

“Jesuit” Begins with “Jesus”

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“Jesuit” begins with “Jesus”. We will learn much about Jesuit things this morning and in these days. It is good to start the day in this Mass with Jesus. That’s where the first Jesuits began, attempting almost literally to be like the original disciples around Jesus. A band of companions of Jesus. Hence our name: “The Society or the Company of Jesus”. They were close followers of the Jesus of the gospel, imitating him, trying to be like him, knowing they were called by him. Much gets obscured about Jesus over the years, or much gets added on, or we make him more in our own image, we accommodate him to who we are and what we want him to be rather than letting him be who he truly is. Can we go back to what is most basic about Jesus and find there something that guides us and gives us a mission and a vision in what we are trying to do in our Jesuit universities and colleges?

Our first reading says, “Grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and savior Jesus Christ.” Let us try to do so.

When I go back to who Jesus most truly was, when I peel off the layers, when I try to find how he is a challenge and what he most deeply calls for, I come to the core about him. He was true. We see this even in the gospel of today where those who would test him or try to trap him, pick up on what was most astonishing to the people, so different, so new, so unlike anyone else. Those out to test him don’t believe it, but they play on this fact that he was true when they say, “Teacher, we know that you are a truthful man and that you are not concerned with anyone’s opinion. You do not regard a person’s status but teach the way of God in accordance with the truth.” Even they see, in their own way, that Jesus was true.

When I say he was true, I don’t mean primarily that he conveyed truths, but rather that he was true in his person. True in the way we talk about “true north”, or true in the sense that in lining up two boards, we say they are “true”, or true in the sense that in assessing something to be level, the bubble in the level must be exactly between lines. Every single morning I pray, “The one who sent me is true, and he will not leave me alone.” Not truthful or having amazing truths, but true in the sense of being straightforward, genuine and guiding, having his own authority not by position but by who he is in himself, full accordance between who he is and what he says and does and teaches.

Jesus was true. The crowds noted this as completely unknown to them, unlike and unparalleled in any other rabbi or teacher. They commented that he taught with authority unlike their teachers, not citing others and commenting on them, but speaking from his own person. They asked, “Who is this who teaches with authority and casts out demons?” These they saw as connected, his truth, his authority, his unborrowed power from within, was what makes his teaching new and what also was his source from which he cast out demons. Jesus was true. Many said, “Never has anyone spoken like this before!” Or another reflection of this same truth of his, this power of being true, is seen as the comment “from the time of John the Baptist in the

desert he went about doing good.” How simple is that, always doing good? That’s part of what it means that “Jesus was true”.

It is a mystery to us—in the real humanity and real divinity of Jesus—what was the source of this truth, how it showed itself, how he came to it, how he knew it, how he could rely on it? Trying to understand this gets us into the theology of two natures in one person without any violation of either nature. Is he the only person who was utterly true? The truth of Jesus as a person may point to the fact that any person is true to the extent that who they are is aligned with God, that we are more true as human persons, not less, the more we are one with the divine. We all know some persons who have so much of this quality, often simple people, uneducated, attached to the land, a grandmother, a grandfather, a poet. Their untrammelled truth as persons comes through, undoes us in our complexities and subterfuges and contemporary ambiguities. In them we find arrows which point to the one true person, Jesus, who simply and completely was true.

In our universities we speak of “the pursuit of truth”. But we mean something different—though not in conflict with or opposed—to what we mean by “true” when we say, “Jesus is true”. Isn’t what we most of all want ourselves to be is “true” as persons along with pursuing the truth; and isn’t what we want our students to learn more than truths is the truth of themselves and to live that. (I’ll tell a story later today about the reaction I got from students when I said, “I take it each of you wants to be present to the truth of yourselves in silence.” For now let me allow you to guess what they said in reaction to that.) But I don’t think we should guess about what it really means that Jesus was true and what this might mean for our Jesuit universities.

“Jesuit” begins with “Jesus” and the place to start with Jesus is that he was true.

- This asks that our Jesuit universities be built on the integrity, the genuineness, of all of its students, faculty, staff and administrators.
- It means that our Jesuit universities must be based on the spirituality of each person, their lived relationship to the Mystery of life.
- It means that we should be true persons in pursuit of truth.
- It requires that there be a process of helping all of us come to a greater self-knowledge and internal freedom.
- It means that infrequently, but powerfully used for key decisions in our universities, should be a discernment of spirit that listens to the quietest but truest voices both within ourselves and among one another.
- And it means that Jesus should be at the center of our universities—not for all as the object of faith—but for all as the person who is true.

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