



## 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.

### June 2017 — The Prophetic Vocation

#### 1. *Read*

##### **Jeremiah 20:10-13**

Jeremiah said:

“I hear the whisperings of many:

‘Terror on every side!

Denounce! let us denounce him!’

All those who were my friends

are on the watch for any misstep of mine.

‘Perhaps he will be trapped; then we can prevail,

and take our vengeance on him.’

But the LORD is with me, like a mighty champion:

my persecutors will stumble, they will not triumph.

In their failure they will be put to utter shame,

to lasting, unforgettable confusion.

O LORD of hosts, you who test the just,

who probe mind and heart,

let me witness the vengeance you take on them,

for to you I have entrusted my cause.

Sing to the LORD,

praise the LORD,

for he has rescued the life of the poor

from the power of the wicked!”

(First Reading of the Twelfth Sunday of the Year,  
Cycle A, June 25)

## *2. Meditate*

Jeremiah 20:10-13 is part of a longer passage (20:7-18) dealing with the prophet's internal struggle over his vocation. Jeremiah 20:7-18 is the last of Jeremiah's so-called "confessions." (See also 11:18-23; 12:1-6; 15:10-21; 17:14-18; and 18:18-23.)

More like complaints or laments than confessions, these passages express doubt, despair, anger, joy and other emotions. Jeremiah was a prophet with strong feelings. The difficulties and challenges of his prophetic ministry created tension in his life. To a large extent the prophet felt like a failure since Judah was paying no attention to him.

Why was his ministry so difficult and without significant results? Jeremiah struggled to understand his prophetic vocation and God's will in his life.

God demanded much of this prophet. Jeremiah is the only person in the Old Testament who was required to be a celibate: "Do not marry any woman; you shall not have sons or daughters in this place...." (16:2). God forbade Jeremiah from attending wakes and funerals and mourning for the dead (16:5-7). He also was commanded to avoid celebrations and joyous occasions, such as weddings (16:8-9). Jeremiah was even ordered not to intercede for his people and not to feel compassion for them (7:16; see 15:1).

The messenger had to live out and symbolize his own message, a message that was negative and gloomy (20:8). Jeremiah was quite unpopular, and his prophetic ministry brought with it social isolation. Through his own life Jeremiah demonstrated that God felt no compassion for the people of Judah.

Since both individuals and societies need to mourn and to celebrate, Jeremiah's life was not only counter-cultural but also lonely. No wonder he felt that everyone was against him (20:10). No wonder he brooded that "all the day I am an object of laughter; everyone mocks me" (20:7). At his lowest point Jeremiah prayed for revenge on his enemies (15:15; 20:12) and cursed the day of his birth (15:10; 20:14-15). Jeremiah's prophetic vocation brought him pain, sorrow, distress and loneliness.

Fortunately, even in this situation Jeremiah also felt the power and grace of God in his life: "But the Lord is with me, like a mighty champion: my persecutors will stumble, they will not triumph" (20:11). Jeremiah could even describe his vocation in ecstatic terms: "When I found your words, I devoured them; they became my joy and the happiness of my heart" (15:16). He cried out: "Sing to the Lord, for he has rescued the life of the poor from the power of the wicked!" (20:13).

When Jeremiah contemplated quitting his prophetic ministry, he discovered that he could not do it. "I say to myself, I will not mention

him, I will speak in his name no more. But then it becomes like fire burning in my heart, imprisoned in my bones; I grow weary holding it in. I cannot endure it” (20:9).

God had so taken over Jeremiah’s life that he could not resist the impulse to speak in God’s name, no matter the consequences. Despite the difficulties of his prophetic vocation, despite attacks from enemies and misunderstandings by family and friends, despite the pain he felt in delivering such a negative message, Jeremiah hung in there. He did not quit. He did not run away. He persevered in his difficult ministry for more than 40 years.

Religious life today has often been described as prophetic. Consecrated life is both counter-cultural and open to the promptings of the Spirit. Religious men and women are called to leave behind “normal” family life and cultural norms (success, wealth, power, individualism, etc.) to become part of a communal witness to God’s kingdom. Celibacy, poverty and obedience are not the cultural norms and values of today’s society.

How does God want us to be prophetic? In what way(s) do we announce God’s Word? What are the demands that God places upon us?

Modern Christians tend to find Jeremiah fascinating. Perhaps we recognize something of ourselves in the prophet who knew such great heights and such great depths. His confessions demonstrate that Jeremiah was human, weak and sinful. He was no Superman. He certainly must have had great faith and courage to preach doom and destruction to an unresponsive nation for 40 years.

He also was weak and fragile. Jeremiah reminds us that, despite our own weaknesses and mortality, we too are sometimes called to do what seems difficult and even impossible. We are asked to do this even when we do not feel that we are worthy or capable. Obviously God did not choose the strongest, holiest or most ideal person in Israel to prophesy. God chose Jeremiah for this task for some inscrutable reason.

Jeremiah was no model of patience or forgiveness, no ideal suffering servant who accepted his prophetic vocation humbly and silently. His faith was neither serene nor unshakable. If we look in the Bible expecting only to find saints, we may be disturbed to find a David or a Jeremiah there. Not everyone can be an Elijah, breathing out fury to anyone who dared to oppose the God of Israel. In fact, one gets the impression that God prefers sinful and unworthy instruments to announce the Divine Word and to fulfill the Divine Will!

This really should not surprise us. God does not make ministry conditional upon the purging of weakness and the achieving of perfection. God calls people to serve even when they are imperfect, undeserving and sinful.

Peter acknowledged his sinfulness at his calling in Luke 5:1-11. He asked that Jesus go away. But Jesus would not go away, and he would not take Peter's "no" as a final answer. God would not take Jeremiah's "no" either.

Every person called by God is transformed by grace to accomplish his or her mission – although we should not be surprised now and then when those who are called do not measure up to their vocation.

### 3. *Pray*

*Good and gracious God,  
grant that I may follow the  
example of Jeremiah  
in my own vocation.*

*Help me to recognize your voice  
and your call  
in the people and  
circumstances around me.*

*May I accept the grace of  
your call  
even when there are  
difficulties and challenges.*

*May your Spirit guide and  
strengthen me  
when I am weak, fearful,  
and sinful.*

*Whatever you may ask me to do  
for you,  
may I, like Jeremiah, devour  
your words*

*and rejoice in your grace and strength.*

*This I ask through Christ our Lord. Amen.*



Stained glass window in the Techny Towers vestibule. (Photo by Media Director Theresa Carson)

### 4. *Contemplate*

Spend some time gratefully remembering God's love for you despite your own unworthiness and sinfulness.

### 5. *Act*

Pray for someone struggling with his or her vocation.

Offer encouragement to someone considering a religious vocation.

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