

“Hallowed be Thy Game” Interview with Mark Roques

Mark Roques works for the West Yorkshire School of Christian Studies. WYSOCS sponsors “Thinking Space” a Gap-Year Programme in Leeds UK, where students take a year out to clarify their goals, usually after finishing secondary education. Mark is a storyteller who has spent many years in education. For eleven years he taught philosophy and religious studies at Prior Park College where he developed a unique Christian world view course that combined film, music, story telling and dramatic entertainment. He is also a freelance writer and presents Sixth form conferences for students wanting to develop their Christian understanding of the world. He is married to Anne and has 2 children, Hannah (11) and Emile (7).

Bruce: Mark you shot to world fame back in January 2005 with the Channel 4 programme “Hallowed be Thy Game“. In that programme you were interviewed along with Alex Ferguson (Manchester United) and Michael Owen (Newcastle) and Robbie Fowler (Liverpool). Tell us how that interview came about.

Mark: First of all can I just say what a pleasure it is just thinking about Fiji and an old Australian mate interviewing me about football. It’s a belter. About two years ago a Channel 4 producer, Mark Dowd rang me up to invite me on a documentary which would be exploring the interface between football and religion. He had read my book *Fields of God: Football and the Kingdom of God* and he told me that he really loved it!

Bruce: So this Channel 4 journalist, Mark Dowd, had read your book *Fields of God: Football and the Kingdom of God*. What impressed him about your humorous study of the Kingdom of God?

Mark: Well Mark had been very struck by my passionate belief that God loves football and longs to redeem the game from greed, idolatry, tunnel vision and vicious, nasty tackles.

Bruce: You are serious. You are not just joking.

Mark: I think it’s vital to understand that Jesus has come into the world both to save footballers and the activity we call football. Jesus wants to redeem everything and that includes the beautiful game.

Bruce: Well in Christian terms I can agree that football is a matter of grace. But how do we confront sin - that’s also part of the message about God’s Kingdom - how is sin to be confronted on the football field?

Mark: Tragically modern professional football is consumed by greed, idolatry and tunnel vision. But it doesn’t have to be like that. For example an Italian player, Damiani Tommasi who plays for top club Roma has recently become a hero in Italy because he has requested a very modest salary of only £1000 a month! That’s the minimum wage. He is a practising Catholic and he is challenging the enormous greed that is destroying

football and he wants to be a good role model. There you have an example of a Christian confronting some of the sin that consumes football.

Bruce: So this is not just about using football to tell people they should live as good little vegemites on and off the field because God is watching.

Mark: No it's not. Top clubs like Manchester United could be totally transformed if footballers behaved more like Damiani Tommasi. Could you imagine the press coverage if, say, a top English player like Wayne Rooney insisted on having his wages reduced and asked for better wages and conditions for the cleaners and toilet attendants at Manchester United. Wouldn't that be exciting and a fantastic witness for Christ?

Bruce: So what you are saying is that football, like anything else, is either played with thanks to God, or it becomes a struggle in which our sinful nature comes to expression.

Mark: Yes. Football can bring glory to God if it honours the wonderful teaching of Jesus. The gospel should affect every aspect of the modern game. Players shouldn't cheat and deliberately foul their opponents. They should also accept lower wages and reject greed. There is something seriously wrong with the game when a player like Faustino Asprilla asserts that he 'cannot make ends meet' on only £17 thousand a week. What kind of cheese is he buying?

Bruce: So you want us to look again at life, at the way good and evil in this life struggle for supremacy over each other?

Mark: Yes. I was recently reading an article about the Christian African footballer Lomana Lualua who plays for Portsmouth. He comes from the Democratic Republic of Congo. Congo has a population of fifty million but three million people have died in a terrible civil war. Whenever Lomana goes back home he spends time visiting old people in hospitals and helping them out financially. He is setting up a day centre for some of his country's poorest people. He really wants to help young girls avoid prostitution and young boys becoming gangsters. What a role model! I wish there were more people like that in the professional game.

Bruce: But isn't someone like that very much the exception?

Mark: Sadly yes. Some European footballers complain if they're only making £35,000 a week! Some of the top players make more than £100,000 a week. Enough is never enough for some people!

Bruce: But can you give us a few examples from the way the game is actually played to help us visualise what you have in mind.

Mark: Take tackling. Tackling is one of the greatest skills in the game. It can be a skilful act of sublime theft but it can also degenerate into plain thuggery. You wouldn't believe some of the vicious tackling you see in the modern game. But it doesn't have to be like

that. It is quite possible to play the game and love your opponent at the same time. In fact this mindset would improve the game enormously because the really skilful players would be able to show us their wonderful tricks without fear of having their legs spiked by studs.

Bruce: And another?

Mark: Players simply don't need to dive and cheat in the way they do. For example Robbie Fowler, who has recently returned to his old club Liverpool, once took a penalty that he believed was unfair to the opposing team. He took the penalty by passing the ball to the goalkeeper! What a fantastic role model to young kids! I'm not saying that Robbie is perfect but in this situation he is confronting the cynical and unbiblical mindset that tells us that "all is fair in love and football".

Bruce: And another?

Mark Well I believe passionately that great football should encourage spontaneity, skill and really attractive football. I love watching Ronaldhino and his fantastic tricks. The long ball game which urges us to 'lamp' it up the park is not 'redeemed' football. Football which honours the Lord should be ethical, gracious and full of fun. Top players should laugh and smile continually and take great pleasure in the game. They should play skilful, imaginative football to the glory of God! And I believe that studying the Bible and taking it really seriously would accomplish precisely this.

Bruce: Are you serious?

Mark: Why not? Living is serious. Life is serious. Even when we are all laughing our heads off with the wonderful flicks and tricks we see in the beautiful game why can't Sir Alex Ferguson adopt a football club in the Congo and develop a charity which allows young African players to come and play football at Old Trafford. Why can't Cristiano Ronaldo visit Africa and then set up an orphanage for waifs and strays with his own money? It's only chump change for a millionaire but imagine the huge impact this could have.

Bruce: And there is always more to a club than what we see on the field.

Mark. Bang on the nail Bruce. Imagine a club whose management team, or whose senior players, really start to read and obey the New Testament. I'm deadly serious. That book changed my life. Why can't it change footballers, or managers, or gaffers, or sports commentators? Who said that the football field is off-limits to God's call to us to serve him.

Bruce: So it's all a matter of evangelism?

Mark: No – it's far more than that! I want to see soccer played to the glory of God. Imagine what a daily study of the New Testament could do to a football club. The

manager and players notice that Jesus had compassion on the most vulnerable people in that first century Jewish society. Somehow Jesus challenged the assumption that some people are terribly important (rich people) and that other people (lepers and shepherds) are unimportant. So small acts of mercy and generosity flood the club and several players are deeply impressed by Christ's command to 'love your enemies' and they issue public apologies to players they have deliberately fouled. Can you imagine that?

Bruce: This sounds a bit like the parable of the yeast. As it works its way into the entire lump big changes happen.

Mark: Imagine the commentators on Match of the Day. They are gob-smacked by the new spirit of generosity that has taken over at Manchester United and the 'transformation' of the famous club is being discussed by everyone.

Bruce: I'm not going to interrupt. Just let your imagination keep on rolling.

Mark: Picture it. The top players delve ever deeper into the Word of God and begin to unpack the meaning of Jesus' commission 'to preach good news to the poor' and 'to release the oppressed'. (Luke 4:18). Over a coffee the captain of the team raises the issue with Sir Alex Ferguson and dramatic events unfold. Ticket prices are slashed in half and unemployed and disabled people are allowed into Old Trafford for nothing! All the players agree to a wage reduction and one famous ex-player writes an article in the Sun newspaper explaining how easy it is to get by on only ten thousand pounds a week!

Bruce: Please go on!

Mark: Well a local journalist actually challenges the club with the following suggestion – "Why can't the club pay the cleaners a better wage and start to treat them with real respect?" The owners concur enthusiastically. A few days later the cleaners at the club are enjoying some of the wonderful benefits of the good news of the kingdom of God, and even the usually miserly goal-keeper spends several hours talking to Elsie about her lumbago and impulsively decides to pay her gas bill that month!

Bruce: Next time I want to go into other aspects of the game and in particular to discuss how soccer according to God's Kingdom might help us think differently about our bodies.

Mark: Great. I'll enjoy that.

Bruce: But for the moment I want you to answer a question about humour. All your writings are humorous and cheeky. This is particularly appropriate given the recent world-wide stir about religious cartoons.

Mark: I understand the Fiji Daily Post has spoken out on this.

Bruce: Yes. But what I want you to tell us is how you were able to go on Channel 4 for a

programme which used as its name a phrase based on one of the sentences in the Lord's Prayer. I think it might be useful to our readers in Fiji if you told us how you see this issue and how we should understand humour and our responsibilities before God.

Mark: The prophet Elijah used a great deal of humour and comedy when he had a pop at the prophets of Baal in the book of Kings. He said to them – “Are your gods on the toilet?” That's great comedy from a top Old Testament prophet. Jesus used comedy when he exhorted us to remove planks from our eyes. That's brilliant, comical material. There is also something comical going on when he turned a thousand bottles of water into the finest wine. Jesus and all the prophets were extremely gifted communicators who used humour and imagination in abundance. If they can do it – so can we!

Thanks Mark. We look forward to your next interview. Mark Roques can be contacted on mark.roques@ntlworld.com and readers are hereby invited to write to him and ask him any questions they might have about his interview.