

Sunday 1 March 2026 – Inequality

For this, the second Sunday in Lent and the second in the topics for our Lent study groups on 'Social Justice', the focus for Sam Cowling-Green's sermon is inequality. Sam is Had of Chaplaincy for the MHA (Methodist Homes).

Readings:

Luke 1. 46-55; Acts 2. 37-47

Sermon: Inequality – Sam Cowling-Green

There's a line from the ancient world that keeps turning up in the news. It comes from Thucydides. The Athenians are about to destroy a small island, but before they do, they say to its people:

The strong do what they can, and the weak suffer what they must.

Don't bother appealing to justice, they say. Justice only exists between equals. Between the powerful and the powerless, there is only power.

We know this world. Inequality isn't an abstraction. You see it on the number 83 bus that runs near this parish. Get on at one end in Fulwood, ride it to the other, and along the way life expectancy drops by a decade. I work in older people's care. I have seen people who can afford warmth, companionship, and choice - and people whose world shrinks to a single room because they cannot. It's the world Thucydides described, and we live in it.

The strong do what they can, and the weak suffer what they must.

Our own faith has not been innocent of that logic. The Bible is not a tame book: it contains the story of liberation, and it also records how quickly liberation gets co-opted by power. And in the Church's hands, it has sometimes been used to bless empires, justify slavery, to keep people in their place. Walter Brueggemann calls it the royal consciousness - the moment when faith stops challenging power and starts serving it. When it colludes with the view that inequality is inevitable.

It's why we need Mary's voice. Young. Unmarried. Pregnant. From Nazareth. The first song of the New Testament comes from someone the world would overlook. And she sings in the tradition of women who sang before her: Hannah, Deborah, Miriam. Songs from the underside of history. Songs about God turning the world upside down.

And this is what she sings:

The proud - the ones who thought their power was permanent –scattered. The mighty - the ones on the thrones - brought down. The hungry - the ones who had nothing - filled with good things. And the rich - the ones who had everything - sent away empty.

Not: God will do this one day. God has done this. She sings in the past tense. It's already underway.

The strong do what they can, and the weak suffer what they must.

Mary says: no. And that "no" hangs in the air. For a generation, it's a song - a promise sung over an unborn child. Then the child grows up, and the song becomes a life. He eats with the people the world overlooks. He touches the ones the world calls unclean. He tells the rich to give everything away. The world says the strong take what they can. He has all the strength, and he gives it away.

In our second reading, Peter stands up at Pentecost and speaks into that old sentence: the strong do what they can, and the weak suffer what they must. He tells the story of a different kingdom. And the people who hear him are cut to the heart. It's physical language. This isn't people nodding thoughtfully. Something has broken open. And out of it comes a question:

What shall we do?

What shall we do? Not what shall we think, or how should we feel. What shall we do? It's the question of people who have run out of options. They can't undo what's been done. They can't unknow what they now know.

And Peter's answer is: repent. But metanoia, the word behind repentance, doesn't mean what we've made it mean. It isn't about shame. It means changing how you see, your whole perception of the world, and then changing how you live because of what you've seen.

Rowan Williams puts it simply: repentance doesn't mean beating your breast. It means getting a new perspective. And this is the perspective: the view from below. The view Mary sings from. The view from the single room in the care home, from the bottom of the 83 bus. Repentance means learning to see from the place where God already sees. Liberation theologians have a name for this: God's preferential option for the poor - that God sees the world from the bottom up, from the place where inequality is felt, not theorised.

That's what happened in Acts 2. The crowd were not shamed into action. They were cut to the heart. And what came out was not obligation but a completely new way of living. They held everything in common. They sold possessions and shared the proceeds as anyone had need. Not as a one-off. As a way of life, where the only criterion was need. And Luke says they did this with glad and generous hearts. They had found something out. That sharing was the good life. That holding things loosely, making sure nobody went without - this wasn't loss. It was how you were supposed to live. Repentance had not burdened them. It had set them free.

I once lived in community with a nun who could carry everything she owned in a holdall. She was in her seventies, and she was about the most joyful person I have ever met. And in a few minutes we're going to come to this table. If repentance is a change of sight, this is where that new sight is given to us. Not as an idea, but as bread in our hands. We come with our own emptiness, our own need, and we are fed. At this table, nobody earns anything. Everything is received. Bread and wine become a sacrament of equality, a foretaste of God's future.

And for a moment, the world Thucydides described is contradicted. Not by argument, but by practice. The same bread. The same cup.

Sadly, the Church has not always lived what this table proclaims. At times, we have drawn lines. We have made the table a mirror of the world's inequalities rather than their undoing. We have sometimes failed to carry the meaning of this meal beyond these walls. But that is not the whole story, and it is not the last word. For all its imperfections, this table is a rehearsal for God's future. Every time we come, we practise that future, and we carry it back into the world, back into the places where inequality is not theorised but felt. The meal gives us a new vision, and then it asks us to live as if it could be true.

They said of the church in her earliest days: there was not a needy person among them.

May we learn to live that sentence into truth, in our time.

Amen.

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