



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.

October 2017

Missionary Challenges and Joys

1. *Read*

Philippians 4:12-14, 19-20

Brothers and sisters: I know how to live in humble circumstances; I know also how to live with abundance. In every circumstance and in all things I have learned the secret of being well fed and of going hungry, of living in abundance and of being in need. I can do all things in him who strengthens me. Still, it was kind of you to share in my distress.

My God will fully supply whatever you need, in accord with his glorious riches in Christ Jesus. To our God and Father, glory forever and ever. Amen.

(Second reading of the 28th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A, October 15, 2017)

2. Meditate

“I can do all things in him who strengthens me”

Paul writes his letter to the Philippians towards the end of his missionary journeys. He is concluding his extensive missionary work in the Mediterranean and more specifically around the Aegean Sea.

According to Acts 16:9-40, Paul establishes his first Christian community on European soil on the southern coast of Macedonia in Philippi. His mission there was not easy. He could not start his preaching in a synagogue as there was none, so he went to the river bank.

He did manage to add some new believers to the fold. Lydia, a business woman who dealt in cloth, opened her heart to the Lord. A jailer and his family accepted Paul’s message after his miraculous liberation from prison.

Of course, it was a powerful exorcism of a slave girl that got Paul into prison in the first place after he was beaten with rods together with his companion Silas.

With mixed missionary successes and failures and undoubtedly with great help from the first followers of the Lord, the Christian community in Philippi was founded and seemingly prospered.

Unlike the communities of Corinth and Thessalonica, which Paul also founded on the same missionary journey, the community at Philippi did not need much correction. Paul’s letter to the Philippians appears to be more of a “thank you” letter than a letter to correct some moral or doctrinal errors as is the case with some other letters.

Paul’s letter to the Philippians is also considered as a “letter of joy.” Rejoicing in the community’s faith in Jesus Christ overshadows his own sufferings and any opposition to the faith that Paul preaches. He shares with the Christians in Philippi his own hopes, convictions, anxieties and fears expressing his total confidence in Christ.

Towards the end of his missionary endeavors Paul reflects on the various circumstances in which he lived. He makes reference to being a guest of Lydia, a prominent lady of means in Philippi: “I know how to live in abundance,” “being well fed.” He also recalls that he knows how to live in “humble circumstances” in numerous humiliations and imprisonments of which the Philippians were quite aware. (v. 12)

Paul, like every missionary, is propelled by his faith through all the circumstances of life. The oft-repeated saying, “I can do all things in him who strengthens me,” comes from verse 13 of this reading.

Our own missionary life may be likened to that of Paul. We also might go through various stages of success or failure, prosperity or want, feast or famine. Often people ask of various dangers that we may encounter as missionaries. They are not necessarily everyday dangers but something we may be exposed to from time to time.

On my first home leave, I was asked, “What are the dangers or greatest challenges you encounter in your mission in the Caribbean?” Having lived through Hurricane Hugo in 1989 during my first three years in the missions was definitely one of the biggest dangers and challenges I had faced.

Last month, some of our missionaries lived through the same type of ordeal. They faced the fury of Hurricane Harvey in Texas and Louisiana, and then Hurricanes Irma and Maria brought damage, devastation and death to many Caribbean islands and to Florida.

The northern Leeward Islands of the Caribbean, a tourist destination frequented by the rich and famous that is home to many people of modest means living in substandard housing, have become a nightmare overnight. The hurricanes reduced these islands to the terrible conditions generally associated with a Third World country: lack of food and water, no electricity and other modern amenities for months to come. A comfortable life has changed overnight into a struggle for the basics with numerous hardships and the prospect of a long rebuilding process extending to many months or even years.

As missionaries, we cannot be complacent. Rather we must live like Paul through various circumstances of life. Sometimes there is abundance, but at other times we must deal with want and need. It is a test for the people, as well as for the missionaries who serve them and have to minister to them in these difficult circumstances.

Amid total destruction, faith and hope shine forth. We hear people say: “We lost everything but thank God, we are all alive.” Facing the arduous work of rebuilding their homes and their lives, words of hope are in order. Like Paul we need to assure ourselves first and then others: “(We) can do all things in him who strengthens (us)”

Like the Philippians who sent financial help to Paul in his imprisonment, we can offer both material and spiritual help as we empathize with those who suffered in recent storms. Speaking on their behalf, we can use the words that Paul spoke: “Still, it was kind of you to share in my distress.” (v. 14)



3. Pray

A Prayer for Missionaries in Challenging Times

Lord Jesus Christ, watch over your missionaries

– priests, religious, and lay people –

who leave everything

to give testimony to your Word and your love.

In difficult moments, sustain their energies

and comfort their hearts.

Strengthen them in all that they do

and crown their work with spiritual achievements.

Let the image of you crucified on the Cross,

which accompanies them throughout life,

speak to them of heroism, generosity, love and peace.

In the times they face challenges

of natural or human-made disasters,

may God fully supply whatever they need,

in accord with his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.

To our God and Father, glory forever and ever. Amen.

4. Contemplate

Dwell a while in the love of God. Experience God's kindness and strength. Let it fill your whole being so that strengthened by God, you can return to your daily life.

5. Act

Do something concrete, however small it may be, to alleviate hardships or unexpected challenges of one of your fellow missionaries who is experiencing some kind of distress.

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