

Poet, Priest and Prophet

Book Launch
Saint John the Divine, Croydon
Diocese of Melbourne
Sunday 13th October 2002

It is a great pleasure to welcome you all here this afternoon to toast the publishing of *Poet, Priest and Prophet The life and Thought of Bishop John V Taylor* by the Reverend Dr David Wood, sometime priest of this parish community. It is an equally great pleasure to welcome David back to the scene of the crime as it were and to thank him for his ministry to us this morning as well as for paying s the compliment of coming back here to launch his superb book. In his foreword David thanks this parish community who “appreciated and loved a parish priest devoted to reading and writing ... and set (him) free to devote time and energy to intellectual exploration and spiritual discovery – time and energy (he says) which might otherwise have been spent on more obviously practical matters.”

As David’s Churchwarden for most of his time in this simple little country parish, I can’t say that we quite knew at the time that this is what we were doing. What I can say now as I hold this tangible outcome of David’s scholarship is that we are very happy to be acknowledged in this way and to have this opportunity to celebrate our role in its conception and to be in on the birthing process as well as to congratulate its author on his prodigious undertaking.

I am in awe of anyone who can have the foresight, the insight, the persistence, the intellect and the commitment to sheer hard work in bringing a book into being, especially one that makes an original contribution to culture. I am the more in awe of a scholar who is able to combine theological insight, historical understanding, aesthetic sensitivity, and an obvious love of and critical admiration for the subject of his investigation into such readable, attractive and flawless prose. When I can claim such an author as a very dear friend, I am in real danger of becoming an unashamed groupie.

Thanks to priests like David, Alan Baxter and Colin Coish, many of us have had our horizons expanded by John Taylor particularly through reading *The Go-Between God* and *The Christlike God*. Archbishop Rowan Williams, who contributed the foreword to the book, claims that John Taylor has had an impact in recent times comparable only to Archbishop Michael Ramsay. Both men, he says, “represented an exhilarating largeness of spirit and imagination; they made you believe that this largeness was the native air of Christians, and that to live in such an atmosphere was the most desirable thing in the world.” There is more than the passing similarity here between subject and biographer. So I am glad that other potential biographers of John V Taylor have apparently had the good sense to hold back. Possibly they have had the good sense to see that Owen Chadwick’s biography of Michael Ramsay established a widely acknowledge benchmark

in the genre which it would be difficult to imitate. They are to be commended for their restraint. This has been worth waiting for. It is what its author terms a biography of the mind – an intellectual biography. In our biography obsessed world, David quotes David Keller, we like to think that the life explains the work, whereas more often the work explains the life. The interest lies in how closely the two are interrelated. Who is this person who writes so beautifully? Does he manage to practise what he preaches? This biography of the mind answers both questions and makes an irresistible claim that “John Taylor’s humble theology may be the only theologizing open to any of us today. Anything grander is simply too arrogant to gain a respectful hearing in so diverse and plural a world. Anything more comprehensive is a proud delusion inconsistent with the authority of Jesus Christ.” In my reading of this book, it is frequently difficult to tell who is doing the talking – John V Taylor or his biographer. This is particularly so in the last Chapter, titled “The Christlike God,” and which is quite capable of standing on its own. It is, I suppose, not to be wondered at, that the theology laid out in this chapter is the theology of the weekly sermons conveyed via the e-mail from the parish of Joondalup to their grateful recipients.

In my view, David’s book deserves a place next to Chadwick’s. It is a great book and David once again, deserves our congratulations, our thanks and our respect.

I invite you to join me in toasting two poets, priests and prophets: Bishop John V Taylor and Doctor David Wood.

Tony White