

A TRIBUTE TO BISHOP JOHN V. TAYLOR

I had the privilege of personally meeting Bishop John Taylor only once, late in his life, when he paid a short visit to the BIAMS Meeting in Oxford in 1999. Yet in meeting him I had the sense that I was greeting an "old friend". I had known some of his writings for some time. I had heard a great deal about him from Max Warren when he was supervising my doctoral thesis in the mid-1970's. I learned many new and intimate details about him as I co-supervised the doctoral thesis of David Graeme Wood, an Australian Anglican priest, who wrote on "Bishop John V Taylor: Poet, Priest and Prophet." David not only read everything that John Taylor wrote but he also had many personal interviews with him in which Bishop Taylor opened his heart to him. His thesis contains much material not appearing elsewhere. And so, greeting Bishop Taylor was truly like greeting an old friend.

The facts of his life are probably well known. He was born in 1914 and ordained a priest in 1938. He served in England for five years before going to Mukono, the theological college in Uganda. He remained there until 1954 when he returned to England for family reasons. At the end of 1955 he began to work for the International Missionary Council. In 1959 he moved to the Headquarters of the Church Missionary Society, and after serving as Africa Secretary for five years became General Secretary and served for ten years. In 1975 he became Bishop of Winchester, retiring in 1985. He died 30 January 2001.

Those who knew him personally will no doubt have their own special memories of him, and perhaps in a future Newsletter of BIAMS they would like to share one or the other memory with us. I can only pay him tribute based on impressions I gained from my reading. And my impressions are that John Taylor was truly a gifted human being, alive in every sense of the word, who had a deep love of the self-emptying Christ and imitated Him in his life and ministry, and who had a gift for writing, leaving us books that will become spiritual classics.

He was, first of all, truly a gifted human being, alive in every sense of the word. David Wood said that he had two qualities which particularly appealed to the Africans. One was that he had no sense of time whatever; he would get caught up in what he was doing to the exclusion of everything and everyone else, or he would act on brilliant ideas immediately, dropping everything to do so. This could irritate Europeans but would delight Africans. Max Warren saw his moving through life spontaneously without planning anything" as part of his artistic and poetic temperament. The other quality was his disarming sense of humor. This enabled him to defuse crisis, create a sense of community among his staff at Mukono and "a pleasure-to-read" Newsletters as General Secretary, and not take himself too seriously when he became a bishop.

His humanity was also seen in the struggle he went through when he had to return from Africa for family reasons. For him the missionary had always been the rue and exemplary Christian. He had been doing splendid work in Africa and was just reaching the top of his form when he had to return to England. He told David Wood in interviews that he felt hurt and angry with God. He seemed to be cast aside and felt lost. But in the end John Taylor saw this as an invaluable lesson. "All those years," he said, "I still had been nursing the very childish, romantic view of

missionaries in the magic forest. I still wanted to be top Christian, and there was a lot of pride in being a missionary, and God had said - rather harshly- 'thank you, but you can forget all that; that's not what it's about'."

John Taylor had a deep love of the self-emptying Christ and tried to imitate Him in his own life. His doctrine of God was one in which humility, gentleness, patience and weakness were central, and he was not ashamed to manifest these same qualities. At the heart of everything was a kenotic, self-emptying, self-giving, self-sacrificing, Christlike God who always preferred persuasion to force, and Bishop Taylor embraced that God. He had encountered the writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his time of crisis, and like him he found that Christ was everything for him. This love permeated both his actions and his writings.

Finally, John Taylor has left us with writings that are destined to become spiritual classics. His *Primal Vision* is not only deeply insightful but also beautifully written. Africans reading this work today still find it to be "true". Max Warren commented: "It is immeasurably the most exciting piece of writing about Africa that I have yet come across from the pen of a white man. 'The pen of a white man' - yes, with all the limitations inherent in the fact that the pen was held in a hand that was white. No-one could possibly be more aware of those limitations than John Taylor. But there are a great many things about the African which only a European who has listened to the African can interpret to other Europeans who have never had the opportunity, or perhaps have been afraid to take it. That is an important fact about communication. It is a wide-spread fallacy that the native of a country is necessarily, by virtue of his 'nativeness', the best interpreter of his own people to the natives of another country! You have to be able to listen to both parties if you are to interpret them to each other. And what a listener John Taylor has been...There are a great many ways of listening, and this book suggests that John Taylor explored most of them." John Taylor himself said after writing this book: "You see, I learnt we do not have to pose our European questions in order to find Christ's answer, we do not have to expose our European sins in order to find his salvation. We can actually start from a totally different position, where the questions are different, and the sense of sin is different, the whole world view is different.

Two other books he wrote are also destined to become Christian classics. *The Go-Between God: The Holy Spirit and the Christian Mission* and *The Christlike God*. The first book essentially are the Edward Cadbury Lectures in Theology that he delivered at the University of Birmingham in 1967. In the book he not only describes the action of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Church but also suggests how the action takes place. The second work is a collection of essays and talks that developed over years and were continually refined until they were published in 1992. John Taylor in this book explores the origins of our concept of God, the various concepts that other religions have, and the Christlike God that emerges in both the Old and New Testament. It is rich with insight and leads to prayer.

So much more could be said in tribute to Bishop John Taylor. Hopefully these few words will convey not only the respect and admiration I have for him ("one of my heroes") but also gratitude for the way he has enriched me through his life and writings.

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