

Views from the Pews – Colour

Our pew sheet for 12 January may have shocked some, as David Zelenka's portrayal of Christ and John the Baptist departs from habitual tradition and makes both men most definitely not European. Our Western tradition is 'habitual' in that we tend to think of Christ as 'white'. This habit has deep roots, harking back to Orthodox and Renaissance art, where Christ is usually portrayed as probably European, albeit with a beard.

Does this actually matter? Does it matter what Christ actually looked like?

Yes it does, particularly if you are a non-European Christian of colour. One of our biggest challenges today is to remind ourselves that we are a truly global movement, and that European Christians are probably in a minority. So we need to be aware of old habits. Christianity does not 'belong' to Europe, or to Russia, or to anywhere else for that matter. Zelenka set out to confront. He presumably knew our habits and asks us to re-examine them.

Tissot (26 January) also requires our attention albeit for slightly different reasons. His Jesus is not particularly western in appearance, and Tissot's other faces seem to blend well with his obvious care to place Luke's account where it really belongs: in a Synagogue. We are reminded again of the place and time of the Gospel stories. Tissot too seems to be saying "this is not Europe".

But neither artist seems to be requiring an apology: we are all creatures of inherited culture. But we need to be aware; if our mission is to spread the Gospel, we need to be mindful of how others might see us. It would for instance be useful to explore Islam; could it possibly be a reaction to a Judeo-Christian narrative that claims priority to the eastern shore of the Mediterranean? No evidence is offered here – just an invitation to be mindful, especially at a time when ancient memories are stoking the fires of conflict again.

And in any debate about the Treaty of Waitangi, the subconscious assumptions of its parties and its enablers are crucial. What assumptions did the missionaries bring? Was their Jesus as portrayed by Zelenka, or was He something different?

The visual arts have played an influential role in Christianity; long may they continue to challenge our thoughts.

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