

The Person Behind the Mission

Baccalaureate Mass
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You graduate this weekend from a university with a mission. You know it most memorably as “empowering leaders for a just and humane world”. You also know it as “educating the whole person”. “Leaders” and “whole persons”, fine and dandy, but does your university have an image or a model for these leaders, these whole persons? Who best represents them? You are graduating from a Jesuit university. “Jesuit” is simply a nickname that stuck with us almost from the start, 468 years ago, a nickname for “Companions of Jesus.” Thus the image or model we propose for the “whole persons” and the “leaders” of our mission is Jesus of Nazareth. He is the person behind the mission.

Fortunately we know today, if we care to dig into the matter, more about the historical Jesus of Nazareth than any Christians have known for the last eighteen hundred years. What is the portrait that emerges from historical studies of this whole person, this leader for a just and human world?

The gospel of today provokes our curiosity about him. In a one-minute speech Jesus says half a dozen times “Do not worry”: about your life, about what you will eat, about your body, about what you will wear, about how long your life will be. Who could say such a thing? It is abundantly clear that all the apostles and disciples, men and women, worried; Jesus’ own mother and relatives worried; the ordinary Jewish people and their leaders worried; the Romans worried. But there is no indication that Jesus of Nazareth ever worried. None. Oh he was sad, anguished, afraid, grieving, astonished, angry, disappointed, enraptured. But he never worried. How strange! Who was he? If you and I are honest we spend a very good part of our lives worrying. Who was this Jesus of Nazareth, this person who is behind our mission? What is his true portrait and hence the truth of our mission? Here is a brief sketch.

First of all he was not just human like you and I. Too tame a portrait. He was not just human, he submitted to being human, took it on fully, was obedient to all that being human means, did not escape from or hide from or avoid anything that is truly human. It is one thing to be human. We all supposedly are, but it is another thing to submit fully to our full, true humanity, to be obedient to it, to live it without excuse or exemption. No person ever spoke as he did because no person ever submitted as fully to being human as he did. There is the first part of the untame portrait of our mission’s “whole person” our “leader for a just and humane world.” Click.

Secondly, he not only was a prayerful person, who prayed every day. Again too tame a portrait. Jesus of Nazareth prayed out of his humanity so deeply, so often through the whole night, so fully as part of his Jewish people and yet so alone in his intensity, that he knew God as Abba and himself as Servant, himself as Beloved Son. So fully did he pray that Jesus experienced the very purpose of God for his chosen people being fulfilled in himself. So much did he find God active in himself as in a temple, that he dared to challenge the Temple in Jerusalem and to see himself as its replacement. Call our “whole person” our “leader for a just and humane world” prayerful,

but do not make his—or our—prayer timid or tame, or anything less than world transforming. Click, the second frame of the photo.

Thirdly, he was clearly a passionate prophet. But again that is too tame. You can be passionate, but it can all stay within you like a hot furnace or the passion can be scattered recklessly. He was passionate that something be done. That something was nothing less than that God recreate us and the world, turn it all upside down, inside out, make us permanent not passing, peaceful, right, powerfully relational with one another and creation. He called what he was passionate about simply “God’s Kingdom”. The true portrait of Jesus of Nazareth is like a mosaic of colorful, jagged, jarring images called parables all about this recreated world of God called the Kingdom. How tame, how spiritual, how remote, how heavenly, how tame we have made that. Yes, he’s about “whole persons” and “leaders for a just and humane world”, but more truly so than we have ever dared to imagine or dream. Click; it’s getting clearer.

Next we think of Jesus calling men out of boats or from benches, women out of homes, people from the side of the road or paralyzed on mats. But isn’t this again too obvious, too easy? Jesus of Nazareth did not grow up in a family of three in a house of their own with neighbors down the street, and work quietly among the shavings in a carpenter’s shop. He grew up in a village, among an extended family, part of a tribe, in a noisy community, working as it were in a construction guild. His “Come follow me!” did not mean “let’s the two of us take a walk”, it meant come, leave all, be part of a new community. Find your meaning in joining this Kingdom community, this “New Way”, this working body for God’s recreating of the world. So our mission is about untamed, untimid persons who are whole only in a community and leaders for a new kind of just and humane world. Click; the real Jesus is more and more in focus.

How about that bit that he never worried? Does that mean he was blessed with a divinely tranquil personality? No! Far too tame; just the opposite! He didn’t worry because he learned to trust. He was tempted, tested, tried. He learned to trust. You can’t read the life of Jesus of Nazareth without being startled by how much he lived in a hostile environment, judged, taunted, accused, threatened, in the midst of a trap about to spring shut and that eventually did. He didn’t avoid worry because he was a calm person, but because in the midst of power poised against him he trusted, cast his very self, his passionate self, on the other side of all human power—even when tortured—onto the side of God’s power and compassion, even if unfelt. The portrait of the person behind our mission impels us not to be calm, whole humanists or self-reliant leaders, but persons who wholly trust and lead by trusting not in our power but in God’s care. Is that the full photo? Not quite; one more shot.

Finally the wildest, most untamed, the hardest to accept part of the person behind our mission is not that he died—because we all do that willy nilly and many of us even die for love of others, whether family or nation. No, the least tame part of the portrait of Jesus of Nazareth is that he was raised from the dead, bodily himself yet transformed, not brought back to life or resuscitated, but living the very re-creation he was so passionate about, himself alive and the pledge of the new life for us that he called simply “God’s Kingdom”. This is very wild, very untamed, very hard to accept stuff. Don’t accept his being raised to a new kind of this-worldly life, and Jesus of Nazareth belongs simply on the shelf with other great inspiring historical persons. Believe that he was raised, and this humanly submitting, deeply praying, passionate for life, calling to community, trusting-no-matter-what Jesus of Nazareth becomes not only a model for us but what our life is also about and in whom we glimpse our own image. Without believing this, by the way, there is no way not to worry your way through life.

You graduate this weekend from a Jesuit university with a mission. The phrase “Jesuit educated” now attaches itself to you as a nickname whether you like it or not! Just remember that “Jesuit” is but a nickname for Companion of Jesus. May the true, untame Jesus of Nazareth, who is the person behind our mission of educating “whole persons who are empowered leaders for a just and humane world” be both the mirror and the companion of your lives.