

MOTIVE AND FOCUS

Stuart Mennigke - 8th December 2002

Mark 1:1-8

Story...

The thought that one might be used for the sole purpose of highlighting another person or their mission is foreign to human nature. In terms of modern right - it might be charged as unconstitutional or even abusive. Swaziland's recent law suit between King Mashwati and the mother of the maiden he choose as a wife highlighted this outside of western culture. In South Africa – where its common for women of many cultures (mind you) to be seen as being there for the rights of their husbands or men as a whole – is at least legally unacceptable (though that often doesn't change the situation). In Nigeria recently – Miss South Africa refuses to participate in the Miss World event because a woman is sentenced to death by stoning for choosing to exercise her right as to who she slept with (or maybe it was choosing to give herself to a person she chooses...)

Children in some countries can choose to exercise their right to exist for themselves against their parents....and so on...

Even psychologically speaking, we're encouraged to journey towards greater autonomy and discovery of who we are for ourselves...its called 'learning to honor your true self'. And, though painful sometimes to be on the receiving end of it in a relationship, it's an important part of being/becoming who one is.

In Christian understanding, there is conflict around our scripture's injunction for women to be quiet in the presence of men in church ...depending on how you read the scriptures.

So, with that background, and our intelligent brains – it does not fit rationally these days for one human to exist simply for the sake of another. People exist in their own right (as well as for God) – not be to used by others – and then they may choose to serve one-another according to their faith/view/love/...whatever.

But John the Baptist **did** exist solely for the sake of another. He didn't seem to have a function apart from pointing to Jesus.

Now, on the **one** hand, there is part of me which identifies with John the Baptist. He wasn't very ordinary, he was somewhat strong in his pronouncements, forthright and outspoken in his ideas and totally out of court in terms of his own faith group – in fact he was seen as a crank by most people - they just didn't get his drift! To the extent that no one really stood up for him when he had his head cut off by the authorities. (Human rights didn't exist in those days). But he had a function totally dedicated to God's whim. (I use the word purposefully). Born a cousin to Jesus, 6 months before him – not destined to receive any luxuries in life. At times, he didn't seem to know the whole story of his/or the life he was pointing to!

On the **other** hand, I'm not sure I could identify with this chap. He seemed to have little care for his own safety or comfort – was totally prayerful and single-minded and seemed to have a pure motive which was to be obedient to his task for God.

MOTIVE in the spiritual life is a tricky and very subtle thing. Most of us are affected in some way or another by the notion that we **should** be modest. Enough at least, not to force ourselves forward – but to give the glory to the other. But, most of us are also affected some time in life by the **false** notion of (Christian) humility whereby we actually WANT the glory – but can't say it. It's a bit like the little child we all have lurking deeper in us – who finds different ways of drawing attention to its-self, especially if we're told NOT to. And it's because the child part in us is very demanding. It's never really **fully** dealt with and comes up to remind us in rather nasty and selfish ways that he/she is there – and *“don't forget it! -You feed me – or else I'll perform”*. I know how the inner child in **me** performs, you know how it screams in you – and it does it - to try and get back to the state where **WE are the focus** – like when we were cute little babies.

But John the Baptist seems to have been given the gift of **pure** motive in his task. *“Not me – but him”*. He'd say: *“I may seem the focus in what I'm doing – but this is a means to an end: “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me.”*

FOCUS is another tricky thing in the spiritual life. St Ignatius said about prayer: “Examine the whole course of the prayer – the beginning, middle and end – and notice the change in mood. Where was God while you and God were talking/listening...? What it's about...is focus...where was the change in it? Who was the focus of the prayer? God or you? ...is what Ignatius would ask the person praying . When God is the focus, we tend toward peacefulness, increase of faith, hope and love...and “advance “ in the spiritual life. Where WE are the focus, the prayer/conversation/life is troubled and busy and distracted.

(Story of me on 30 day retreat...and description of ‘wild imaginings and dreams ...and a skilled director ...saying “ Nonsense. Wild imaginings!...go away and be still and ask God to give you the grace of moving out of the focus. The prayer isn't about you – its about watching God and his love for you.”)

There are times when we get very excited about God and ourselves, and the temptation is to step into the spotlight, ...and when we do, we push God out of it. Of course, it all FEELS good, but then, often it's about what **we are** doing for God not what God is doing for us!

So, in some ways the whole of the spiritual life is about measuring **motive and focus**.

In John the Baptist, we see it modeled as a grace from God ...in someone who existed for a brief time - solely for God. And it's these two qualities that enable him to point in an un-interrupted way to Jesus. I may need also to look at these in myself.

Advent is a pointing time. There are opportunities to point to the Jesus we wait for. And there are signs all over pointing to the need for a saviour.

In this paining and warring and scared world ...

At this time in our crime ridden and murderous society....

For the people who have no money to eat/live ...

For the people – known to me at work and home with HIV/AIDS ...

HOW am I willing to be used as a pointer to Jesus who comes?

In my family and in my church community ...

With my bonus, food and celebration....

How can I point to Jesus?

I might struggle to see how I can TOTALLY live for God as John Baptist did – but it could be that this Advent I ask for grace to see just **one** way - for my life and actions to point to the one who comes and waits to save.