

St Mark's Lent Course 2026

Exploring Social Justice: Critical Issues Defining our Time

Week 2: Inequality

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

2.1 Visual



Photo by Denis Oliveira on Unsplash

2.2 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.*

2.3 Briefing

What is inequality? It refers to the uneven distribution of income, wealth, opportunities and access to services across individuals and communities. As such, it encompasses economic, social, educational and health disparities.

Consider, for example, economic inequality. According to the [World Inequality Report](#) 2022 (WIR), the poorest half of the world population earns 8.5% of global income, whereas the richest ten percent earns 52% with the remaining 40% earning 39.5%. The disparity is even greater when it comes to global wealth with the poorest half of the world population owning just 2% of total net wealth, whereas the richest half owns 98% of global wealth and, of the richest half, the top ten percent owns 76% of global wealth.

One metric used to measure inequality is the ‘average national income’ which is calculated by dividing the total national income (GDP) by the total national population. In the UK, the average national income in 2022 was £32,720; however, in reality, the poorest 50% earned just £13,300 and the top ten percent earned £116,700, nine times more, which is comparable with Germany and Poland (10x), but significantly less than China (14x) and the United States (21x). When it comes to wealth, the poorest half of the UK population owns 5% of household wealth, whereas the richest ten percent owns 57%.

Inequality, though, extends well beyond income and wealth as is powerfully demonstrated locally by the [‘Fairness on the 83’](#) project which follows the route of the number 83 bus through some of the poorest and wealthiest districts in Sheffield, with interviews and statistics highlighting various forms of inequality along the way. One particularly disturbing fact relates to life expectancy. It takes the number 83 bus approximately forty minutes to travel from Fulwood to Burngreave – barely four miles, yet residents in the former can expect to live on average ten years longer (87) than those in the latter (77).

The recently published Sheffield Poverty Truth Commission report, [‘Finding the Root Cause’](#), supplies further evidence:

Inequality rates in death studied in Sheffield show that after some improvement, the gap between the poorest decile and the richest in terms of early death has widened. Some of Sheffield’s poorest areas are also some of the poorest in the UK including Shiregreen, Shirecliffe, Firth Park, Darnall and Burngreave. In areas such as Tinsley and Carbrook, over 53% of children are in low-income households and across the whole city 33% of children are in this bracket. It is also estimated that 47,500 residents are in what are called ‘negative budgets’ i.e. they don’t have funds for the basics without help. A further 35,000 residents are financially ‘running on empty.’ [p 41]

Many of the causes of inequality have long been identified and studied. Here are some of the principal drivers:

- **Economic Factors:** Wage disparities, insecure employment and zero-hour contracts all contribute to income inequality, with increases in essentials such as accommodation, utilities and food outstripping improvements in income.
- **Education & Skills Gap:** Unequal access to quality education and vocational training affects social mobility. Schools in deprived areas often have fewer resources, impacting outcomes and future opportunities.
- **Wealth Distribution & Inheritance:** Historical accumulation of wealth and property privileges some groups over others, with inheritance and inter-generational transfers reinforcing these disparities.
- **Health Inequalities:** Life expectancy and health outcomes vary significantly by income, region and occupation. Access to quality healthcare and healthy living conditions impact significantly upon quality of life and employment opportunities.
- **Discrimination & Social Exclusion:** Systemic discrimination based on race, gender, disability or immigration status limits access to employment, housing and social services. Social exclusion intensifies inequality and reduces community cohesion.
- **Policy & Taxation:** Changes in taxation, welfare support and public service provision influence not only income and wealth distribution, but also levels of poverty and deprivation. Cuts to social programmes disproportionately affect vulnerable populations.

Addressing these and other sources of inequality will require comprehensive and sustained reform applied to many aspects of society which are sure to be opposed by some of those with most to lose – including members of Parliament. One encouraging piece of legislation to make it onto the statute books recently is the [Equality Act 2010](#) which offers legal protection against discrimination, harassment and victimization in the workplace and in wider society, prescribing nine ‘protected characteristics’: age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage or civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation. Other important legislation includes: [Human Rights Act 1998](#); [Employment Equal Treatment Framework Directive 2000](#); [Gender Recognition Act 2004](#); [Work and Families Act 2006](#).

2.4 Voice

There are a number of options. Here is a poem exploring inequality by Fauxcroft Wade, 'Inequality, Shame and Blame' [\[LINK\]](#). Owing to copyright restrictions, the poem cannot be reproduced here.

Alternatively, why not watch or listen to an interview from the 'Fairness on the 83' website. For instance, the one with Kevin, selling the Big Issue [\[LINK\]](#) or those interviewed in the City Centre [\[LINK\]](#) or around Burngreave [\[LINK\]](#).

If you can't access the internet, here is 'Brittany's Story' from the Sheffield Poverty Truth Commission report, [Finding the Root Cause](#).

Hi I'm Brittany ... and I'm 26. Growing up I lived a very unstable and chaotic life. My mum was young with 3 kids all aged 2 years apart, deeply struggling with her own mental health, abusive relationship and social problems. My dad was a functioning alcoholic, again struggling from his past and current life resulting in him losing control of his anger often and leading him to be quite abusive towards us at times.

My dad worked as a porter at the hospital and my mum worked multiple jobs, both working day and night shifts but still we struggled to get by day by day and my parents racked up a lot of debt throughout the years just trying to provide us with basic necessities. Not being able to afford childcare, me and my brothers were often left in the care of family members who weren't capable of looking after us which put our wellbeing and safety at risk.

Both me and my brother have ADHD and autism which made school a massive barrier for us. Not only did we experience major bullying ... there was a real lack of a support system ... We were often put in isolation or excluded branded 'naughty or bad kids' when in reality we were in fact traumatised from our home life and struggling to cope in an environment that overwhelms and over stimulates us with little to no support.

We were let down by the system in our education and our safeguarding as both social services knew about our home life but it was always dropped with practically no investigation or care plan in place. The lack of support that we or our mother got is unacceptable.

My parents split just before I moved into secondary school this is where I really went on a war path with myself on a road I thought was 'freedom' and 'taking control of my own life.' I started hanging with older teens and sometimes adults smoking, drinking, taking drugs, getting involved in petty crime and wreck-less antisocial behaviour. I experienced grooming and both criminal and sexual exploitation. I was passed between family member (none who wanted me there) and jumping between any friend that would let me stay with them. Before I knew it, I was 16, street homeless waiting in Roundabout to be taken down to their hostel. I lived there for 8 months and in this time my substance misuse, abuse and exploitation got progressively worse. I became a zombie of myself and still I couldn't find the right support to pull me back onto the right path. I entered into an abusive relationship before being moved into a much larger hostel with less support.

While living there I suffered major abuse and due to my partner's actions and behaviour I was evicted from the hostel, this led to me being intentionally homeless and sleeping rough on the streets of Sheffield with my partner for a long period of time before I was signed into care and placed in my own flat.

I would spend the next 4 years moving between different temporary and supported accommodations with social care hardly having any contact with me and mostly served as a way for me to get money and clothes when I needed it. With the lack of support mixed with trauma and drugs I was the perfect target for grooming and exploitation. I experienced 20 years of hell all while being “supported” by a system made to fail me and it was only in my 20's when I got caught pregnant that I sought proper professional help became clean of drugs and started to build a future for myself and unborn child.

2.5 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 inequality a social justice issue?
- Is inequality inevitable?
- What does inequality reveal about human nature?
- How can faith communities address inequality both internally and more broadly?
- Can we gain any insight or inspiration from the Bible (see 2.6 below)?

2.6 Biblical Insight

Overview

The Bible doesn't speak with one voice on inequality – quite the opposite. For one thing, each biblical book, like every human artifact, emerges from a particular time and place, sometimes uncritically or inadvertently adopting cultural norms that enshrine inequality, such as patriarchy and slavery. For another, two defining convictions shared by many biblical authors, especially in the Old Testament, foster inequality, namely election and land – the belief that Israel is God's chosen people (and other nations aren't) and that God has given Israel territory, Canaan, for their homeland (even though it was already inhabited by indigenous people). A third conviction characterising much of the Old Testament relates to blessing and cursing: in particular, the belief that progeny, wealth, longevity, well-being, good fortune and the like are signs of God's good favour, while their absence demonstrates divine displeasure. In contrast, some of the Old Testament prophets (eg Amos, Micah, Isaiah, Jeremiah) challenge inequality in the name of justice, calling perpetrators to account while demanding change in God's name. John the Baptist and Jesus

belong within this prophetic, reformist tradition which, in Jesus' case, is augmented by a praxis of compassion and care focused on those suffering from the effects of inequality. As a consequence, the early Jesus movement appears to have been much more egalitarian and committed to tackling inequality, at least in some of its manifestations.

Acts 2.37–47

'Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, "Brothers, what should we do?" Peter said to them, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him." And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.' (NRSVA)

Luke 1.46–55

'And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever." (NRSVA)

2.7 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.

To seek your soul, that is a precious thing,
But you will never find it on your own,
Only among the clamour, threat, and pain
Of other people's need will love be known.

Do not retreat into your private world,
There are more ways than firesides to keep warm;
There is no shelter from the rage of life,
So meet its eye, and dance within the storm.

Verses from a hymn by Kathy Galloway (1952–2025), included in 'Bread for Tomorrow,' edited by Janet Morley (London: SPCK, 1992), reproduced under Church Copyright Licence Number 887387.

Acknowledgement

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