

The Genesis of *Poet, Priest & Prophet*

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Since we are at synod, perhaps I should start with a synod story. There are, of course, many JVT synod stories, all of them good, but my personal favourite is the occasion when some irate clergyman (and it was at man!) attacked John for the unforgivable ecclesiastical sin of rocking the boat. "Oh, no," said John without a moment's hesitation, "there is no boat. We're walking on the water." In some ways, this anecdote says all that need be said about this extraordinary man, and I could now sit down, but I've been asked to say something very briefly about how *Poet, Priest & Prophet* came to be written so I will stick to the commission.

Let me then airlift us back in time, and from York to Geneva. "Holy Week 1984. The chapel of the Ecumenical Centre. A crowd of people, gathered in circular formation, intently listening to a man dressed in a faded purple cassock as he quietly leads them deeper into the mystery of God, of the cross. A community of seekers, glad and heartened at not being fobbed off with easy answers, seeing in this man, John Taylor, with his scarred eyes and humorous mouth someone who had also suffered and doubted and been tempted, a fellow pilgrim." These words of John's friend, Gwen Cashmore, from the preface to one of his shortest and loveliest books, *Weep Not for Me*, still capture best my reasons for writing about John. I had fallen in love with John Vernon Taylor as a young theological student reading *The Go-Between God: The Holy Spirit & the Christian Mission*. For me, this was and is *the* book, *the* watershed, *the* eye-opener to the adventure we call theology. Captivated and carried away by the sheer beauty of the words, by the undiluted poetry of every single sentence, I desperately needed to know the word-smith. In one sense, of course, I had already met him. In the text on the page, the flesh and blood John Taylor was already incarnate. What John's friend Professor Jesse Mugambi says in his Introduction to the new edition of *The Primal Vision*, issued by SCM last year, is true of all John's writings, but especially true of *The Go-Between God*. There is no nothing here of cool detachment or any pretence at objectivity. The reader actually *feels* the presence of the author. In every line, and between the lines, the real John Taylor is to be met – someone who has also suffered and doubted and been tempted, a fellow pilgrim. In other words, there is a genuine *humanity* here which is simply inescapable. Stated this way, perhaps it sounds unremarkable, but I found it sufficiently unusual to compel my attention, and continue to find it endlessly refreshing. At the end of *The Go-Between God* I felt not so much that the book was my new friend, as that I now knew John Taylor personally. The book is written in his blood – something which I felt instinctively right then and there, which only later was confirmed face to face. The key to the book, after all, is three traumatic deaths. In the light of this pain, John re-worked every sentence of the lectures on which the book is based – revising, re-casting, altering, honing, infusing. Here is a perfect instance of a central JVT conviction, namely that life dictates theology – a risky idea which demands of us real faith, faith in the sense of actually trusting God the author of life, trusting God who is God of the whole of life, trusting God who is God of the dark as well as the light. There is, you see, no boat. We are walking on the water, unafraid of the waves and the tempest. To read John Taylor is to want to follow him there. He is one of those rare saints who make Christian orthodoxy seem like our native air, and that to live in such an atmosphere is the most desirable thing in the world. In Rowan Williams's words, John is one of those people who make the reality of the church a missionary reality because they make it compellingly attractive, an environment in which is to be found the secret of true and joyful vision.

My book arises, then, as one attempt to see the word-smith, the man John Taylor in the words on the page, and this is why it takes the form of what Kenneth Cragg calls a "biography of mind". As such, it is an incarnational exercise, a sacramental experiment. Theology cannot be "faith seeking understanding" simply as an intellectual exercise, any more than it is a talking head or a writing hand. Theology, if it is worth anything at all, is *thought* and *taught* and *lived*, always ministered, never simply proclaimed. All truth, all

theology, is *relational*. Any response of faith to life, any relating of life to faith, must be autobiographical. It is, after all, *in us* that life is consciously happening and faith is inwardly negotiated, reached and trusted. To coin a phrase, dangerous in Christian circles at present, authentic theologising involves *coming out* – out of hiding, out into the open, out into the light.

According to John Taylor, God's surprise for those with the courage to face their fears, share their wounds, allowing other pilgrims into the house of the heart, is that Christ turns out to be completely at home in this many-roomed mansion, albeit as a disruptive and disturbing guest! In any case, in Christ himself, we would claim, we have God's "writing in life", where the essential divine nature is defined, denoted, described and dramatized. There is, then, no other way to write about John than to embark on a biographical study. Not, of course, that biography as theology is intended to replace prepositional theology. It cannot do that, and is not intended to do so. It does, however, I suggest, complement, disturb and enhance what is otherwise very much a flat-earth world. The results, I hope, are honest and humble, illuminating and suggestive, simply because they are in the nature of things fragmentary and partial. Indeed, I would argue that all the best theology is like this – poetic, evocative, glimpses, no more than the hem of the garment. Certainly, John Taylor never pretends to any sort of systematic completeness. His creativity lies not in producing original ideas, but in the juxtapositions he makes, ideas and images held in tension, combinations which make the familiar strange again. It lies in his willingness to admit us to his own unfinished internal dialogue, allowing us to share his struggles and strategies for going on believing. How rare it is for any theologian to be honest about this! There is no attempt to impose order on an untidy world, and this arises out of an intense reverence for the facts of life. It is not that he lacked the intellectual or theological expertise to produce such an edifice, but for John it simply lacked integrity. However impressive, such systems fail to take into account *all* the beauty and *all* the pain. Paying attention to the facts means, of course, that now we know only in part, and results in theology which remains both *humble* and *human*. It also results in a theologian who is at heart poet, priest and prophet – allowing us entry, inviting us in, walking alongside us as together we explore the mystery which grasps us. This being the case, even in a very brief introduction such as this, John himself must be allowed the last word. I have wondered what this might be, there are so many wonderful, memorable, passages I could choose. In the end, however, it has to be what I consider to be his greatest poem. It is, to put it mildly, an astonishingly daring composition for a respectable bishop to write, stunningly revealing of the man, stunningly revelatory of the enterprise. As Rowan Williams says, John's poetry cuts straight through all the theological baggage to the things that strike the heart. Nowhere, perhaps, is this more true than in the poem he called *Unicorn*. It seems appropriate that I should read it from the book itself where it is central to the final chapter, "Christlike God", for it encapsulates John's single-minded quest, namely to speak truthfully of the *Christian* God as distinct from all the gods we Christians and others prefer to worship and serve.

They say it was her innocence drew him
down from the high places and the heath land.
Or was it the magnet of his intent
approach that brought her barefoot
to the meeting among the moonlit trees?
It was he, the chalky blur on the blackness
beyond the clearing, watching her
at ease on the sawn stump. Then the glance
of light off that long lance
tossed in salute as he dared and
crossed the impassable bright space.
Alien and fathomless his eyes
probed hers for mutual meaning,
till she saw the fine-drawn tear-drains
lining the pierrot mask and breathed
his acrid animal heat.
The brittle ivory of his limbs at last
folded to her feet and the sharp
imperious crest lay pressed
like a beam aslant her shoulder.
Sleeking the warm buckram of his ears,
she chanted as one in a dream:

*Stay, love, with me
till we shall see
all that is yet to be.*

They came upon them there, the hunters,
in the dark time when the moon had set.
Because he was rare and mysterious
or because her embrace affronted them
or because they knew the going price
of the horn, but mostly because
it was a monstrosity, against nature,
to be one where always were two,
distinct and apart, they killed him.
Staunching the warm blood of his heart
she chanted as one in a dream:

*Stay, love, with me
till we shall see
all that is yet to be.*

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