

# *Poet, Priest & Prophet*

**Book Launch**  
**Wollaston College, Mt Claremont**  
*Sunday 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2002*

There is a delightful scene in the Merchant-Ivory film, *A Room with a View*, which features a cultivated English clergyman, the Reverend Mr. Eager, the English chaplain in Florence, acting as a professional guide in one of the marvellous churches of Florence. His captured audience swivel their heads to and fro, as he enunciates in a staccato fashion the features of a fresco in one of the chapels. I vowed when I endured this scene that I would not ever entrust myself to an amateur guide of anything. For discovering something beautiful and transcendent requires time for personal reflection and deepening acquaintance.

There are, however, guides who themselves have surrendered to experiences that imbued them with a sensitive capacity to interpret for others, to alert others to the intimations of transcendence, and in the case of theological guides (theologians), to identify those intersections of the Divine with ordinary human experience. I think the term *guide* is a useful referent. Such theological guides improve our own sight - we hear ourselves "*ahaing*" as we read their texts. We even become excited because as we are engaged by their explorations, we appreciate that we are having aspects of our own experience of God articulated, clarified, even enlivened. We are given 'a room to view' our own wondrous encounters with the God who works from the inside out.

Bishop John Vernon Taylor was such a master guide. His theological approach was imaginative. He was a guide, not a logical mapmaker as systematic theologians are wont to be. Their maps are helpful; often they get you there, to the right theological place, but as to assisting you to appreciate the wonder, the beauty of God? Ah, that is when we need the poetic theologian, as John Taylor was.

Bishop John Taylor's writing has had a life-giving influence upon me. Life in the Anglican Church of Australia in the early 1970s was something of a theological wasteland. Reading *The Go-Between God* about 1974 awakened me to theological understandings that had been until that moment, mere impressions or hints. This awakening was a wondrous experience - I devoured the pages, although I found that I had to pause often and long, for the text was so rich.

On the basis of that book, I subscribed to the Winchester Churchman, the sort of Diocesan paper that barely passed for your average pew sheet, except for the *Rosewindow* articles penned by the bishop, John Taylor. Again, they breathed of life-giving acquaintance with God.

Like many others, I found the writing of John Taylor to be theologically translucent. His thoughts were vigorously fertile, spawning deeper and further reflections, enabling theology to engage with life, embracing the joy and the pain, much more so than I had encountered before in other writers.

In 1988 I sat at John Taylor's feet as he led the Bible studies at Cantess, at Christ College Canterbury. Up the hill at the University of Kent the 1988 Lambeth Conference was in session. John Taylor led studies that centred on "*The Kingdom of God.*" These formed his book *Kingdom Come*. This was another conversion for me, one that has set much of the direction of my thinking and life for almost twenty years. I am ever grateful for that experience of scriptural illumination.

I came, therefore, to Dr David Wood's book with both relish and unease. I wondered whether someone who had shaped my thinking, spirituality, and direction in life might be reduced by close scrutiny and vivisection. Not that I wanted hagiography, for such a treatment would abuse the facts, and attending to facts was the substance of John Taylor's theological method.

I finished reading David's book with genuine gratitude. I think David has written a great book. This intellectual biography, almost a theological biography, will be a much-read book. This book will last. This book is not a piece of fashion.

This book requires the reader to give it time and reflection. The text, like the subject's own writing, is rich. You need to pause in order to digest. There are so many insights, stimuli for theological imagination, profound thinking, and pastoral application.

David states unequivocally early in his text that *"making connections between Christian doctrine and ordinary experience is personal and it begins in oneself, so this work looks at John Taylor's theology...as it is expressed in his own life as Christ's disciple. The biographical element is intentional and deliberate, central and inescapable to this study. One whose theology is so intensely and insistently incarnational must himself be incarnate for us and with us."* (p.10)

David Wood does incarnate John Taylor for the reader. This is a *"biography of a mind"* - a mind that, in the words of Archbishop Rowan Williams in the foreword to this book, was *"a reminder of ways of doing theology that could only come from somewhere other than the academic mainstream, and were all the more richly three-dimensional for that"*.

Let me open the window, as it were, on this three-dimensional theology, by reading some enticing pieces from this marvellous book:

On doing theology, p.92.  
On recognition, p.120.  
The Christlike God, p.197.



There is much more. For David's own words are as fertile as the one's whom David so lovingly makes accessible to us. For instance, these extracts of David's own thinking are a sample of the entire text:

p.111  
p.202

David is a real wordsmith who has crafted a book that will creatively lodge in your mind. It is the kind of writing whose texture provokes recall.

Bishop Bill Ind of Truro gave the address at John Taylor's funeral. Bill Ind paid this tribute, *"As I look back, I think parts of me were asleep before I met him. He who wrote so freshly about the Holy Spirit was himself a life giver. How he did it, I don't know, but he helped me and countless others to see. And there is something significant and poignant in the fact that he whose eyesight was so affected, brought sight and vision to others."*

David's book does help us to understand how John Taylor did what he did. This is part of the greatness of this book. The book itself will do what John Taylor did in his life: it will awaken parts of the reader that are asleep. We are deeply indebted to David Wood for this book. This book will make the thought and writing of a very great theological mind more widely accessible. That can only be for the health of the church's mission. David's scholarship, felicitous prose, are all highly in evidence throughout the text. David is to be congratulated for such scholarship that will itself give the gift of insight.

Let me end with one of David's own observations: *"John Taylor's humble theology may be the only theologizing open to any of us today."* (p.15).

Please now join me in toasting the success of this great book, and in congratulating the author, Dr David Wood, whom it is such a delight to have as a priest in the diocese of Perth.

**The Rt Revd Dr Brian Farran**