

MARK JOHNSON – A TRIBUTE

ERIC STODDART

A number of alumni of the Bible and the Contemporary World MLitt programme will remember Mark Johnson. Mark participated in the course as a student (2006-2008) and then conducted individual tutorials with students once he had completed his PhD (also through St Andrews) in 2011. Mark published his work as [Seditious Theology: Punk and the Ministry of Jesus](#) (Ashgate, 2014) and was closely involved in this online journal. Mark died, after a period of illness, on 4 October 2022 and this is our first opportunity to pay tribute to him in the journal.

I had the privilege of giving an address at Mark's funeral at St Giles Church, Horsted Keynes, Sussex on 20 October 2022. It is reproduced here in Mark's memory.

I am here as Mark's one-time teacher, later academic collaborator, and, for me, most importantly, a friend.

Today's Bible reading [Matthew 25: 31-40] was from a parable of Jesus that upends, undermines or, we might say, subverts, his hearers' assumptions of what it means to be considered right with God. The sheep are confused, they can't recall anytime they fed this king (the character in the parable that represents God), or any occasion they gave him something drink, clothed him or cared for him in sickness. The parable presents a scandalous explanation; scandalous in that it foregrounds compassion instead of ritual purity: 'The king will answer them, "truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'

Mark has been taken from us by a virulent disease. We are gathered here to honour Mark and to support his wife Elaine, his wider family and one another. Mark died knowing love and giving love - as a husband; as a son to Alan and Jenny and brother to Ian; as a son-in-law, brother-in-law and uncle to the Shippams.

Mark was born in South London (where his late-grandfather Bert bore a particular influence on him) and Mark lived there until he and Elaine were married in 1991. They came to Horsted Keynes in 2003. From the age of 16 Mark pursued a career in retail; for 7 years with the John Lewis Partnership and later with bookseller Wesley Owen for whom he was regional manager for the southern half of the UK. He spent the remainder of his working life

in the charity sector, most recently with Christian Aid, looking after Sussex and latterly both Sussex and Kent.

For someone who went on to earn a PhD, preceded by Masters and Undergraduate degrees, Mark had, as he would say, ‘underachieved’ at school.

To his core – and perhaps from his core – Mark was a man who gave priority to relationships. He had an Olympian ability to chat; never to grandstand his prodigious intellect and recall but to find out what you thought. Mark was interested in us – in our opportunities and challenges – not with the purpose of changing us but because he valued us. Football, politics, popular culture, Christian faith – Mark was curious, informed himself, and inspired us to think more deeply and compassionately about our world – and the little corner of it we occupy.

If you’re anything like me, coming away from a conversation with Mark (rarely a brief one) I often believed more in what I’m doing and, more importantly, in who I am. Mark drew the best out of us by being interested in us.

Mark’s compassion shaped us – to differing degrees according to the depth of our relationship with him. Mark has been taken from us but nothing can take away what he gave to us of himself. Yes, we will carry his memory in our hearts but more than that - Mark’s effect on us continues. Who we yet shall be will bear a Mark-shaped aspect of compassion, loyalty, and inquiry.

What, then, was the shape of Mark’s compassion? He wrote his PhD thesis comparing and contrasting the ministry of Jesus to the British punk movement of the 1970s. Mark later published that work under the title ‘Seditious Theology’. Another word he often used to explain his approach was ‘subversive’. This was about subverting political, religious and social conventions that bore down upon and restricted the lives of ordinary people; often those already marginalised economically, culturally or religiously.

In Mark’s life, his compassion was subversive. He loved us by undermining our preconceived ideas about ourselves. Whether it was through talking with us about music, history or Christianity – or perhaps cricket – Mark encouraged us to think differently about ourselves and those around us. Christian Aid was, in his last few years, an arena for Mark to campaign on behalf of, and be an ally for, marginalised people around the world. His professional life bore that subversive trademark too – burrowing, as it were, to undermine the foundations of those barriers that stand in the way of people flourishing.

Mark was a consummate project manager – but he subverted that too. I’ve never known an academic who filed paperwork so assiduously. In mid-conversation on FaceTime Mark

could grab a ring-binder from the phalanx lined up on his shelf and produce the photocopied article he wanted to tell me about. Many aspire to that level of organisation but few achieve it. And, I'm sorry Mark, in that skill you didn't succeed in influencing me for the better!

Mark was a subversive manager of projects. By this I mean that for Mark it was never efficiency and tidiness for its own sake. His organising skills meant he could clear his mental space to invite you and I in. We weren't 'interruptions' or 'hindrances' to Mark. We were never objects out of place to him. Mark was organised so when we had time with him we were the centre of his attention.

Mark's was not a conventional Christian faith; he understood the power of religion too well to sign on dotted lines. Yet Mark, through his words, his actions and his love, pointed us to a subversive Jesus. Here, in a few sentences from his book, is what I think was Mark's creed:

Jesus *sat* alongside the "outcast" community of his day, [...] Jesus' act was all-encompassing. He ignored purity laws, subverted cultural barriers, offered solidarity, acceptance and – perhaps most seditiously of all – forgiveness and inclusion in *his* kingdom. The reality was that the religiously "ugly" were equally welcome in Jesus' kingdom; furthermore, having been invited by Jesus, they were beautified. It was a simple but imaginative and scandalous presentation of what the new kingdom was like, set against the old kingdom. It involved the rejection of previous metrics, the smashing of social boundaries and a seditious challenge to what constituted acceptability and acceptance.¹

Mark, for subverting our barriers with your love, thank you. Rest in scandalous peace and rise in subversive glory.

¹ Mark Johnson, *Seditious Theology: Punk and the Ministry of Jesus* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), p. 147.