

Christian Mission with Bishop John V. Taylor

David Wood

On the south bank of the Thames, in a rather drab part of London, just a short walk from the National Theatre and Waterloo Station, stands a concrete and brick building you might hardly notice. It is almost entirely bereft of distinguishing features, so the traffic rushes by without giving it a second thought. Or, does it? You might wonder at the great letters inscribed over its doors: Into All The World. What is this about? Or, standing in the road at dusk hailing a taxi or waiting for a bus, a simple upper room jutting out above the entrance way might attract your attention. This room has a large coloured glass window - all abstract, lines and circles and cubes - lit from within. What can this be? The stones may not exactly cry out, but at least they raise questions. Such curiosity is not to be despised in a world where the creating and redeeming God is as much at work in the secular as the sacred.

The honest, unpretentious use of raw materials, the expanse of windows looking out to the world, will, I hope, say something. At the heart of our activity the chapel will be a pool of silence, as far as the architect can make it. Visually it is not cut off from the rest of the building, and from most points one can look right into it. It is important also that from inside the chapel one can look right out of it, not only back into the corridors and committee rooms, but, more importantly, down into the ceaseless traffic of the Waterloo Road. 'Glory to God in the High Street!' We are, I believe, only on the threshold of a new theology of the horizontal 'here-and-now-ness'. Yet we must not simply opt for that alone, and those who too readily abandon the vertical of God's transcendence are robbing us of an essential dimension. Now I understand why the angle between the east wall and the floor of our chapel had, from the beginning, been so crucial in my thought that I had asked for the floor to slope downwards and the wall inwards, as if to intensify that that point of intersection was the place for the overflowing font. It might be that the architect must suffer an unresolved conflict between the two foci of attention as the only honest symbol of a reality we are still groping to express.

Modern drama is wrestling with the same theological issue. For three centuries we have had directional theatre, the picture stage presenting that 'other' reality over there, until its clichés became irremediably banal, and dramatists demanded the theatre in the round, with all the immediacy of audience-participation. But experiment showed that to abandon the picture-stage entirely was to throw away precious gains of perspective. And so the solution has been found which retains the picture-stage while thrusting out from it an apron stage on which the players can perform in the very midst of the auditorium. This suggested to our architect the resolution of the dilemma. The great east wall sweeps down past the cross and the flowing water to the floor where, in an unbroken movement, it thrusts out into the body of the chapel the sanctuary-dais on which the Holy Table stands. It is a fine diagrammatic symbol of 'the Beyond in the midst'.¹

We are overhearing the authentic voice of one of the greatest missionary statesmen of the 20th century, John Vernon Taylor, General Secretary of the Church Missionary Society 1963-1973, Bishop of Winchester 1974-1984. This Chapel of the Living Water, his own vision, given to him entire in a dream, is a fine lasting memorial of a great and generous imagination placed at the service of 'the Beyond in the midst', one nourished as much by art as by theology, as much by theatre as by liturgy. In considering what might be involved in Christian mission in the third millennium, John Taylor is a trustworthy guide because his vision is never narrowly compartmentalised. Christian mission, as he understands it, embraces the whole of life, all the facts, all the beauty and all the pain. Only God is catholic, while we remain sectarian. We long for a

catholicity which is yet to be revealed. John Taylor is one of those rare saints offering us glimpses of what such wholeness and completeness feels like. In a time when the church is traumatised by decline and terribly anxious about the future, his all-embracing vision is wonderfully liberating, inviting us to trusting faith just as our fears overwhelm us. John Taylor's significance for mission today, I would argue, lies in refusing to let us huddle together in the secure Christian ghetto, becoming ever more theologically conservative, building higher the walls of division, marking out more clearly who is saved and who is not, and shouting louder to make ourselves heard. He offers as a way forward which is at once thoroughly orthodox and marvellously sensitive and human. He does this by remaining absolutely true to scripture and Christian tradition on the one hand, while holding himself wide open to experience fully the new thing God is doing.

For a short-hand image of what this involves, just think of his two greatest books, *The Go-Between God* and *The Christlike God*. *The Go-Between God*ⁱ is all about the Spirit blowing where it will - uncontainable, endlessly surprising, endlessly refreshing, endlessly creative, never reading the rubrics, divine energy infusing every living thing. Nothing and no one is cut off from this life-giving Spirit, for here is 'the Beyond in the midst', the very depth of reality in which we all live and move and have our being. It's not just that this God is to be found *in* every religion, but also *outside* every religion – in the secular scientist who doesn't believe, just as in the saint who does. In what might be one of his most stimulating insights, John Taylor says –

This is a pre-forgiven universe. God had chosen in eternity to take upon himself the risk and the cost of creating this kind of world. As a precondition of creation he took upon himself the judgment and death of the sinner. Being forgiven is therefore a more primary condition for us than being a sinner. Being in Christ is a more essential human state than being in ignorance of Christ. So any and every movement of the human mind and will that can properly be called a response of faith is truly faith in Christ to some degree even though Christ is still only the invisible magnetic pole that draws us on.

So, with our minds open to recognise the reality of the experience of divine grace and salvation within all the faiths of mankind, we can say that what God did through Jesus Christ is the one act which it was always necessary that he should accomplish in time and at the right time if he was to be the God who throughout time is accessible and present to every human being in judgment and mercy, grace and truth. Wherever we see people enjoying a living relationship with God and experiencing his grace we see the fruits of Calvary though this may be neither acknowledged nor known. It still makes a vast difference to people when they have seen the Cross of Jesus as the indicator of the inner nature of God, and that remains the theme of the Christian witness. But in bearing that witness we do not have to deny the reality of the experiences of grace and salvation that are found, because of Christ, in all the faiths of mankind.ⁱⁱⁱ

Our task as Christian missionaries is gladly to affirm this universal presence and action of God, recognizing it and celebrating it, while being ourselves evidence of God's christlikeness. Consequently, *The Christlike God*^v is all about our distinctive contribution as Christ's witnesses to the human search for meaning, attempting to describe *the* Christian gift which we are called to share with all our sisters and brothers without distinction.

But this is to run ahead. We need to take a few steps back, and get our bearings.

John Taylor helps us greatly here with his definition of religion. Every religion, he argues, represents a people's particular tradition of response to the reality which the Holy Spirit has set before their eyes.^v Note how very careful he is not to say that any religion *is* the truth which the Spirit has disclosed, nor even that it *contains* such truth. Let us also be quite clear at the outset that this includes Christianity. No religion, including Christianity, represents the truth of God. It is also misleading to speak of the various religions as *revelations* of the one God, for this suggests that God discloses different aspects of God's self to different people. "Is this", John Taylor asks, "how a compassionate father loves the various children of his family?" No, of course not. God is faithful, and God's self-revelation and self-giving is consistent for all, but different

people respond differently. All we can say on the basis of the facts is that people of a particular culture have responded and taught others to respond to what the Spirit of God made them aware of through the events of their history and the vision of their prophets. In other words, every religion represents both *obedience* to God as well as *disobedience*. Human beings use religion as much to escape God as to approach God, so both obedience and disobedience get built into the tradition and are passed on to succeeding generations.

If this is true, it follows that all of us are called to conversion – Christian and Jew and Hindu and Buddhist and Muslim, and all the rest, the whole of humankind. We begin to think about mission, then, knowing that we are all in the same boat, that we all belong together, children of God together, gloriously made in the divine image but marred by human frailty and sin. This radical humility is our starting point, an honest recognition demanding of us grace, sensitivity, patience, gentleness, and genuine openness to the leading of the Spirit.

For John Taylor, this starting point can hardly be stressed too much, and it all comes together when he talks about us being really present. His jokes about this underline the seriousness of what is at stake. The eucharistic action, the central act of Christian worship, is all about presence, the real presence of Christ in word and sacrament. We might imagine it follows naturally that Christians are well rehearsed in being really present to one another. The trouble, however, with professional Christians – as he wryly observes - is that often we are not all there!^{vi} Being really present to one another is actually quite rare. Listening is an art-form at which too few of us excel. Mission, however, demands real presence of us. It is all about meeting and greeting. Mission is encounter, impossible apart from relationship. It happens, if it happens at all, face to face. I need to be here with you, not somewhere else, attentive to you, not distracted, really looking, listening, paying attention. Only so can we move closer together, only so do we begin to trust each other, and without trust nothing of any lasting value will pass between us. Dialogue is, by definition, a sustained conversation between different people who are *not* saying the same thing. Dialogue is a conversation between people who are not saying the same thing, but who nevertheless go on talking. It happens whenever we recognise and respect the differences between us, the contradictions, the mutual exclusions between our various ways of thinking, yet refuse to abandon one another.

If we are honest, we find this very, very hard to sustain, for we are all naturally afraid of the unresolved opposites in ourselves. In John Taylor's words, "we find it very painful to include and accept the dark self along with the light, the destroyer as well as the creator in us, both the male and the female element in our personality, both the child and the parent which we are."^{vii} We want a simple unity when in fact we are a mass of contradictions. It follows that it takes a high degree of maturity to respect an opinion which conflicts with my own without itching to bring about a premature and naïve accommodation. Being really present to one another, persisting in dialogue, John Taylor suggests – no doubt with one of his secret smiles - is actually about loving one's enemies!^{viii} All jokes aside, however, he never allows us to forget that mission is an act of love-making.

Christian mission so defined certainly includes the search to find what we have in common. There is, of course, a great deal of common ground shared by people of faith. John Taylor even takes the risk of listing what we share as a kind of contemporary credo.

We believe now that the Ultimate Being upon which the faith of all believers is focused in every religion is the same, though our interpretations of its essential nature are still at variance.

The new interchange between people of different faiths has established the fact that all religions express an awareness of human alienation, enslavement, and need for healing and deliverance, and in all religions people experience an inward liberation, a sense of being accepted and made new.

Though the rituals of corporate and individual prayer differ widely, as does the degree of personalised encounter in the actual experience of prayer, yet the sense of oneness and

communication with a gracious Divinity is common to them all, as is the hunger of the heart for such communion.^{ix}

If this is a fair assessment – and we might differ over some of the detail - we cannot but rejoice in such shared truths. Here is one important marker for the journey. But there is more. There is something else we all have in common. We also have in common what John Taylor calls the ‘jealousies’ of the different faiths. For the Muslim it is that the Holy Qu’ran is not just another revelation, but is God’s final word. For the Jew it is that Israel’s covenant and her attachment to the Holy Land has central significance in the determinate purpose of God. For the Christian it is the conviction that in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, God acted decisively for all humankind. Even Hindu relativism can be understood as itself another absolute which cannot be surrendered without destroying the essential identity of that faith. This means that every profoundly convincing encounter with God is with a “jealous” God, in the sense that, having experienced God in *this* particular way, no other God will do. In other words, one of the most significant things we have in common on which to build mutual understanding is the experience of having convictions that by definition preclude the other person’s belief, of being unable to accommodate it with integrity. “So I would plead with those who want to make all the intractable convictions relative and level them down for the sake of a quick reconciliation: leave us at least our capacity for categorical assertion, for that is what we have in common.”^x

Where does this leave us, at a dead end? Yes, in that it leaves us in the dark. John Taylor did not believe the way to mutual understanding and reconciliation between the great faiths is in sight, and always called for patience and persistence in dialogue. Nevertheless, real presence and genuine dialogue means we are moving closer together, and therefore closer to God. This certainly cannot be called a dead end, even though we still cannot see beyond the next turn of the road. Indeed, do we not believe that it is precisely when we come to the end of our tether and throw ourselves on the mercy of God that God is able to work great miracles in us and through us? This is certainly the Christian conviction, for the distinctively Christian confession, after all, is that having met Jesus, thereafter only a *wounded* God will do.

This must be the Christian’s contribution to the loving interchange between the great faiths. Let us gratefully honour their magnificent witness to the unknowable mystery, the unity, the faithfulness or the sovereignty of God, but no less gratefully bring our peculiar witness to God’s everlasting self-sacrifice, for we uniquely possess the imagery and vocabulary for saying it.^{xi}

The freedom and the protest of Jesus of Nazareth, his dying for us all and his Resurrection, are *both* history *and* eternal reality. They happened, and they are the way things always happen. And we can be transformed, not only by relating to that past life and death and resurrection, in which the pattern was made plain once and for all, but also by relating to that true pattern wherever it emerges in the tissue of our contemporary experience.^{xii}

Why then, look for more? Why seek *conscious* allegiance to Jesus Christ rather than let people live by the light they already enjoy? Not, John Taylor answers firmly, because there are no degrees of salvation apart from naming the Name, and certainly not because Christ is greedy for the credit. We seek *conscious* allegiance to Christ in order that everyone may rise to their full stature as adult daughters and sons of God, through attachment to him who *was* and *is* and *ever shall be* the fully human being because he is the perfect Son. And if that perfect sonship could not be complete without the cross, then no one’s salvation is complete until we become cross-bearers. The common approach to salvation is to think of wholeness - atonement where there is now estrangement, restoration of lost harmony. Suppose, however, that we are so constituted as only to be truly human when we are bearing one another’s burdens? If this is so, then the happy pagan has not yet in fact been made whole. Making love is not enough; one must actually say the words “I love you”. To be a Christian within this or that particular furrow is not enough; one must perform the duties and obligations of being an ambassador. This is not so that anyone will switch from one religion to another. It is that men and women, all of us without exception, should experience the miraculous newness to be found in Christ and start living here and now as citizens of heaven.

This is the driving motivation for speaking to others of Christ. It is not some crude belief that Christianity is the only true religion. It is not that we believe God's mercy to be ultimately limited to those within the visible church. We can confidently leave the eternal destiny of our neighbours in the hands of the One slain before the foundation of the world – pierced hands, than which there are none stronger or safer. We can acknowledge these same hands at work anonymously in every redeeming event and action through which the basic humanness of people is being saved and brought to its maturity. And yet, unless we are to be guilty of the ultimate arrogance and paternalism, we must covet for all what we covet for ourselves: the privilege of walking *consciously* in the steps and in the power of the *crucified* Christ. For in a universe of which he is Maker and Lord, fullness of life cannot mean less than that.

The End is in God's hands, but meanwhile we ourselves are the Easter evidence. Mission for us is following the incarnate Lord, giving the Spirit our hearts and hands and lips, again and again becoming Christ's Body now in the world. Cradled in Mary's arms, when we look with the eyes of faith, we see ourselves. As we might say, we see our real selves, *human becomings* in the process of transfiguration, on the way to resurrection after the pattern of the only true *human being*, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.

Let not my humble presence affront and stumble
 your hardened hearts that have not known my ways
 nor seen my tracks converge to this uniqueness.
 Mine is the strength of the hills that endure and crumble,
 bleeding slow fertile dust to the valley floor.
 I am the fire in the leaf that crisps and falls
 and rots into the roots of the rioting trees.
 I am the mystery, rising, surfacing
 out of the seas into these infant eyes
 that offer openness only and the unfocusing
 search for an answering gaze. O recognize,
 I am the undefeated heart of weakness.
 Kneel and adore, fall down to pour your praise:
 you cannot lie so low as I have been always.^{xiii}

The Reverend Dr David Wood is Rector of Joondalup and Anglican Chaplain to Edith Cowan University in Perth, Western Australia. He is the author of *Is God a Boy's Name?: Inclusive Language for the Liturgy* (Melbourne: Saint Stephen's Press 1991), and *Poet, Priest and Prophet: Bishop John V. Taylor* (London: CTBI 2002). He was commissioned by SCM press to write an introduction for John V. Taylor's *The Go-Between God: The Holy Spirit and the Christian Mission*, when it was published in their Classic series in 2004. Fr David was also invited to contribute a chapter to Simon Barrow & Jonathan Bartley (Eds), *Consuming Passion: Why the Killing of Jesus Really Matters* (London: DLT 2005). This article on JVT and mission today, published in *International Review of Mission*, Vol. XCII, No. 366, July 2003, pp. 427-433, is an edited version of a paper given to the Waterloo Mission Seminar at Partnership House, London, 9th July 2002.

ⁱ J.V. Taylor, *CMS Newsletter* 297, October 1966.

ⁱⁱ J.V. Taylor, *The Go-Between God: The Holy Spirit and the Christian Mission* (London: SCM 1972; New Edition, SCM Classics 2002).

ⁱⁱⁱ J.V. Taylor, "The Theological Basis for Interfaith Dialogue", *Crucible*, January-March 1978, pp.10-11.

^{iv} J.V. Taylor, *The Christlike God* (London: SCM 1992).

^v J.V. Taylor, "The Theological Basis for Interfaith Dialogue", p.6f.

^{vi} J.V. Taylor, *The Primal Vision: Christian Presence amid African Religion* (London: SCM 1963; New Edition, SCM Classics 2001) p.189.

^{vii} J.V. Taylor, "The Theological Basis for Interfaith Dialogue", p.4.

^{viii} *Ibid.* p.4.

^{ix} *Ibid.* p.15.

^x *Ibid.* p.12.

^{xi} J.V. Taylor "The Christian Vision and the Way Ahead", *Discernment*, 2:1, Summer 1987, p15.

^{xii} J.V. Taylor "Christian Motivation in Dialogue", *Face to Face: Essays on Inter-Faith Dialogue* (London: The Highway Press 1971) p.14.

^{xiii} J.V. Taylor, "Christmas Venite", *A Christmas Sequence and Other Poems* (Oxford: The Amate Press 1989) p.15.