

# St Mark's Lent Course 2026

## Exploring Social Justice: Critical Issues Defining our Time

### Week 5: Social Fragmentation

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

Please make space in this final session for group members to share their reflections of the course.

#### 5.1 Visual



*Photo by Buddy AN on Unsplash*

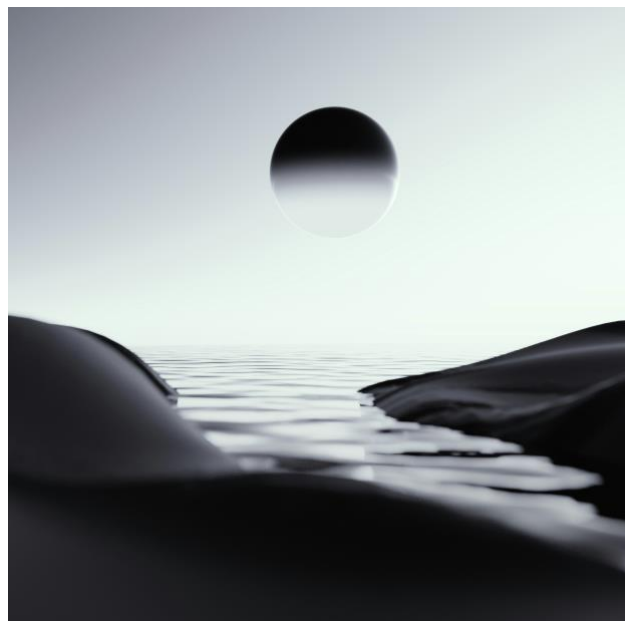


## 5.2 Gathering

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.*

## 5.3 Briefing

Social fragmentation refers to the breakdown or weakening of social cohesion within a community or society, resulting in diminished trust, reduced social interaction and the erosion of shared norms, values and institutions. Social fragmentation often manifests as a society divided into isolated, disconnected or antagonistic groups, often along lines of ethnicity, class, religion or ideology, which can undermine collective identity and complicate governance.

The Southport killings of three young girls, Elsie Dot Stancombe (7), Bebe King (6) and Alice da Silva Aguiar (9) by Axel Rudakubana on 29 July 2024 sparked sporadic acts of violence and disorder in over 35 locations around the UK, including the Holiday Inn Express, Manvers, near Rotherham on 4 August. This widespread targeting, mainly of Muslims and asylum seekers, but of other minorities as well, constituted the worst outbreak of racial violence in the UK for decades and highlighted the fragmented nature of UK society.

Several analyses of this incident and its aftermath, as well as of UK social fragmentation more generally, including [After the riots: Building the foundation for social cohesion](#) (September 2024) and [The State of Us: Community strength and cohesion in the UK](#) (July 2025), have identified a number of causes, including:

- Economic inequality & deprivation: Income inequality erodes trust and social solidarity. Communities with high inequality caused by factors such as high unemployment, low wages or housing stress show weaker social bonds, lower civic participation and reduced confidence in institutions.
- Demographic & housing changes: A rise in single-person households and an increase in private-rented accommodation often result in higher residential turnover and reduced personal investment in an area, eroding any sense of belonging.
- Technological advances & digital isolation: The rise of social media and digital communication facilitates the spread of false or inaccurate information intentionally (disinformation) or unintentionally (misinformation). They can also create echo chambers, reinforcing existing beliefs while reducing exposure to other perspectives. Online interaction can decrease face-to-face encounters while remote working can foster a sense of isolation, eroding community cohesion or participation.
- Migration & diversity: Rapid demographic and cultural changes, while offering benefits, can increase pressure on access to housing, education, employment and public services - eroding social cohesion while heightening levels of suspicion, powerlessness and disillusionment.
- Weakening social infrastructure: Cuts in community provision, including children's and youth services, libraries and museums, sports and leisure facilities, have significantly reduced social interaction, as well as opportunities for community building and nurturing social networks.

- Disillusionment with traditional party politics: The failure of recent governments to deliver significant improvements in public services or to take back control of UK borders, along with recent falls in the standard of living, have undermined trust in mainstream parties, polarizing the electorate while making consensus-building and mutual understanding more challenging.

The consequences of social fragmentation are significant and readily apparent. They include, firstly, reduced community cohesion and a weaker sense of attachment to neighbourhoods. Secondly, poorer mental and physical health outcomes as strong social connections are vital for well-being, while isolation is linked to increased risks of depression and anxiety. Thirdly, reduced civic engagement as people become more isolated and less likely to participate in local groups, volunteering or voting. Fourthly, increased difficulty in addressing collective challenges, such as inequality or climate change, owing to a lack of trust and shared purpose hindering collective action.

## 5.4 Voice

Heath Gunn was born in Sheffield and grew up in Rotherham. After a career in the Royal Navy, he started to write, embracing different genres, including poetry. Here is a [\[LINK\]](#) to one of his poems, 'A Million Lives in Parallel,' which cannot be reproduced here owing to copyright restrictions.

Here is a collection of sound bites gleaned from community consultations referenced in the report, *The State of Us: Community strength and cohesion in the UK* (July 2025):

- *'I think about [community] as my very local community. So, the houses around where I live [...] My neighbours are very friendly on either side of me and we talk. But there might as well be a Grand Canyon between us and the other side of the road.'* (Bolton focus group)
- *'Prices are going up, the salaries aren't there anymore, there's less security. When people are living in poverty and worried about what food they have on the table, that's their priority. They're thinking about, how am I going to be looked after, safe. They're not able to think about community or politics.'* (Belfast roundtable discussion)
- *'Whenever local authorities want to close something, it's always the libraries or the cinema – the nice things, the social places.'* (Abergavenny focus group)
- *'If you go to Westside Plaza, it's all charity shops, bookie shops and off-licences. There's been a lot of incidents there: a lot of beatings up and everything, because people hang out there, by the off licence, drinking. And there's just nothing for the teenagers to do.'* (Edinburgh focus group)

- *'[The grooming scandal] has made a divide in the community, because a lot of white British students now, especially in the younger generation, are looking at the Asian community. And they've got a bad feeling about them. They're sort of getting tarred with the same brush. It's so wrong, because the younger generation are carrying [the racism] on and on with the Asian community.'* (Rotherham focus group)
- *'The workplace, once a melting pot of different backgrounds, has also become more stratified. Firms are increasingly split into those that hire almost exclusively graduates and those that do not. The gig economy and remote work have only exacerbated these trends, further reducing social interaction between different classes. Meanwhile, educational segregation is also deepening: British schools are now more divided by race and income than the neighbourhoods they serve.'* (Jon Yates)
- *'My mother-in-law has just gone into a care home, and we have to pay thousands of pounds a month. She's worked all her life. She doesn't get the heating allowance now. These are all little things that have been taken away. The TV licence too. I think the unskilled workers coming in ... the boats ... also the media has a role to play – it's all so negative. You see all these people coming in and they're getting three hot meals a day and a hotel. They're not being charged thousands of pounds a month.'* (Rotherham focus group)
- *'I'm born and bred in Croydon. In the 60s, it was a nice place. You had big department stores [...] and half the shops are empty now. And that makes people resentful, sad, and certainly, in my own view, the powers that be are very self-centred ... I live in a rented place – a house costs too much. So I have to move from place to place. People like me can't be a part of their community, because I've moved so many times. My neighbour actually died a few months ago. I only realised the other day. I feel very excluded from my community.'* (Croydon focus group)
- *'I think part of the problem is we don't trust them [politicians], because they feel sneaky, like they're supposedly doing stuff for the people with the people, but they're just lining their own pockets with their expenses and their massive salaries. I've contacted MPs before and raised issues about funding for schools. They never get back to me. They're not interested. They just pay lip service.'* (Bolton focus group)
- *'You're now hearing this term indigenous people, and there's now a rhetoric against anyone that's of an ethnic minority background that says "you shouldn't be here". And I kind of sit there and I'm like, "I was born and bred here. I'm probably the most British person you'll ever meet." Like, I love nothing more than a Sunday roast dinner and going down the pub. I was wearing an England shirt the other week at the rugby game, and, yeah, I now get people looking at me, going "you're not British" – just because of the colour of my skin.'* (Stoke-on-Trent focus group)
- *'We've seen a massive movement of society into an online world, and an online world whereby algorithms and social media are directing people into a siloed sense of belonging, a belonging which is not within the parameters of local communities. And it's a more toxic belonging, which says "my tribe is better than your tribe".'* (south-east England roundtable)

- *'In the town where I live there's lots of HMOs [Houses of Multiple Occupation] going up at the moment. And people on the local Facebook groups are commenting "do you want illegal immigrants walking the streets in your area? Look after your children; they'll be assaulting your wife". Things like that.'* (Bolton focus group)

## 5.5 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 social fragmentation a social justice issue?
- Is social fragmentation an inevitable consequence of societal diversity?
- Is there any 'glue' holding UK citizens together? What is it or what could it be?
- How should faith communities respond to social fragmentation?
- Does Jesus' encounter with a Gentile woman or Isaiah's diagnosis of Israel's condition offer any insight (see 5.6 below)?

## 5.6 Biblical Insight

### Overview

Unsurprisingly, Biblical authors interpret societal breakdown theologically. A classic example is the Tower of Babel myth which accounts for breakdown in relationship between people in terms of a rupture in relationship with God, resulting from pride and self-aggrandisement (Gen 11.1–9). Significantly, early Christian commentators (eg Origen, *Homilies on Genesis*) interpret Pentecost as the reversal of Babel when all people through the Holy Spirit reunite in Christ (Acts 2). It's important to remember that the modern construct of the 'individual' as an independent, self-sufficient being would have been alien to biblical authors. Instead, personal identity was constituted from the web of relationships comprising each life, first and foremost 'covenant' with God. Where relationships were wholesome, blessing flowed; where relationships had broken down, dis-ease ensued. This is where most biblical accounts of sin should be located, namely, sin in those actions, words or intentions that compromise or destroy right-relating. We also need to note that fundamental to biblical conceptions of sin is disorder (eg Rom 1.18–32), especially the disordering of relationship with God through transgression, but also with other people, particularly one's kinship group. As a consequence, the root cause of societal breakdown would be understood in this way. Equally, an almost universal claim of early Christian witness is that Jesus Christ restores right-relating with God and with all people (eg John 17.20–24; Acts 10.34–43; Rom 5.6–11; 2 Cor 5.16–19; Eph 2.13–16; Col 1.19–20). Here are two passages that throw further light on the causes of social disintegration and its remedy.

### Matthew 15.21–28

‘Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.” But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, “Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.” He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” He answered, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” Then Jesus answered her, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed instantly.’ (NRSVA)

### Isaiah 58.1–9

‘Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet! Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins. Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments, they delight to draw near to God. “Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?”

Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high. Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD?

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.’ (NRSVA)



## 5.7 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.

My own healing is bound up with that of others.  
I need to pray and work  
for the healing of the nations,  
for food for the hungry,  
for justice for the downtrodden,  
for my neighbours in a global village.  
Without their well-being  
I cannot be completely well.

*Jim Cotter (1942–2014), from 'Healing – More or Less' (Sheffield: Cairn Publications, 1990), reproduced under 'fair dealing' provision within UK Copyright Law, for non-commercial, educational purposes.*

## Acknowledgement

'But the silence ...,' a portion of which is included in section 5.2 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).