Shouldering the Load

In a recent Washington Post article, Lenny Bernstein reports on a study released in the science journal Nature that describes the evolutionary development of the human shoulder. According to Bernstein, the authors of the study indicate that unlike chimpanzees, Homo erectus developed the unique ability to throw projectiles at speeds that long ago enabled them to hunt and bring down quarry many times their size from a distance that kept them from getting eaten in the process. It also explains the heat brought when Washington Nationals’ ace Stephen Strasburg delivers his fastball. It appears there is no other vertebrate that can whip its torso-shoulder-forearm-wrist-hand complex as fast or hurl with the degree of accuracy as a major league pitcher.

But what has that to do with the brain? Evolutionary biologists suggest that with this particular skill, man was able to acquire food resources that led to the ingestion of important nutrients that enabled us to grow bigger brains in the long run. Hence, more sophisticated shoulders led to smarter minds. It all seems to make sense at one level. At another, articles like this often raise questions.

For some, the very mention of evolution might seem out of step with an orthodox view of Christian faith. For others it will affirm that science and following the resurrected Jesus of history are in harmonious accord. What Bernstein and the authors of the study do not reveal is their tacit anthropological position. If they are aware of the intentionality of a creator that ultimately shoulders the brain’s development, we are not made aware of it. It may never have occurred to the authors that this discovery of the relationship between the shoulder and the brain points to even more crucial relationships. Relationships between people and a God who is intimately involved in creating and sustaining the physical universe.

Many scientists who are Christians are deeply persuaded of the elegant progression of mankind’s development over hundreds of millions of years, and believe that God was and is in the middle of every element of this. Others find this to be inconsistent with their faith. Either way, what is important is the question of whether we believe that our anthropology is ultimately rooted in something (in this case, someone) outside of ourselves that creates and reveals itself to us or rather in something the ultimate purpose of which we create out of our own imagination.

Much has been written suggesting that those who do not believe in a living God but rather in a mechanistic evolutionary progression of human life have substituted the abstract idea of evolution for Yahweh, not unlike Adam and Eve did with a pear that held out hope for knowing things as only God can know them. On the surface, it appears far easier, far more desirable in the short run to know things, such as the knowledge of good and evil, or the way our shoulder and brain have evolved, than it is to be known by someone. Far simpler—and safer—it seems, even in the complex and fascinating world of evolution, to keep God out of it. This God who vulnerably enters our world as a newborn and vulnerably leaves our world on a cross, but in between is turning over tables, seeking to find us, to know us, asking us questions. A God who, in raising Jesus from the dead--whether you believe in evolution or not--is making all things new.

In the end, life is not just about how well our shoulders carried the burden of the development of our brains, but how deeply God has shouldered the development of our hearts along with our bodies, taking us so seriously that he would rather die than let anything stand in the way of our being with him.

So, later today when you’re throwing the ball with your child, or when you watch in amazement as Strasburg fans yet another batter, remember this: the God who put your shoulder into motion and developed your marvelous brain is the same one who moved into the neighborhood in Jesus. Just the pitch we so desperately needed someone to deliver.