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When we read weekly columns about science or food in the newspapers, we find a common concern for personal well-being. Preventive medicine is given a justifiable high place in essays about health. Do any of these writers discuss the relation between personal wholeness and the mission of human life? Only the Frugal Gourmet might introduce this question. When we express gratitude for good health or petitions to overcome illness or affliction, do we consider that this mission is to serve God and neighbor? St. Paul's prayer for the Christians of Thessalonica placed this universal human concern in an even more profound perspective. “May you be preserved whole and entire, spirit, soul and body, irreproachable at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thes 5:23). To grasp the meaning of life we must consider our ultimate destination.

Sometimes the ancient hopes in Israel for deliverance and a better life were couched in political terms. The coming of God's kingdom and of an Anointed Servant to lead the chosen people were expectations that seemed to demand the conquest of social evil. Thus, some documents depicted the promised scion of the Davidic dynasty to be a warrior like his illustrious ancestor The disciples of Isaiah realized that this model did not exhaust the mystery of God's care for his creatures. The Servant anointed by God's Spirit would be a teacher, a healer and a mediator. The passage from Isaiah 61 is familiar to us from St. Luke's description of Jesus in the Nazareth synagogue (Lk 4:18). He epitomized the Master's homily with one sentence. “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (4:21).

One of the great tasks of this Servant would be a message of hope to the poor, unappreciated members of society. Those crushed by any of the burdens of life would be healed. Those unjustly imprisoned would be freed. As Jesus conducted his ministry of teaching and healing, he insisted that these people be integrated back into the spiritual and social life of their community. Their lives were transformed so that they could minister to the needs of others. When people acknowledge that health and freedom place this onus upon them, they will cooperate with God to "make justice and praise spring up before all the nations" (Is 61:11).
As in our own day, a number of people in the time of Jesus claimed to be God's instruments of instruction and healing. It was the duty of the religious authorities ("the Jews" in John's coded phrase) to investigate the credentials of these "upstarts." So priests and Levites from Jerusalem examined John the Baptist. He had no Messianic pretensions, nor was he Elijah or the new Moses (promised in Mal 3:23 and Dt 18:15 and 18 respectively). Probably relieved by these answers, the interrogators still required an answer concerning John's identity and activities. John described his commission by quoting Isaiah 40:3 (proclaimed last Sunday). He plunged people into water in order to prepare his contemporaries for the coming of another Leader more important than himself. John acknowledges being unworthy to conduct this ministry, or even the menial task of removing the Master's sandals.

In the midst of many conflicting message about God's plan for humanity and all creation, people today desperately need numerous leaders with the humility of John the Baptist. Indeed those who search for healing and freedom should discern authentic religious leaders from charlatans. The authentic teacher points beyond himself or herself to God the Father and his anointed Servant. St. Paul gives practical advice to ordinary people of good will in every age. "Do not stifle the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies. Test everything: retain what is good" (1 Thes 5:19-21). Like John the Baptist, every Christian teacher must say of Jesus, the Bridegroom: "He must increase, I must decrease" (Jn 3:29). Then the person will have something of the dispositions found in Mary's prayer, the Magnificat, part of which is used in response to the first reading.