

St Mark's Lent Course 2026

Exploring Social Justice: Critical Issues Defining our Time

Week 1: Identity – Resource Pack

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

I.1 Visual

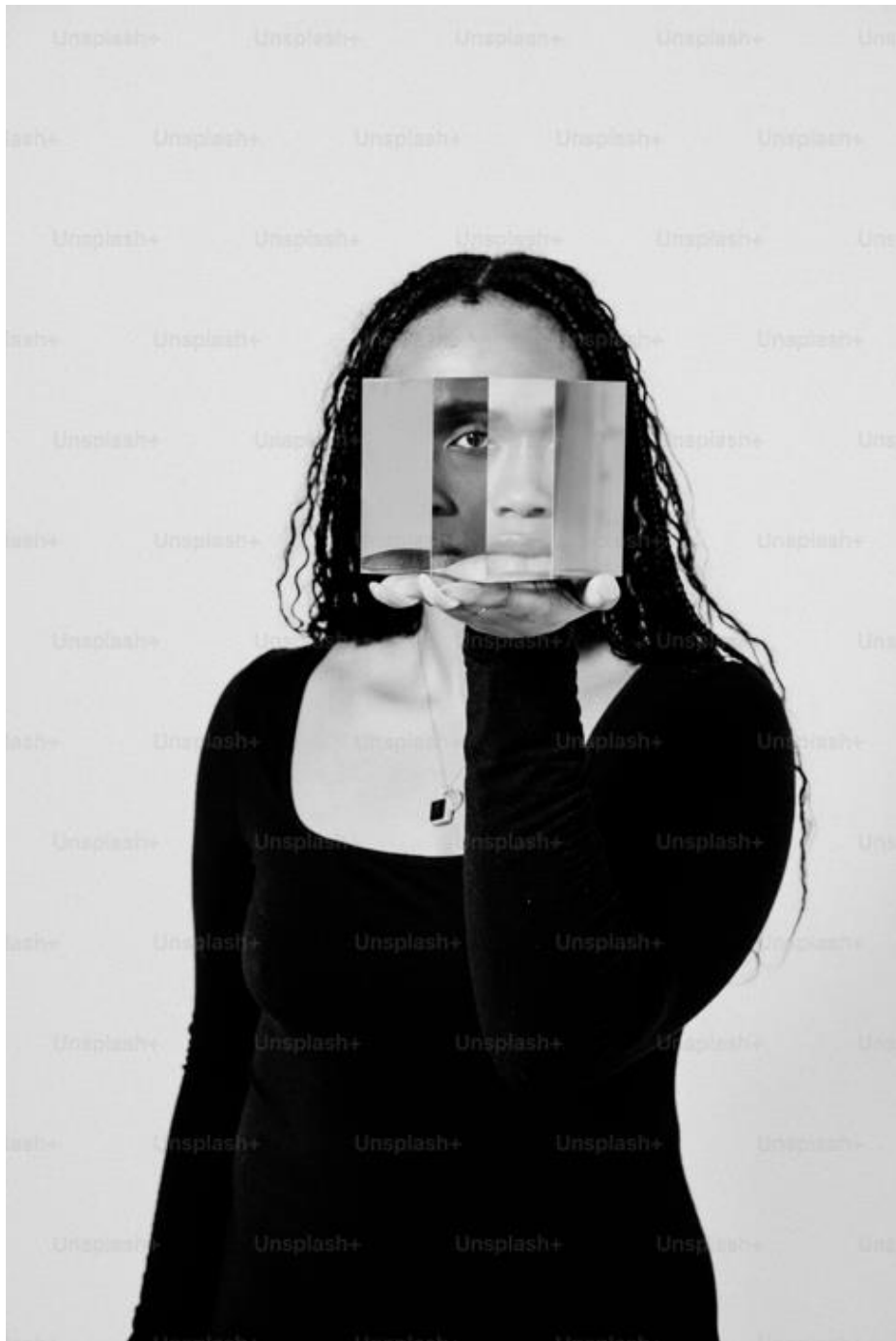


Photo by Nick Fancher on Unsplash

I.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.

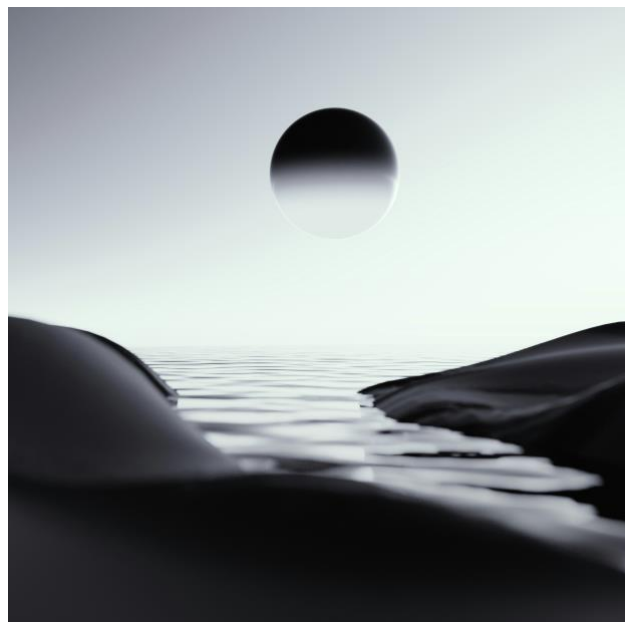


Photo by Shri on Unsplash

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.

I.3 Briefing

Who am I? Three short words, a mere six letters, yet framing one of life's most demanding questions – one that takes us to the heart of personal identity. This question is so demanding because identity is multifaceted, a confluence of influences, including:

- biological sex
- class consciousness
- cultural & religious/ideological affiliation
- educational opportunities
- environmental factors
- gender awareness
- genetic inheritance
- health status
- living conditions
- nurture & upbringing
- quality of life
- race, ethnicity & nationality
- sexual orientation
- socio-economic conditions

In addition, each of us inhabits different roles in relation to different persons or groups of people. For example, we may be a child, partner, parent, teacher, carer, friend and volunteer. They are all 'you' or 'me,' yet each persona possesses its own particular characteristics. What is more, the virtual world of the internet and social media platforms afford us opportunity to explore multiple identities, if we wish, anonymously and some would argue without accountability.

Nor does it end there because not only is identity multifaceted, it also evolves through time as we experience more of life, encounter different people and situations, experiment with new ideas, grow, mature and age. All this is complicated further because most of us find ourselves juggling at least three identity drivers that are often in tension – lived experience (how we see ourselves), expectation (how others see us) and aspiration (how we would like to see ourselves).

What has emerged with greater clarity over recent years is that many of these identity-forming influences interact with one another to shape experience, beneficially or detrimentally – intersectionality, as it is termed (eg class, gender, race, religion, socio-economic conditions). Equally, there is a growing recognition that some, for example, gender awareness and sexual orientation – even ethnicity, health status and religious affiliation – are non-binary, giving rise to a spectrum of perceptions and responses.

On top of all this, certain psychiatric (eg schizophrenia, PTSD), neurological (eg Alzheimer's, strokes, tumours) or systemic (eg substance abuse) conditions can substantially affect a person's sense of self and identity, often with far-reaching implications for patient and loved ones alike. Some medication (eg antidepressants) and clinical interventions (eg electroconvulsive therapy) can also affect identity constructively or destructively – sometimes both concurrently – while gender-affirming treatments can help to align a person's physical characteristics with their gender identity.

Who am I? is, indeed, a demanding question, but it is also an existential one at the core of authentic living. We owe it to ourselves to address it to gain a deeper appreciation not only of our own identities, but also – as we shall discover in the coming weeks – of the identities of others.

I.4 Voice

Three personal explorations of identity (please select the most suitable for your group).

Firstly, 'Love after Love,' by Saint Lucian poet and playwright, Derek Walcott (1930–2017). Owing to copyright restrictions, this poem cannot be reproduced here. However, it can be accessed legally via this [\[LINK\]](#). 'Love after Love,' appears in Derek Walcott's *Collected Poems: 1948–1984* (London: Faber & Faber, 1992).

Secondly, another poem, 'Names,' by contemporary English poet, Wendy Cope. Once again, the text cannot be included here, but please use these links to [\[READ\]](#) or [\[WATCH/LISTEN\]](#) to it. 'Names,' was originally published in *Serious Concerns* (London: Faber & Faber, 2002).

Please note, if no one in the group will have access to the internet during the meeting, ask someone to print off a copy of these poems beforehand and bring them along so that they can be shared. This does not contravene copyright legislation.

Thirdly, a testimony of coming out, posted on the BBC Radio 5 website [\[LINK\]](#). Asad grew up in a British Pakistani Muslim household. He was part of a religious community, a very tight-knit family household, with multiple different families living under one roof. Everyone knew everyone.

I grew up with that feeling of interconnectivity, being very much part of a community yet secretly living a lie and knowing that I probably wouldn't be welcome in that community if I were honest about who I am.

The strain took a huge toll on his mental health. He was diagnosed with depression in his early 20s but says he was probably showing signs of it since he was 13 or 14.

You assimilate to the point of disappearance, you become a shadow of a person, you just try your best to fit in. Your own goal is survival.

The turning point for Asad came when conversations started around arranged marriage. His parents, brother and sister had all had arranged marriages and as a young man in his early 20s with a good job in London, Asad was, as he says himself 'a catch'. But for Asad, it was a step too far.

It just got to a point where I just couldn't handle the thought of now involving someone else in the lie, it just seemed so unfair to that woman.

When he decided to come out to his parents, Asad was so unsure about what might happen that he packed a bag and got a friend to drive over and park outside. He texted his dad from his room and asked him to go upstairs, but when it came to telling him Asad struggled to find the words.

I couldn't say the word gay, I couldn't say the word queer. I just stumbled through it, I said I can't get married.

He says his dad's immediate response was concern and to keep asking questions until in the middle of all those questions he hit on the right one.

He said 'Do you like girls, do you like boys? I froze at that point and I just confirmed it.

His dad's response was not what he had been expecting.

His reaction was beautiful, 'I love you, you're my son, nothing is going to change how much I love you' and that was that.

Asad says his relationship with his parents is non-existent today, but he still looks back on that moment fondly.

1.5 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 identity a social justice issue?
- Are you aware of possessing different identities – how do they relate to one another?
- Do you think we all possess a 'core' identity?
- What would your epitaph be?
- What is Christian identity and how does it relate to other identities (see 1.6 below)?

I.6 Biblical Insight

Overview

In the first-century Middle East, identity could be complex and multifaceted, with individuals inhabiting multiple identities each with its own set of allegiances, expectations and responsibilities. Many of these identities would be inherited such as gender, family, tribe, status, ethnicity and citizenship. Others could be acquired, albeit within tightly prescribed parameters, such as employment and marital status. Others still could be enforced, for example, becoming subject of a conquering empire (Rome) or taken into slavery. Religious identity was usually inherited and considered to be non-negotiable. In this respect, Christianity was unusual with persons converting to it and being expected to offer exclusive allegiance to Christ (a rarity in the ancient Graeco-Roman world). This created an identity crisis for many as they struggled to work out the implications of their newly acquired Christian identity for their other identities. What can we learn from their experiences?

Philippians 3.4–9

‘If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith.’ (NRSVA)

Galatians 3.27–29

‘As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise.’ (NRSVA)

Mark 3.31–35

‘Then Jesus’ mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, “Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.” And he replied, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” And looking at those who sat around him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.” (NRSVA)

1.7 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.

Your true presence
is your field of power.
It is not of the mind's making
but comes from the heart.
If we can live from there, deep inside,
we discover our calling, our true purpose,
and follow the path we were born to take.
For each of us is born to be
what no one else can truly be,
and each of us is born to do
what no one else can truly do.

*John Elliott-Kemp (1927–2011);
John was a long-standing member of St Mark's.*

Acknowledgement

'But the silence ...,' a portion of which is included in section 1.2 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).