



Bible Reflection on Vocations

2017 is the PANAM Zone Year for Divine Word Vocations. Each month throughout this year, the biblical reflection will focus on a passage related to vocation awareness, discernment and promotion. In each reflection, the Bible Committee will make use of the five steps of *lectio divina*: read, meditate, pray, contemplate and act.

August 2017 — Expanding One's Horizons

1. *Read*

Matthew 15:21-28

At that time, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And behold, a Canaanite woman of that district came and called out, "Have pity on me, Lord, Son of David! My daughter is tormented by a demon." But Jesus did not say a word in answer to her. Jesus' disciples came and asked him, "Send her away, for she keeps calling out after us." He said in reply, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But the woman came and did Jesus homage, saying, "Lord, help me." He said in reply, "It is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs." She said, "Please, Lord, for even the dogs eat the scraps that fall from the table of their masters." Then Jesus said to her in reply, "O woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And the woman's daughter was healed from that hour.

(Gospel of the 20th Sunday in Ordinary Time,
Cycle A, August 20, 2017)

2. *Meditate*

The Gospel of Matthew was probably written for an audience composed of both Jewish and Gentile Christians. The author was sensitive to Jewish issues, such as the interpretation of the Torah, the teaching authority of the rabbis and the promises of the Old Testament. Matthew wanted to reaffirm that Jesus did not come to destroy the Torah but to fulfill it (Matthew 5:17).

At the same time the evangelist acknowledged the universal mission of the church – the very nature of the Gospel required that the teaching of Jesus be presented to all the nations. It was because of his missionary vision and the need to expand the horizons of the early church that Matthew wrote his Gospel, which ends with the so-called “Great Commission,” where the Risen Jesus commands his followers to “make disciples of *all nations*” (28:19).

The Gospel of Matthew also contains an explicit missionary discourse in chapter ten. Within this Gospel there seems to be a kind of dialogue between the missionary church and what is going on in Judaism.

This attempt to bridge the old and the new, Jewish tradition and the mission to the nations, produces some conflicts within the Gospel. The law is considered still to be valid, yet important prescriptions are either contradicted or eliminated (5:17-48). Jewish authorities are severely criticized yet also respected (23:2-3). The apostles are ordered to limit their mission to Israel at one point, then sent off to the nations at another (10:5; 28:19).

Matthew attempts to explain a movement from particularism to universalism. More than any other evangelist Matthew tells of Jesus’ ministry to Gentiles, yet he also includes certain sayings that may have been offensive to Gentile readers (10:5-6; 15:24). It is possible that these conflicting ideas reflect opposing viewpoints in Matthew’s community. Interestingly enough, he includes both views in his Gospel.

An important principle in the Gospel of Matthew is that of *response*. Regardless of social or religious status, anyone who responds with faith and obedience to the Gospel becomes part of God’s people. Since anyone can respond positively to Jesus, this principle espouses universalism. However, response in Matthew means *more than words*. The disciple is not only to *hear* the words of Jesus but to *do* them (5:19; 7:24-27; 24:45-51; 25:14-30, 31-46).

The story of the healing of the Canaanite woman’s daughter fits into Matthew’s concerns. Jesus left Jewish territory and specifically entered Gentile territory. There a “Canaanite” woman approached Jesus. (Mark

7:26 calls her a “Syro-Phoenician,” which was probably a more accurate designation since the Canaanites had disappeared by Jesus’ day. “Canaanite,” however, emphasizes the distance between Jesus and the woman since the Canaanites were Israel’s original enemies.)

The woman asked Jesus to heal her demon-possessed daughter. She was obviously a Gentile, and at first Jesus ignored her. Her calling out must have embarrassed the disciples, who suggested that Jesus get rid of her – hardly a compassionate response to her need. Jesus’ initial response was also rather harsh: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (15:24).

The woman refused to give up, so Jesus made a remark that might seem harsher still: “It is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs” (15:26). The woman responded with humility but also with courage and wit: “Please, Lord, for even the dogs eat the scraps that fall from the table of their masters” (15:27). Jesus was impressed by her response, which expressed the faith of this pagan woman, so he immediately healed her daughter.

An important Gospel value is service. All Christians are called to love and serve others, including those who are different from us – the stranger, the foreigner, the poor, the sick. Sometimes that can be a difficult task because of our own cultural limitations and blindness.

Those called to consecrated life and to public ministry in the church must also ask themselves if they can expand their own cultural horizons to learn from and be challenged by people from other nations, cultures and religions. Today we hear much about *globalization*. Businesses and politicians must think internationally. Migration affects every part of the world; communication across the globe occurs instantaneously.

Those called to serve as priests and religious today must be able to connect with smart phones and social media. Jesus recognized the faith of someone quite different from himself – a woman, a Gentile, a pagan. He now challenges us to hear his voice and to recognize God’s will in those we may prefer to ignore – strangers, foreigners, immigrants, people from other cultures and religions.

Perhaps God even calls us to service in the Church through those who may be far from the Church, those who are themselves searching for God, or those who may be disturbed and disturbing. Perhaps God calls us to missionary work through those who have no interest in God’s mission.

One never knows the surprises that God has in store for us. After all, even Jesus could be surprised by the faith of a pagan foreigner.



3. *Pray*

A Call to Service

*Lord of the harvest,
your Word finds a home in our hearts,
calls us into community and
invites us to generous service of the human family.*

*Bless with courage and spirit your priestly people,
called to full participation in the one Body of Christ.*

*May many choose to respond in public service
to your call offered in Jesus' name. Amen.*

(Cardinal Joseph Bernardin)

4. *Contemplate*

- With a grateful heart recall all the wonderful gifts God has given you to make you who you are – including the gifts of your culture and your family heritage.
- Recall at least one time God has stretched your personal or cultural horizons.

5. *Act*

Say “hello” to a perfect stranger. Perhaps it will lead to a conversation.

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