

The Immaculate Perception (1):

diversity

No mortal enjoys the gift of “immaculate perception.”¹

So said T F Carney cited by John Elliott in a social-scientific criticism of the New Testament.

Of course what Carney was trying to say is that everything we understand, everything we see and hear, is a point of view. Nothing we see and hear is immaculate – everything has an intermediary, everything must be contested, everything negotiated.

All the data streaming into our brains is interpreted mediated by the mind. Nothing that is birthed in our understanding has come to us *without* an intervention of some kind.

From the first moment of awareness in the transition from proto-human to human, through thousands of years of the evolution of the brain, through billions of re-configurations sparked by experience, upbringing and culture, we have arrived at this present moment.

Given what we know about the remarkable plasticity of the brain, this evolution will continue as new technology interacts with us and as we interact with it, particularly nanotechnology, to produce an ever changing, ever developing higher consciousness.

This must be for us the subject of marvel and wonder, rather than fear, if we trust the overarching purpose of God

¹ T.F Carney cited in John Elliot, “Social-Scientific Criticism of the New Testament: More on Methods and Models,” *Semeia* 35 (1986): 5.

working itself through and despite the infamies and excesses of human history.

Albert Einstein one of the preeminent scientists and thinkers of the 20th century points us in the right direction:

The most beautiful emotion we can experience, he remarks, is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion that stands at the cradle of all true art and science. He (she) to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead, a snuffed out candle. To sense that behind anything that can be experienced there is something that our minds cannot grasp, whose beauty and sublimity reaches us indirectly: this is religiousness. In this sense and in this sense only I am a devoutly religious man.²

This Einstein wrote in answer to Rabbi Herbert S Goldstein. A prominent leader in the American Jewish community of New York who had fired off this telegram: *Do you believe in God*” Stop. Answer paid. 50 words. You will have noticed how cleverly Einstein sidesteps the directness of that question. Perhaps it was in deference to his scientific friends, who were shocked when he described himself as ‘religious’.

In our passage set for this evening’s lectionary, St Paul is all too mindful of the cantankerous nature of the debate that rages around us every day as yesterday’s wisdom becomes today’s foolishness and today’s wisdom morphs into tomorrow’s foolishness, and so on... into the future.

Nothing in Greek intellectual history had prepared them for the meaning of this event, of the cross: was it not, after all, a weakness of cosmic proportions that must be set aside and despised as the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche would do centuries later?

² Quoted in Walter Isaacson, “Einstein and Faith”, *Time* April 16, 2007, p.47

And how could the suffering and death of a heretic, made blasphemous, unclean by its Roman perpetrators, bear any resemblance to the triumphant Messiah that all of Jewish sacred history had anticipated?

And as the debate rages from this side to that, the central point is missed:

the power of God,
the sheer wisdom of God
stand before them unrecognized.

In the end the not necessarily wilful blindness and deafness by which such people stumble and fall, represents a misunderstanding of cosmic proportions.

But of course none of us are immune. Not even St Paul, who despite his compassion towards the slave Onesimus, was ultimately blind to the evil of slavery, even though he teeters on the edge of such understanding when he writes to the slave's master Philemon,

Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother.

And I do note even in Paul's words to the Corinthians an edge of triumphalism:

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

Which contrasts strongly with St John's proclamation in our gospel reading also set for today that:

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to

condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

And therein also lies the immaculate perception to which as enlightened human beings we all aspire.

But lest we feel this too difficult and beyond us, may this exemplary tale about a moment in the life of Jesus when his eyes too were opened, be an encouragement to us.

MARK 7:24-30

24 From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know that he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, 25 ... a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. 26 Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. 27 He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." 28 But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." 29 Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go – the demon has left your daughter." 30 So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

With the help of *scientific social criticism* we are able to unravel this remarkable moment when Jesus, a product of his culture and times, clearly caught off guard, answers the woman's request with (to 21st Century eyes and ears) with uncharacteristic and unexpected harshness.

There is no evading this conclusion when we consider the considerable scholarly evidence. Nor is there any way of softening this.

That is why Theissen, a biblical scholar, views the subsequent prejudice and how it is overcome in the encounter with "the other", as more miraculous even than the healing of the child.

Let us look at the evidence, for a moment.

Firstly, the situation in Tyre at the time provides “fertile soil for aggressive prejudices on both sides”, between the Jewish man who has a reputation for healing and this woman, a Syrophenician by birth, who belongs to the elite class of the city-dwelling Hellenes: two social worlds just waiting to collide.

Secondly, Cadwallader another scholar, maintains that gender was an important category in the ancient world and its management paramount that the place of women was participation “at the margins” of a male world, and that it applied to speech and movement. One of the ways this management occurred was through public rhetoric and mastery within the household.

Rationality, speech and reason were the domain of the male.

Females were irrational and by extension on the same plain as animals, “the animal can join woman in a single broad category as ‘aloga’, or irrational creatures”, Cadwallader notes.

Using a methodology which combines the realms of reason, ethology and gender, he argues that Jesus’ statement is abuse directed at her because of her gender, and this is shown by her demotion to the level of a dog. Dogs were considered scavengers, with tendencies to be ferocious and wild. Amongst the Jewish population dogs were considered to be sources of impurity and filth. The term “dog” in connection with any human being was extremely abusive and derisive. However, dogs had some ambiguity in the ancient world. Whilst generally they were feared, reviled or controlled (as vicious guard dogs were) there were occasions when non-Jews would have house dogs (Greeks were known to keep hunting dogs).

The woman’s reply alters the parameters of the conversation.

She takes the general and makes it specific: dogs can have a place inside the house, just as she too has come into the house.

She is either identifying with a dog which she is willing to do to have her request met or she is beginning the process of resisting and redefining the parameters presented to her with her own cultural knowledge. Maybe she's doing both: whichever, this is an unmistakable challenge to Jesus' world.

The Syrophoenician woman prefaces her response with deference (respect), she follows the key species metaphor, which Jesus has used (another sign of deference) and yet refuses to be silent and accept her superior's decision. In fact her response of a "counter-proverb" is cleverly constructed to destabilise the all encompassing nature of Jesus' proverb.

The contest then becomes one of "two words", two declarations of wisdom and the focus becomes choosing the most appropriate proverb for the situation on hand.

And this is the remarkable thing: the word, which Jesus chooses in the contest, is the woman's.

Let us take in the wonder.

The woman acknowledges the honour of Jesus while Jesus accentuates her shame. However, in the final scene, when the woman's request is granted, Jesus does not lose honour and the woman's honour is restored.

This is a Jesus I can believe in.

Being human, he, like us, grows in awareness and understanding.

Against his iambic pentameter tirade, his brutal proverb, she posits in the most beautiful and elegant Greek, superior to Mark's, a defence of her dignity and right to respect, which Jesus not only recognizes but rewards.

We end as we began:

No mortal enjoys the gift of "immaculate perception", except that given by God.

Clearly that memorable day, Jesus' Father revealed to his Son through the unlikely intermediary of this beautiful woman, the full extent of his mission to the world.

Where is the wise? Where is the debater of this age?

Where indeed!

We can only stand back in wonder and in awe at the mystery of this moment, with thanksgiving for a God who knows and understands *everything*, whose point of view is indeed immaculate.

It just takes a little time for us humans to catch on.