

St Mark's Church, Broomhill & Broomhall

LENT COURSE 2026

Exploring Social Justice: Critical Issues Defining our Time

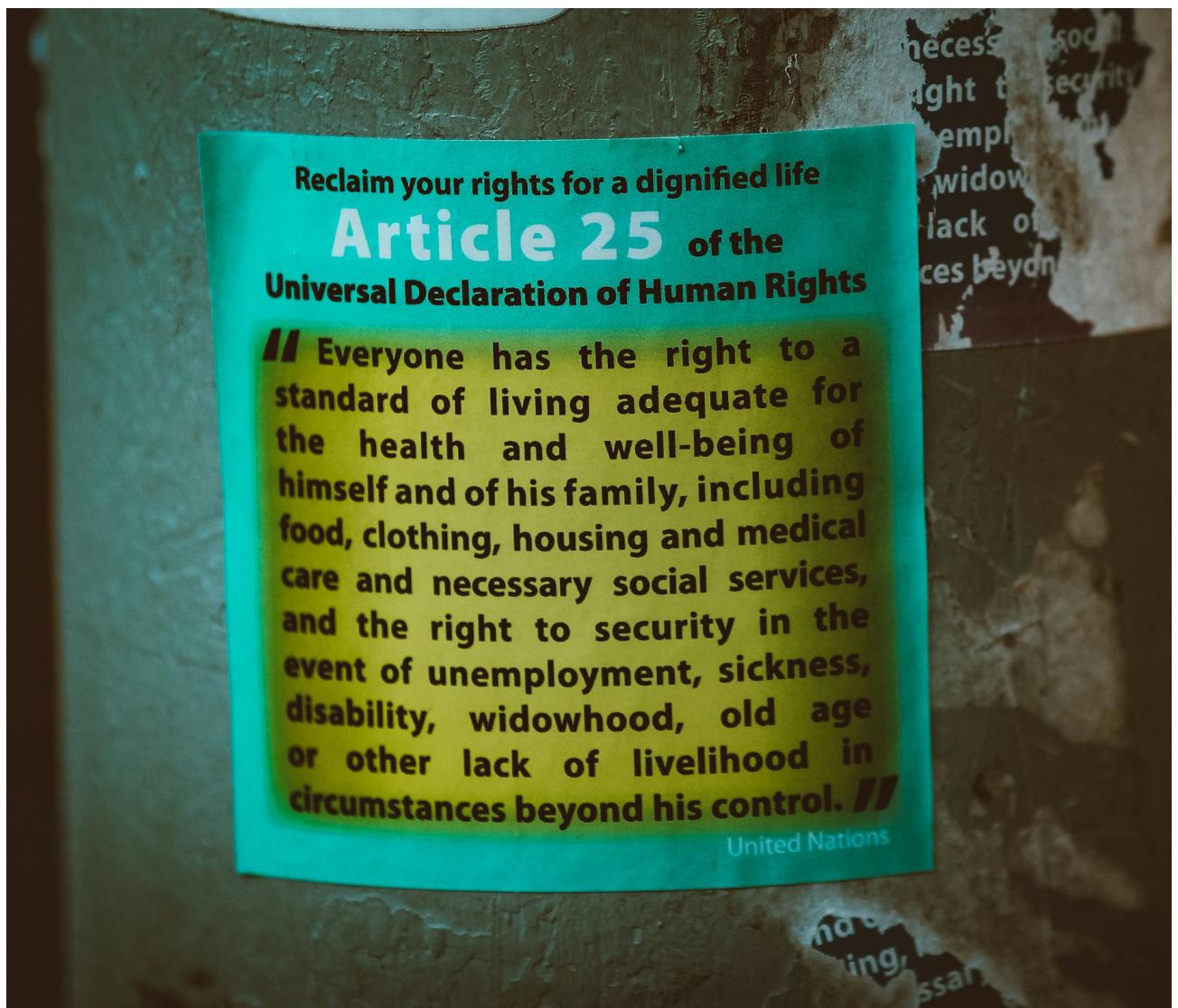


Photo by Jon Tyson on Unsplash

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.

Readyng 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 (ideally, read before the group session)
- Gathering (this shouldn’t be rushed)
- Voice (best listened to or read aloud, be selective)
- Response (give time for everyone who wishes to contribute)
- 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).

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.

1.1 Visual



Photo by Nick Fancher on Unsplash

1.2 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.

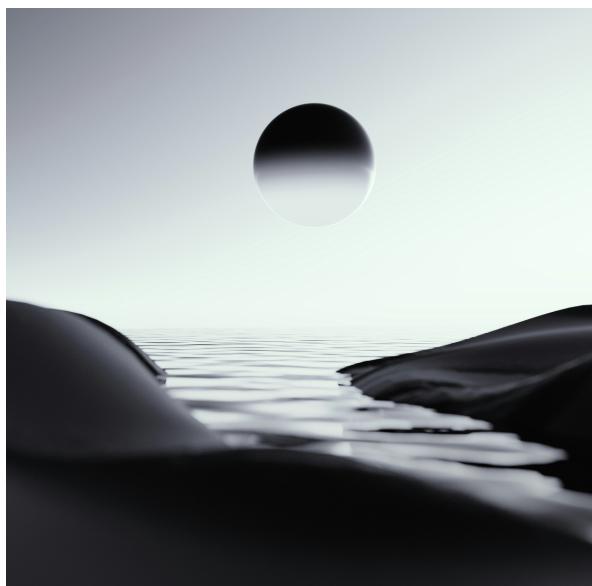


Photo by Shri on Unsplash

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.*

1.3 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.

1.4 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 BCC 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)?

1.6 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).

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

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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.

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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



Photo by Getty Images on Unsplash

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

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St Mark's Lent Course 2026

Exploring Social Justice: Critical Issues Defining our Time

Week 4: Asylum

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

4.1 Visual



Photo by Stuart Brock

4.2 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.

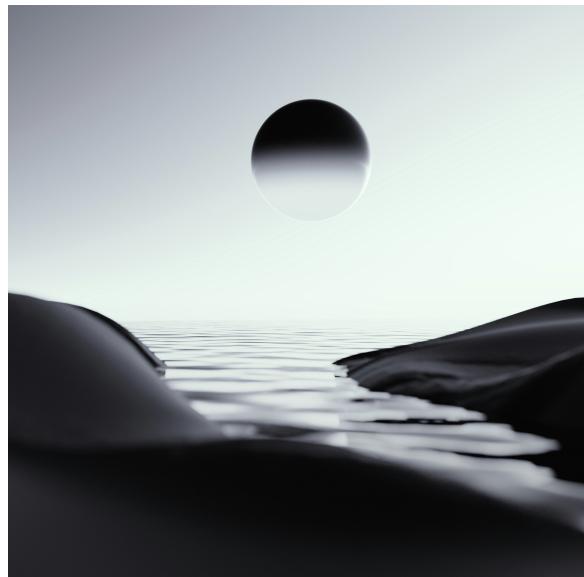


Photo by Shri on Unsplash

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.*

4.3 Briefing

According to the [United Nations Convention on the Rights of Migrants](#), a migrant 'should be understood as covering all cases where the decision to migrate is taken freely by the individual concerned, for reasons of "personal convenience" and without intervention of an external compelling factor' (Article 1.1a). The principal reasons for migration include education, economic opportunities, family reunification and globalisation.

By this definition, asylum seekers are not migrants because their relocation is made under duress as they attempt to escape from political instability, persecution, conflict, famine or other life-endangering drivers. Asylum seekers are persons who have fled their countries of habitual residence 'owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion' ([UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees](#), 1951). Under international law, anyone has the right to apply for asylum in any country that has signed the 1951 Convention and to remain there until the authorities have assessed their claim.

At the end of 2021, the Refugee Council reports approximately 89.3 million people were forcibly displaced across the world, 41% of whom were children. Of these, 27.1 million were seeking asylum abroad, while 53.2 million were internally displaced within their country of origin. Of the 53.2 million, 72% were living in neighbouring, often developing, countries. Only 1% were refugees residing in the UK. More than two-thirds of displaced persons across the world come from just five countries: Syria (6.8 million), Venezuela (4.6 million), Afghanistan (2.7 million), South Sudan (2.4 million) and Myanmar (1.2 million). Of Syria's 6.8 million, Turkey, the world's leading refugee-hosting country, provided safety for 3.7 million; the UK resettled 20,319.

Currently, the Office of National Statistics includes asylum seekers in its long-term (a year or more) migration figures. In its latest report relating to 2024, 517,000 emigrated from, while 948,000 immigrated to the UK, giving a net migration figure of 431,000. However, most of the 948,000 immigrants arriving in the UK did so through legal channels, such as work, student or family visas. The ONS identifies 95,000 of that number as asylum seekers and a further 50,000 as refugees, the latter having been granted permission to remain in the UK before arrival (eg special arrangements for Ukrainians, British Nationals resident in Hong Kong, some 'at risk' Afghans). These ONS figures are provisional.

With the exception of these special schemes, it is not currently possible to apply for asylum outside of the UK. As no asylum visas are issued that would permit a prospective asylum seeker to arrive in the UK legally, the only way to apply for asylum in the UK is to arrive via an illegal route, such as small boat crossings, or to obtain, in the first instance, a legal temporary visa to study or work and then apply for asylum once in the UK.

Oxford University's 'Migration Observatory' estimates that the average wait time from applying for asylum to receiving an initial decision was 413 days in 2024; however, as applicants are usually able to appeal, the process can take much longer. In 2024, 47% of initial applications were successful.

During this 'limbo' period between application and decision, asylum seekers are not usually permitted to earn a living through employment, but they are entitled to support from the Government, including accommodation, healthcare, education, legal representation, some travel expenses and subsistence living costs (£49.18 per week for self-catering accommodation; £9.95 per week if meals are provided). During the financial year 2023-24, the UK Government spent £5.4 billion on supporting its asylum system.

If granted leave to remain in the UK, an asylum seeker's status changes to refugee, at which point most of the Government support ceases within 28 days (unless there are extenuating circumstances), including accommodation and financial support. However, refugees can access their eVisas (digital proof of immigration status, including conditions) which enables them to apply for Universal Credit, access healthcare and education, seek paid employment and accommodation, and open a bank account. In reality, unless they already have family or friends settled in the UK, without the help of support services and charities, new refugees are likely to experience homelessness and destitution, at least initially.

In the recent white paper, '[Restoring control over the immigration system](#)' (2025) and accompanying consultation document, '[A Fairer Pathway to Settlement](#)' (2025), the UK Government has outlined major reforms to the current asylum system. These include: (i) refugee status will initially be granted for 30 months (currently 5 years), and only extended if continued protection is judged necessary; (ii) indefinite leave to remain (permanent status) will take up to 20 years (currently 5 years); (iii) settlement status will have to be 'earned' on the basis of character, integration, contribution and lawful continuous residence; (iv) ECHR Article 8 rights (right to family/private life) will be restricted, as will the right to appeal an adverse decision (single appeal only); (v) access to accommodation and other benefits will be discretionary for asylum seekers (currently statutory); (vi) increased measures to prevent illegal working during the application process; (vii) swifter initial decision, appeal and, where unsuccessful, removal. It should be noted that, at the time of writing, these proposals are not currently law.

The paragraphs above supply information about asylum in the UK. But behind these statistics are, first and foremost, not asylum seekers but human beings – persons with back stories and aspirations that have driven them from their homes to embark on long, perilous, gruelling and often costly journeys in search of security and a fresh start.

4.4 Voice

Warsan Shire's poem 'Home' is a visceral expression of what motivates people to seek asylum. Warsan, a contemporary British poet born in Kenya to Somali parents, has given permission for hard copies of her poem to be distributed among group members. A powerful performance of 'Home' by Sir Jonathan Pryce can be found here [\[LINK\]](#). Alternatively, the text of the poem can be accessed via this [\[LINK\]](#).

Here is a short video in which Gulwali, an Afghan refugee who endured a harrowing journey to the UK when a child, explains why persons seeking asylum should be given a chance [\[LINK\]](#). You may also wish to view those by Ernesto and Maria accessed via the same page.

4.5 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 asylum a social justice issue?
- How do you instinctively respond when encountering a person seeking asylum?
- Why has asylum become such a contentious and divisive topic in the UK?
- What contribution should our church make to the asylum debate and how can we become more hospitable towards persons seeking asylum?
- What insights can we glean from the story of Ruth or Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan (see 4.6 below)?

4.6 Biblical Insight

Overview

Again, there are multiple, sometimes conflicting, biblical voices with respect to asylum. The first point to note is that the ancient Hebrews were probably nomadic or semi-nomadic tribes without homeland ('A wandering Aramean ...' Deut 26.5). However, accounts of the Hebrew/Israelite occupation of Canaan, the land they believed God had given them, narrate what amounts to divinely-sanctioned ethnic cleansing, resulting in the indigenous population being slaughtered or displaced (eg Exod 23.23–33; Num 33.50–56). That said, once in residence, the 'law of the stranger/sojourner' appears to have been observed: 'The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God' (Lev 19.34). There may also have been cities of sanctuary (eg Num 35:9–15; Deut 19:1–13) and the Old Testament witness includes a strong prophetic voice advocating justice for the destitute and displaced (eg Isa 58.6–7 & Jer 22.3). Jesus picks up this prophetic imperative (eg Matt 25.31–46), although his attitude towards foreigners could be equivocal (eg Mark 7.24–30). He is remembered as practising inclusive hospitality (eg Mark 2.15–20; 6.30–44; 8.1–10), something that is evidenced in the early Christian movement (Rom 12.13; Heb 13.2; 1 Pet 4.9). Here are two passages of particular relevance.

Ruth 1.1–18

‘In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and two sons. The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion; they were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. When they had lived there about ten years, both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

Then she started to return with her daughters-in-law from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the LORD had considered his people and given them food. So she set out from the place where she had been living, she and her two daughters-in-law, and they went on their way to go back to the land of Judah. But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, ‘Go back each of you to your mother’s house. May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. The LORD grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband.’ Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud. They said to her, ‘No, we will return with you to your people.’ But Naomi said, ‘Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons, would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the LORD has turned against me.’ Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

So she said, ‘See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.’ But Ruth said, ‘Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die – there will I be buried. May the LORD do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!’ When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.’ (NRSVA)

When the Moabite Ruth returned to Judah with her Jewish mother-in-law Naomi, she eventually marries Boaz, a family member of Naomi’s Jewish husband, Elimelech. Ruth and Boaz conceived a child, Obed, a Gentile after his mother, who becomes a progenitor to Jesus, the Messiah (Matthew 1.5)

Luke 10.25–37

‘Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” He answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.” And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbour?” Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’ Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.” (NRSVA)

4.7 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.

I believe that behind the mist the sun waits.
I believe that beyond the dark night it is raining stars.
I believe in secret volcanoes and the world below.
I believe that this lost ship will reach port.
They will not rob me of hope, it shall not be broken ...
My voice is filled to overflowing
with the desire to sing, the desire to sing.
I believe in reason, and not in the force of arms;
I believe that peace will be sown throughout the earth.
I believe in our nobility, created in the image of God,
and with free will reaching for the skies.
They will not rob me of hope, it shall not be broken,
it shall not be broken.

Confessing our Faith Around the World IV
(South America: World Council of Churches, 1985)

Acknowledgement

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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

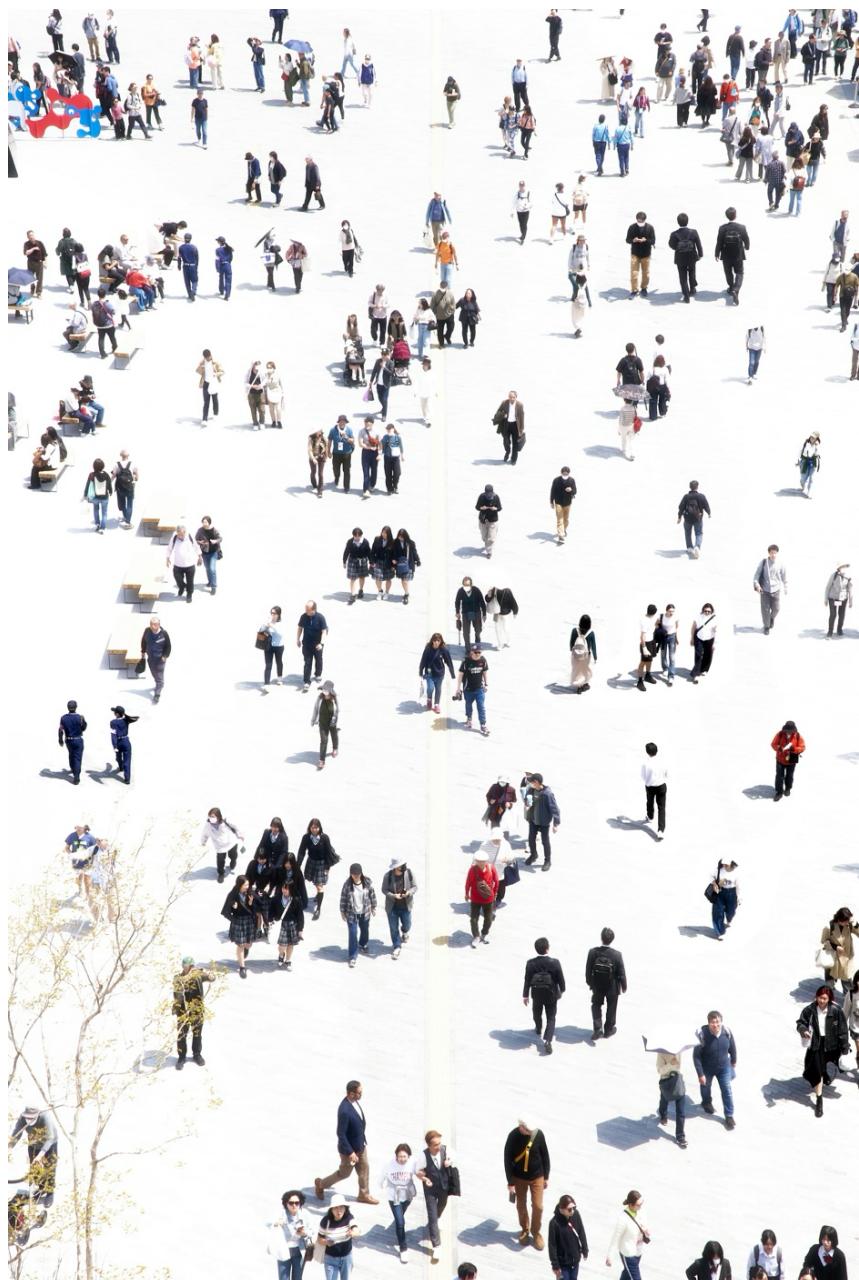


Photo by Buddy AN on Unsplash

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).