

## Review

Vincent Strudwick, *The Naked God (Wrestling for a Grace-Ful Humanity)*. London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2017, 233 pp. (Pbk). ISBN: 978-0-23253-256-2.

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Vincent Strudwick is a former monk, priest, historian and lecturer, as well as a charismatic, engaging man. He was principle of my ordination course many years ago, so I knew that this book would be worth reading. For Strudwick, everything is made sense of by historical context, so it is no accident that this book is firmly set in church history and the context of his life. We hear of the influences on his thought and faith, often from personal encounter. Strudwick sets out the need to rescue God from inaccessible language and to wrestle with how to “proclaim the gospel afresh” in this generation. Fundamentally, God is stripped away until God just “is” and we are called to give hospitality to God. It is a book by a wrestler, for other people who wrestle with “big” things, of whatever faith, or none.

The book is in four parts. In Part 1, Strudwick wrestles with our history, our theologies and ecclesiology. The Interlude is a section on his personal wrestling. In Part 2, he wrestles with globalization, how society has changed, and the response of faith communities. The Postlude is his reflection on how we can move forward from here.

In the first part of the book he describes how each generation “clothes” god, and the need to decode the concepts, language, and rituals. The early church was born out of experience of God, rather than ideological constructs. Early Christians were People of the WAY, and the early church came from relationship with God, rather than reasoning. This relationship preceded the church structures, Bible, creeds and dogma. Strudwick quotes Dawson’s ages of the church, each starting and ending in crisis and passing through growth and decay. In each “age” the church has resisted a changed situation; engaged with it; presented its message in the language of that age;

flourished and resisted the next change ... each “age” lasts three to four centuries. It seems to him that we are at the end of one of those ages.

In the first “age” early Christians received the Living Word (not text) and Strudwick describes the shift from that internal word of God to the external word, of scripture, creeds and dogma in the historical context of Emperor Constantine wanting to create religious/cultural uniformity. He goes on to describe other historical events (like the Reformation) which “froze” the church in a particular historical context. Of particular note for Strudwick is Hooker, who’s thinking so formed the Anglican church, giving us the concept of “scripture/tradition/reason”.

An interlude follows, which is a journey with the author through his growth in understanding and wrestling in the company of other wrestlers. These include poets, mystics, sociologists and artists with or without faith. God, however understood, is there for everyone.

The second part of the book wrestles with global changes and faith responses to those changes. Again, it is shot through with the author’s wrestling and also his contribution to the process. We are to “kingdom spot” and join in with what God is doing. We have a responsibility to shape things as we “do our theology” in the context of unprecedented ecological and economical change, not to mention mass displacement and fear. Strudwick says there are three options open to us (1) despair (2) laager (withdrawal into defensive huddle) and (3) work towards the rescue and healing of the whole of society. For him, long-term, patient pursuit of mutual understanding is essential.

In the postlude, he goes on to describe the necessity to build bridges, and to notice when others are building a bridge towards you. He also movingly describes the necessity to “cross over” and experience life for the “other” before coming back to continue to work for understanding in a new way.

Strudwick’s style is accessible and fluent. The fact that so much is written from experience or encounter makes it even more readable, whilst also being dense. Every word is carefully placed, and he has packed a great deal into this book. So much so, that I found I gained more from it the second time through. There is a huge amount in each section that I have not mentioned.

This is a great book for all who wrestle with “religion” or “Church” and where God might meet us and others outside those constructs. As such, it is relevant to chaplains, who often work at the edges of our institutions. Engaging with others in dialogue without proselytizing, but embodying God so that “the gospel note is sounded” by our listening rather than our words seems to me to describe the direction chaplaincy is taking.

Whilst acknowledging the great need to cross the bridge and experience the life of another, we need to know from whence we have come and to what

we return. In taking the clothes off God, removing the historical constructs, I found myself left with a rather vague God who (Strudwick quotes Baum) “is weak as water, but irresistible as a river”. There was much explicit ecclesiology in this book, but often only implicit Christology.

I found I agreed with many of Strudwick’s frustrations and wrestling’s, but my thoughts didn’t always lead down the same paths. The author would be fine with that!

If you are looking for answers, this is not the book for you. If you wrestle with or are frustrated by the status quo and defensive behaviours (in ourselves, our communities, the world), you will find much in this book to illuminate and encourage you.