

Sunday 22 March 2026 - Passion Sunday & Fifth Sunday of Lent – Social Fragmentation

Our Lent course this year has focused on social justice. On this Passion Sunday, the beginning of the commemoration of Jesus' Passiontide, Ian Wallis examines the issue of social fragmentation.

Readings:

Isaiah 58 : 1-9. Matthew 15 : 21-28.

Sermon: Social Fragmentation – Ian Wallis

Although bombarded with news 24/7 these days, ever so often we encounter a story that stops us in our tracks and confront us with harsh realities we would rather ignore. One such incident took place on 29 July 2024 at a dance class in Southport, Merseyside, during which three young girls were brutally murdered and many others severely injured by Axel Rudakubana, a UK citizen with Rwandan parents – sparking a racially-motivated wave of violence and disorder, mainly targeting Muslims and asylum seekers, that spread throughout the country, including South Yorkshire and Sheffield.

The following year, a report into the causes of those disturbances appeared, *The State of Us: Community strength and cohesion in the UK* (July 2025).¹ In the foreword, former Conservative Home Secretary, Sajid Javid, and former Labour policy advisor, John Cruddas, offered the following assessment:

Communal life in Britain is under threat. Some of these threats are driven by long-term trends that have undermined connection within our communities over many decades: the degradation of community infrastructure and institutions, weaker family units, growing inequality, declining trust in institutions and chronic neglect from policy-makers. But there is another set of threats that are more recent and are turning the chronic crisis of social disconnection into an acute threat of social division: the mismanagement of immigration, cost of living pressures and social media driven extremism. These forces are converging into something altogether more dangerous - leaving the UK sitting on a tinderbox of disconnection and division.

Their conclusions, reflecting the document's findings more generally, echo those of a report produced 20 years earlier in response to another wave of racially motivated violence and disruption, the so-called 'Northern Town Riots' of 2001. The *Cantle Report*, after its chair Ted Cantle, concluded:²

Whilst the physical segregation of housing estates and inner city areas came as no surprise, the team was particularly struck by the depth of polarisation of our towns and cities. The extent to which these physical divisions were compounded by so many other aspects of our daily lives, was very evident. Separate educational arrangements, community and voluntary bodies, employment, places of worship, language, social and cultural networks, mean that many communities operate on the basis of a series of parallel lives. These lives often do not seem to touch at any point, let alone overlap and promote any meaningful interchanges.

¹ <https://www.belongnetwork.co.uk/resources/the-state-of-us-community-strength-and-cohesion-in-the-uk/>.

² <https://policycommons.net/artifacts/4315366/communitycohesion20cantlereport/5124958/>.

Social fragmentation – communities living parallel lives. Significantly, the practice of religion, particularly, different religions is cited as one of the causes and it is not difficult to understand why. After all, as we acknowledged at the beginning of our Lenten explorations into social justice, religion can be an important source of identity - providing a worldview to inhabit, an ethical code to follow, a community to belong to, a purpose and direction for life.

Almost inevitably, practising religion affects how we spend our time, who we spend it with and what priorities and lifegoals are determinative for us. One consequence of this process is that we find ourselves keeping company with like-minded people who, broadly speaking, are ordering their lives around the same grand narrative or religious tradition to ourselves.

There is much that can be wholesome about this and when the UK was populated almost exclusively by those identifying as Christian as was the case when the Church of England emerged in the sixteenth century and, believe it or not, remained to be the case until well after the Second World War, Christianity was able to provide the foundation, rationale and, crucially, social glue for our public life.

Today, the demography is radically different. The UK has become multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-religious. In the National Census of 2021, only 46% of the population identified as Christian, closely followed by 37% who claim no religious allegiance at all, with other religions registering significant minorities, notably Muslim (6.5%), Hindu (1.7%), Sikh (0.9%), Jewish (0.5%) and Buddhist (0.5%). Within such a climate, religion may still be able to promote social cohesion within particular religious traditions and groupings, but at what cost to social cohesion more broadly?

Now what are we to make of all this and how should we respond? Let's turn to this morning's scripture readings for guidance. The Gospel is insightful and perplexing in equal measure – one of the most challenging passages in the New Testament to interpret, not least because of how it portrays Jesus. If you recall, he had ventured beyond Galilee and the territories of ancient Israel, entering the Phoenician city-states of Tyre and Sidon where, unsurprisingly, he encounters a Gentile woman of indigenous provenance – someone who was Jewish neither ethnically nor religiously, nor was there any reason why she should have been given where she lived.

Initially, Jesus' Jewish identity appears to blind him to her plight and to jaundice his response. 'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs' is, by almost any account, both prejudicial and offensive – 'dog' in this context constituting a Jewish slur on Gentiles, the implications of which are spelled out in Matthew's version of this story with Jesus saying, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.'

While scholars continue to debate who is meant by those 'lost sheep,' it almost certainly didn't include the Canaanite woman before him. And here is, perhaps, the first key take-away for us with respect to overcoming social fragmentation and promoting social cohesion, namely, that religion can be part of the problem, and often is. Why? Because it affects the way we view other people, especially those who do not share our religious convictions or belong to our religious communities.

In a comparable way to belonging to a family, belonging to a religious community can make demands upon us in terms of allegiance, solidarity, commitment, investment of time, resources and so forth. It can also shape our attitudes towards 'outsiders' who, at best, are viewed as 'non-kin' whose affiliations to and expectations of us are of a lower order or, at worst, as strangers whose presence constitutes an existential threat. Either way, and this is the crux, religious identity complicates community building beyond its own contours and boundaries, with the potential to frustrate it altogether.

Unless, and here is the second key take-away, our religious identity enables and encourages us to see ‘outsiders’ in a more generous light, namely, as being related to us at an even more fundamental level – as human beings made in the image of God. And is this not what is going on in our Gospel encounter as the Canaanite woman’s tenacious faith challenges Jesus’ tunnel vision, enabling him to recognise her humanity and to respond to her need.

But she came and knelt before [Jesus], 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.’

To my mind, one of the measures of a religious belief-system, or any ideological belief system for that matter, is how it shapes our attitudes towards those different from ourselves – to the ‘other.’ In particular, whether it overcomes the boundaries of religious particularism to recognise a common humanity under God and to respond out of love, rather than fear or ambivalence.

To be candid, I don’t think we should underestimate how difficult this can be and for a raft of reasons, including the recognition that religious identity – like many sources of identity – is intrinsically discriminatory, at least in the neutral sense of distinguishing between those who belong and believe within a particular religious tradition and those who don’t, but often in the pejorative sense also of making value judgements about the moral and spiritual status of ‘outsiders’ – whether they are ‘lost’, ‘enslaved to sin’, ‘unenlightened’, ‘going to hell’, and the like.

Interestingly, what starts to emerge (and at a relatively early stage – 8th century BCE) within some of the voices giving expression to a nascent Jewish faith found in the Hebrew Scriptures (our Old Testament) are seeds of a universal language and value system that, although taking shape within a particular stream of belonging and belief, transcend it by recognising the equal worth of all people and, as a consequence, the divine imperative to treat them fairly and equitably. This language and value system we now recognise as justice.

Listen again to verses from our first reading in which the prophet Isaiah diagnoses why, although back in the ‘Promised Land’ with the Jerusalem Temple rebuilt and its sacrificial cult reinstated, the blessings associated with God’s good favour remain elusive. He redefines what is required to secure divine favour, using the well-established practice of fasting as a metaphor for the faith-filled life:

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.’ (Isaiah 58.6–9 NRSVA)

Significantly, as I pointed out in my sermon introducing this year’s Lent programme, Jesus’ exhortatory imperative to love both ally and alien entails a commitment to doing right by them – treating them fairly, seeking justice on their behalf, championing their just causes (cf Mark 12:29–31; Luke 7:27–30) – and when he identifies this as a measure of our love of God, he is transforming it into a touchstone for the practice of faith, one with universal application and reach.

So, picking up where we started with social fragmentation and the role of religion within our society, we have seen that the latter can indeed be part of the problem because, while it possesses the capacity to strengthen social cohesion among members and associates, this often comes at the expense of reducing social interaction more broadly, loosening societal ties, contributing towards communities living parallel lives.

However, this need not be the outcome. It largely depends on how religious traditions form attitudes towards outsiders – whether they educate and encourage their members to recognise a common humanity under God and to respond accordingly – a recognition informed by their sacred texts, enshrined within their teaching and embodied within their leadership.

This, to my mind, is the key question – and, at the moment, our multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-religious society finds itself participating in a living experiment that, knowingly or otherwise, is supplying the answer.

© Ian Wallis (2026)