

Nativity of St. John the Baptist

By Fr. David Altman, OCSO

The reason we are who we are and for the most part where we are, is the call of God. The Creator-God called the universe into existence and calls each of us to a specific work that contributes to our own union with God and the union of many others.

The meaning of life for every person is in our assignments: to serve God in specific ways identified by the talents and the circumstances in which we find ourselves. It is true that there are no accidents with God, so that who we are and the good we work at accomplishing are part of a divine plan for the rescue of all humankind from the world's power to lure us away from God. The immediate gratifications offered by the world can outshine their Creator, because of the shortsightedness of those lacking sufficient faith.

Many do not realize their value before God on account of this lack of faith. They do not see beyond this world, and therefore they think they occupy insignificant places. To see reality as it actually is, we have to see with the eyes of God, that He has chosen each individual to have an assigned part to play in the growth of the human race toward union with its Creator.

The false observation has been made many times throughout history, "What difference do I make?" and "Who will care if I go?" The answer is that the most important person in everyone's life —God himself—cares very much about the difference each human life makes.

In order to appreciate our roles in life, in order to appreciate ourselves, God gives us historical figures of great importance, not simply for our observation but for our identification. God calls everyone to go beyond themselves, beyond their apparent limitations, and realize that we are all John-the-Baptist figures, for example, with the special call to be God's servants through whom the Lord will manifest himself and bestow his life.

People of faith look at the Baptist as a universal figure, but the effects of his life were initially limited to the people around him, as he tried to prepare local minds and hearts for the coming of the Lord. The very same is true of us.

What did John have to show for his life after all, in the world's terms? His efforts had little effect on a people who largely ignored and rejected Christ, and in the last analysis John lost his life because he challenged the immoral behavior of someone in power. In the world's view, John was really nothing and spent his life for nothing.

Yet John has been made famous and an important role model for all time, because he allowed God to work through him. Through his persevering faith, penance and prayer, John was able to become spiritually transparent, so that the message of God could be seen and heard through him. With the power of God, John's life and voice are heard not only beyond his place but beyond his time, as we become more familiar with his role of preparing people for the coming of Christ in their lives. That is the role of every Christian, to be a light to all the nations, that

God's salvation in Jesus may reach to the ends of the earth.

The communications media have reduced our planet to the proverbial global village, so that events on one side of the world are quickly made present on the other side. The media have nothing on our lives of prayer, which operate by connecting instantly with the universal power and presence of God. In media presentations, religious and moral conversion do not enjoy universal popularity; they strike too many spiritually deaf ears without penetrating into minds and wills.

Prayer connects us with God who lives inside the minds and hearts of all people. This is our universal John-the-Baptist vocation, to be those who introduce Christ's presence and message to all people. John was right in saying that he was not the Christ, but we have the gift to go even further and teach that we have the Christ, not just in front of us but within us. In John's time, the presence of Christ's Spirit was limited to his body, but now his Spirit is unlimited and can penetrate our Spirits. It was Augustine who observed, the Lord is more present to us than we are to ourselves.

As adults, all of us are in process of answering the question about ourselves, "What will this child be?" The hand of the Lord has been with us, to bring us to this point of time and place, perhaps much unexpected by parents and former friends. We can identify with John the Baptist in our common vocation of prayer, to prepare ways for the life of Christ, first in ourselves and then throughout the world. We can identify with the hidden life of John, and we can identify with his success in becoming like Christ in his mission and in his destiny.

John the Baptist was born into a life planned by the Lord, so that God would have easy access to his people for their salvation. Today, we might say that the work of the Baptist was to make as many people as he could "user friendly" for the entrance of God's life into the world. John's life and assignment is prophetic of our own lives as we struggle to exchange our lives for the life of God.

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