

St Mark's Church, Broomhill & Broomhall

LENT COURSE 2026

Exploring Social Justice: Critical Issues Defining our Time

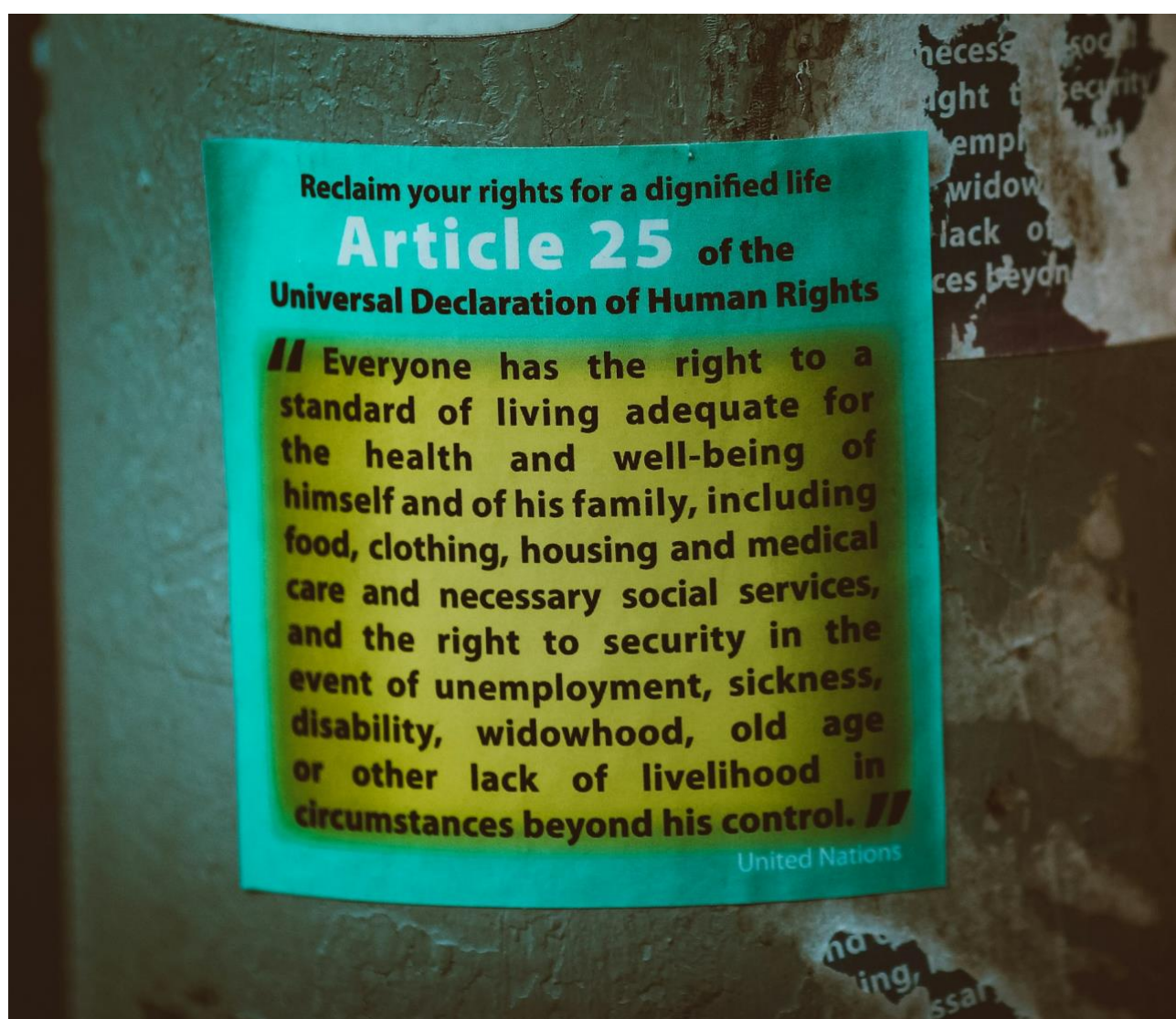


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Welcome!

Welcome to this year's Lent Course which explores what it means to seek justice for some of the most vulnerable members of society. Although it has been designed as a Lent Course, it could be used at any time and by pretty much anyone. It has also been prepared with group use in mind, but there is no reason why it couldn't be employed profitably for personal study.

As you have probably discovered already, course material is posted on the St Mark's Church website, <https://www.stmarkssheffield.co.uk>. In addition to this introduction, there is a resource pack for each session. You will discover within each pack there are hyperlinks to other materials, mainly poetry and testimonies, that cannot be reproduced in the body of the text owing to copyright restrictions. However, to the best of our knowledge, they can be accessed remotely from the specified sites without contravening copyright law. Where no one in a group will have access to the internet during a session, it is our understanding that members are entitled to reproduce a copy beforehand for personal study purposes which could be brought to the group.

The topics covered in this course are challenging. We will be presented with new information and first-hand accounts that may be uncomfortable to receive, causing us to rethink our attitudes and reformulate our responses. Above all, we will be reminded that seeking justice is everyone's responsibility, especially followers of Christ.

Why Social Justice?

To recognise why social justice is a suitable focus for Lent, we need do no more than recall the origins of this liturgical season in the early church, where it served as a time of preparation for baptism candidates and restoration for those excluded from the community of faith owing to serious transgression. In both cases, the emphasis fell upon readying oneself to share in Christ's risen life, celebrated at Easter, when the baptised and restored alike would be incorporated into the body of Christ, the church community, and invited to participate in the Eucharist.

Readying oneself to share in Christ's risen life entails, among other things, a commitment to practising God's rule of love and encouraging others to do likewise. Love is one of those words that can mean different things at different times and in different contexts. When Jesus commanded his followers to love their neighbours and enemies (Matthew 5.43–48; 19.19; Mark 12.28–34), he wasn't expecting them to feel emotionally inclined towards them or even to like them. The biblical scholar John Meir captures Jesus' meaning when he writes:

To love this 'neighbour' means to will good and do good to him, even if one feels some personal enmity toward him. More specifically, in the immediate context, loving one's fellow Israelite means promoting, protecting, and, if need be, restoring that person's rights, honour, status in the community ... Jesus is commanding his disciples to will good and do good to their enemies, no matter how the disciples may feel about them, and no matter whether the enemies remain enemies despite the goodness shown to them. (*A Marginal Jew*, vol 4, pp 492 & 530)

Loving, in Jesus' teaching, is a wilful and practical undertaking towards another human being, in God's name. It is perhaps best summed up in another of Jesus' sayings, 'Do to others as you would have them do to you' (Matthew 7.12/Luke 6.31). The implications of this teaching are wide-ranging while the applications are various and extensive, but many of them will relate, in one way or another, to justice. For example, loving someone who is marginalised or oppressed might mean striving alongside them for their emancipation. Loving someone who is destitute might mean helping them access the resources they need to live with dignity and sufficiency. Loving someone who hates us or who seeks to do us harm might mean refusing to return hate with hate while seeking reconciliation, thereby embodying a different way.

Another biblical specialist, John Dominic Crossan, articulates the relationship between 'love' and 'justice' in this way:

My proposal is that justice and love are a dialectic – like two sides of a coin that can be distinguished but not separated. We think of ourselves as composed of body and soul, or flesh and spirit. When they are separated, we have a physical corpse. Similarly with distributive justice and communal love. Justice is the body of love, love the soul of justice. Justice is the flesh of love, love is the spirit of justice. When they are separated, we have a moral corpse. Justice without love is brutality. Love without justice is banality. (*God and Empire*, p 190)

How to Use this Course

This year's course will explore social justice through focusing on five areas, one each week: identity; inequality; disability; asylum; social disintegration. In addition to the weekly theme, if feedback from last year's course is any guide, participants may be looking for quite different things from each session, including silence, contemplation, companionship, biblical study, social engagement and practical application.

To embrace such glorious variety, this year's course takes the form of a set of 'ingredients' designed to explore the weekly focus, which can be selected and combined in a way that suits each group. There is no expectation that all the ingredients will be included in each session; rather, it is for group members to decide where their interests and inclinations lead them. In brief, here are the ingredients:

- **Visual:** An image inviting visual engagement
- **Gathering:** Resources to help group members settle, focus and become receptive
- **Briefing:** Information about the weekly focus (profitably read before each session)
- **Voice:** Hearing from 'insiders' with personal experience
- **Response:** Questions to help us reflect, engage and respond
- **Biblical Insight:** Voices from scripture with introductory comments
- **Closing Reflection:** Giving expression to our responses

It is hoped that all groups will begin with some form of 'Gathering' and conclude with some form of 'Closing Reflection.' Following the 'Gathering,' groups looking for a more analytical/investigative approach may choose to major on the 'Briefing' and 'Response,' while those inclined to a more empathetic/intuitive approach may be drawn to the 'Visual' and 'Voice.' Other groups, drawing on their own experience and understanding, may choose to start with some of the questions raised in 'Response' and use other resources as they engage with them. Other groups, again, may choose to start with 'Biblical Insight' and see where that leads. And please remember that resources not used in group time can accompany us through the week.

If you or your group are unsure how best to use these ingredients, why not start with the following menu:

- Briefing (read before the group session)
- Gathering (this shouldn't be rushed)
- Voice (best listened to or read aloud)
- Response (give time for everyone who wishes to speak)
- Biblical Insight (focus on one passage and use the last question in 'Response')
- Closing Reflection

Please feel free to experiment and be under no pressure to use all of the ingredients – it is not a curriculum to be covered, but a menu to be explored. What is important is that participants come away from sessions feeling they have experienced a fruitful encounter with other group members, as well as with the weekly focus and, hopefully, with God.

Disclosures

Please note, these are educational materials for non-commercial use. We have attempted to acknowledge authorship and respect copyright throughout. Materials included in this course may not be reproduced without the permission of the authors or copyright holders.

Most of these resources have been researched, selected or created by a retired male Anglican priest who is straight, white, married and tertiary educated. Like everyone else, he interprets the world through a set of presuppositions and perspectives that affect his judgement. Given that there is no genuinely 'objective' position from which to engage with the topics of this course (or anything else for that matter), the best we can strive for is to be conscious of our biases, constantly interrogating them in the crucible of personal experience, public discourse and intellectual inquiry – and, if need be, ready to revise them accordingly (in as much as it is in our power to do so).