to a close, we are invited to return to the silence from which we began, before concluding with these words.

If you fail to see
the person
but only the disability,
who is blind?

If you cannot hear
your brother's cry
for justice,
who is deaf?

If you cannot communicate
with your sister
but separate her from you,
who is disabled?

If your heart and mind
do not reach out to
your neighbour,
who has the mental handicap?

If you do not stand up
for the rights of all
persons,
who is the cripple?

Your attitude towards
persons with disabilities
may be our biggest handicap
and yours too.

From a poem, 'Who is Disabled,' attributed to Tony Wong, a Jamaican who became paraplegic following an accident in the 1970s after which he worked internationally on behalf of disabled persons. We have been unable to trace the copyright holder of this poem and reproduce it here for non-commercial, educational purposes.

Acknowledgement

*'But the silence ...,' a portion of which is included in section 3.2 above is reproduced under 'fair dealing' provision within UK Copyright Law, for non-commercial, educational purposes. The full poem was originally published in R S Thomas' collection, *Counterpoint* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1990).*