

Mark Santer

Wednesday 4th September 2024 at 11.45am

St Aldhelm Poole

1 John 3:1-2

John 6:35-40

From the moment the embryonic cells began to divide and the Divine Word became flesh, pragmatism ceased to be a dirty word. Once divine participation in the grit and compromise of ordinary life was so demonstrated, God invited humanity to tell embarrassment about compromise to leave the room.

From the moment the embryonic cells began to divide and Word became flesh, virtue ceased to be a naïve word. Our sense of opposition between the practical and the principled was challenged. Our vague embarrassment before God that virtue always had to be ditched when things get complicated was shown to be misplaced. When the Word became flesh, God proved the grittiness and the longing, the politics and the hunger, wherever humanity feels most conflicted, all is held together in God's heart. A new integrity became possible. In the person of Jesus, the ancient Jewish commandment to "love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength" lit up. (*As relayed by Mark 12:30 who adds "strength" to the Hebrew command.*) At least that was God's offer. That we continue down the centuries to set practicality and passion over against each other is a tragedy. When the church tears herself apart over sexuality, we are frankly not enjoying the incarnation enough.

Occasionally you meet someone whose being does not seem tortured by those man-made fractures between the physical and the spiritual, the political and the faithful, the practical and the passionate, the pragmatic and the principled. Mark was such a human being. He loved God with all his heart, soul, mind and strength. He showed these not to be an intimidating list to be ticked off. The delight is the way they flow together. Heart, soul, mind and body are joined up. Mark's integrity was anchored by an unshakeable confidence that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. (John chapter 1)

Well into St John's Gospel we hear Jesus, who has not long fed five thousand people with bread, working the bread metaphor really hard. The crowd had their physical hunger satisfied but are now with full stomachs realising that a deeper hunger remains: the hunger so deep it had led them to follow Jesus eagerly into the wilderness without stopping to pack some lunch. He is the bread of life. Our physical longings are not in opposition to our spiritual longing, but are signs and metaphors for our ultimate longing: to be with God. (Pastorally sensitive preachers don't normally recommend books in funeral sermons. It's just not the time. But in honour of the fact that every single one of us here, and praying and mourning with us online, has had a book recommendation from Mark, why don't I recommend Sarah Coakley's [God, Sexuality and the Self](#) where she explores all this brilliantly with the lenses of the ancient theologians who Mark knew as if they were his family?)

By the time John's Gospel was distilled, the Jesus community was sharing bread and wine every week, the bread as body gaining gravity with each year, becoming even more than a metaphor. For in it, our physical and spiritual desires are enacted as flowing from the same place. Mark's whole self was anchored in the mysterious fact of the incarnation, experienced in the sacraments, which cajoled his endlessly curious mind to explore, describe, explain and synthesise not only the scriptures and thinking of the great patristic figures, but ideas and information and culture from everywhere and anyone, all of which pointed him back to the One through whom all things were made.

It was precisely Mark's sense of security that God was in Christ, embodied in this world of compromise and negotiation, that enabled, indeed required Mark to explore, hence the freedom and openness of his ecumenism, his eagerness for inter faith fellowship, his curiosity about cultural diversity. His rigour, far from conservative, meant any step forward could be sure footed. It is a terrible irony that those who love to use Jesus' "I am" assertions in John's gospel as an excuse for exclusion seem to forget that John begins with John chapter 1. All things were made through the Word which would become flesh. Such a beginning means that in our reading from chapter 6, huge weight falls on the word "anyone". "*Anyone* who comes to me I will never drive away." So with Mark's anchored, rigorous, inquisitive help, it is not too grand to say, the Church of England could evolve, however clumsily, through the cultural changes of the late twentieth century, responding to new invitations and challenges, none more important to Mark than the expanding possibilities of ever more diverse vocations to ordination. As he explored and changed, he said St Peter's words: "who [am] I to hinder God?" (Acts 11:17b)

We can of course envy Mark's **mind**, his staggering recall, his languages, the multiple connections he could see in an instant. But he made his intimidating intellect loveable by applying it tirelessly to the health of the church. He always showed us as colleagues, especially when we were starting out all earnest and self-conscious, that we are called, but it's not about us. "Step up, but humbly," his demeanour sternly told us. He made his absurdly clever mind loveable by his wit and generosity, his contagious interest in the world, and by kindly assuming we understood much more than we probably did. He also kept it loveable rather than frightening because you sensed a little boy was still in there, capable of mischief. This clever man knew himself to be a child of the God his theology explored. He loved God with all his mind.

Again, when the daunting mind was at work, even presenting as a serious diocesan bishop, we always knew there was a big **heart** beating behind it. His heart was made for companionship, he was a man for whom it was not good to be alone. (Genesis 2:18) We could hear his heart beat in his passion for doctrine and liturgy; in his feeling for political injustice; in his endless capacity for friendship and human connection. We could hear his warm heart beating, too, in the generous grumpiness which was always oriented to the health of the church. Woe betide you if you "bowdlerised" a Wesley hymn even with well-intentioned inclusivity. He'd jab his finger at the hymn book and show how you'd changed its meaning. We could feel the heart in him when he said something a bit outrageous and then reached out to stay connected with the words "*Do you know what I mean?*" A well to do PCC, somewhat self-pitying, was shocked to hear direct from his heart when he told them: "Don't shit in your own bed." However un-diplomatically sometimes, Mark loved and worked with all his heart.

As for **strength**: we perhaps did not realise how remarkable his physical strength was until he was unbearably tested in the last few years. But we did know the integrity of his heart, mind and physicality. He couldn't really hide what was going on inside. He expressed himself physically and frankly, so we knew when he was bored by the liturgy; when he was appalled by a chorus; when he was tired, when he was grieving, when he was excited by art. We loved the hunch of his shoulders as he eagerly sought out a quotation in an old book. We knew his strength also manifested as diligence, tirelessly serving the church, but also in the tender vocation of husband caring for Sabine as she navigated dementia. We know Mark's inner strength, bearing the immeasurable loss of his two beautiful, wise, insightful companions, Henriette and Sabine, trusting God through it all. Love with all your strength.

Soul: the word we reach for, theists, atheists and agnostics alike, to name the priceless consciousness that cannot be measured, for which even the glories of mind and heart cannot contain. Soul is the word for where we feel the magnificence of the St Matthew Passion, or gasp and

fall silent before a mesmerising painting, or feel moved beyond words by a tragedy, a birth, by falling in love. Mark's enthusiasm for the arts was unquenchable. Far from superiority or snobbery, his passion for almost all the artistic media humanity has conceived arose because they can evoke the divine and help to explore and celebrate the aspects of humanity that are most precious and essential, but elusive. Love God and neighbour with all your soul, went the commandment.

Mark showed that the delight of the command to love God with heart soul, mind and strength is in the way they flow together. Heart, soul, mind and body are joined up, enlivening and nuancing each other. Integrity, Mark shows, is far from prim and respectable. It is about being fully alive. To explore how his integrity was anchored in Christ is not, I hope, to oblige anyone to faith, but it is to try to understand why he presided so beautifully; why his pastoral counsel was so practical and principled; why he reached out and connected so warmly; why he thought and felt so deeply; why he took his roles so seriously but wore the titles so lightly. Nor is it to idealise him. Rather it helps us appreciate why even his flaws could be attractive and draw us to him.

That we have in our different ways as neighbours, friends and colleagues been able to admire and love Mark is very much thanks to Henreitte and Sabine, who shared his journey and nuanced his thinking, and to Hendrika, Miriam and Diederick whom he loved with all his heart. Thank you for letting us have so much of your Dad.

All that learning, all those words and languages, all that intellectual work mattered because it forbade the church from being lazy about the most important aspect of humanity: the bit of us that loves and prays. Yet it is all, in essence, so simple. We are all God's children. We can enjoy being so because coming as a child, Christ banished the shame we thought was inherent in our conflicted existence. As he died, all Mark's scholarship was finally refracted in his hands clutching the cross Henreitte, too, had held. To the last, Mark was God's unembarrassed child who trusted God will raise him up on the last day.

The Revd Canon David Warbrick
Vicar of All Saints Kings Heath in the Diocese of Birmingham