

“To whomever I send you, you shall go” (Jer 1:7)

Reflections on the GA2016 Scripture Theme

Luke’s Gospel (4:16-30) captures the day when Jesus comes to the Synagogue of Nazareth and takes up the scroll of Isaiah and begins to read (Isa 61:1):

“The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,

because the LORD has anointed me;

He has sent me to bring good news to the afflicted. . . .”

This passage then becomes the signature description of Jesus’ ministry in this Gospel, and the one which drew the attention of St. Vincent as he sought a way to describe the charism of the priests and brothers who composed the Congregation.

In seeking a description for his ministry, it seems natural for Jesus to seek among the writings of the major prophets. One can wonder what would have happened if Jesus was handed the scroll of Jeremiah or that of Ezekiel, what passage would he have read? In Jeremiah, perhaps the Temple Sermon would have attracted Jesus’ attention as it calls people to repentance (26:1-15), or perhaps Jeremiah’s reflection on the necessity to proclaim the word of God without compromise (20:8-9; cf. 15:16). In Ezekiel, perhaps he would have chosen the vision of the dry bones as the prophet emphasizes the power of God’s word/spirit to bring forth life as it is proclaimed by God’s agent (37:1-14). In each of these prophets, one can find numerous passages which embrace the direction of Jesus’ ministry, and, consequently, the call of the Congregation as Vincent would have interpreted it. One begins to appreciate more profoundly the prophetic character of Jesus’ proclamation and that of a missionary.

Aside from the powerful passages in action which one could identify in the prophets, one can also seek enlightenment in the vocation story, the commissioning, of each of them. Each major prophet of the Old Testament—Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel—records this event. Each has a different context for his calling, but what they all have in common is a summons to be “sent” and to be armed with the Word of the Lord. There is always a reason not to speak which is followed by an empowerment to speak. Isaiah proclaims

himself a man of unclean lips living among a people of unclean lips, and the Lord has an angel touch his lips with an ember to purify them (Isa 6:5-7). Jeremiah says that he is too young, and the Lord touches his mouth to give him words (Jer 1:6-9). Ezekiel is repeatedly told not to be afraid of the people or of the situations, and the Lord gives him the scroll to eat (Ezek 2:6-3:4). In each story, the prophet is always gifted with the Word of God, and so he is commanded to speak.

Empowered with the Word of God, the prophet is then “sent”—we might say made a “missionary” for his people. When the Lord God looks about to seek whom he shall authorize to proclaim his message, Isaiah speaks up:

Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?” “Here I am,” I said; “send me!” And [the Lord] replied: “Go and say to this people” (Isa 6:8-9)

As Ezekiel sees the heavenly vision, the Lord commissions him:

The voice said to me: “Son of man, stand up! I wish to speak to you.” As he spoke to me, the spirit entered into me and set me on my feet, and I heard the one who was speaking say to me: “Son of man, I am sending you to the Israelites. . . —to them I am sending you. You shall say to them: ‘Thus says the Lord GOD’.” (Ezek 1-3, 4)

And, Jeremiah, despite the protestations of his youth, cannot avoid the force of the summons to be the one who carries the Lord’s word:

*But the LORD answered me, . . .
“To whomever I send you, you shall go;
whatever I command you, you shall speak.” (Jer 1:7)*

It is the prophet Jeremiah and this last statement (“*To whomever I send you, you shall go*”) which we have decided will exemplify the Scriptural expression for our General Assembly motto: “*Let us allow ourselves to be renewed by the missionary vitality of our Vincentian vocation.*” We shall seek to learn from Jeremiah the particular lessons which he has to teach regarding mission and vitality. We can imagine the ways in which the Lord Jesus meditated upon the witness of this prophet, and the lessons which this reflection teaches us. In other presentations, other aspects of our theme will receive treatment.

The global statement of identity which colors all the other elements is that we are missionaries who proclaim God's word and God's vision of the future. As Vincentians, it is important for us to understand and accept this truth. It is one which all of us continue to need to ponder. The current focus of the Church on the "New Evangelization" can help in this analysis. That is our starting point: I am a missionary of the word—what does that mean for me as a confrere in the Church today.

In the presentation above, three elements were intended to emerge with regard to our charism and the Jeremiah passage: first of all, the prophetic character of our calling; secondly, the empowerment of the Word of God; and thirdly, the dynamics of being sent, of carrying out the ministry of an apostle. The remainder of this presentation will focus on these elements and particularly as Jeremiah tutors us along these lines.

1) The Missionary as Prophet: A boldness of presence

*Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
before you were born I dedicated you,
a prophet to the nations I appointed you. (Jer 1:5)*

No scriptural figures were more embedded in their own time than the prophets. That was the very nature of their calling. They were summoned by the Lord God to take a look at the world around them and to see where the needs of people were most devalued and cast aside, and then they were to speak out with clarity and boldness. Everything about the prophet spoke this message: his clothes, his food, his words, his actions. The prophet enfolded his message in a way that no other figure did or could. Jeremiah hears the call to be one of these powerful figures. He is sent by the Lord:

*"To uproot and to tear down,
to destroy and to demolish,
to build and to plant." (Jer 1:10)*

The Lord reminds him:

*"I am the one who today
makes you a fortified city,
A pillar of iron, a wall of bronze,*

against the whole land.” (Jer 1:18)

The message of the prophet is that which needs to be said—offering consolation as well as challenge, forgiveness as well as a call to repentance. And he is to carry out this ministry with courage and energy. These elements need to characterize the heart of a missionary.

The words of the prophet which call someone or a society or oneself to change and be converted rest close to the center of the Vincentian charism and the mission. In the midst of this proclamation and witness, we present the good news.

2) The Missionary as Preacher—The Word of God

The necessity for a missionary, like a prophet, to be filled with the word of God is primary. This, of course, happens in at least two ways: hearing and speaking. First of all, the missionary needs to have heard God’s word with clarity. The Word of God needs to be our primary text because it is our clearest and most explicit connection to Jesus. No other writing comes close to offering this intimacy. We know how Vincent speaks about the need for confreres to study and reflect upon God’s word. We know how he uses the example of Jesus culled from the Scriptures as the models for action and decision in our Common Rules.

Then the missionary must speak. There are two parts to the commission which the Lord gives to Jeremiah. We have highlighted the first half, but the second is joined to it in spirit as well as intent as the Lord gives this charge to the prophet:

“To whomever I send you, you shall go;

whatever I command you, you shall speak.”

The missionary, as the prophet, is directed to speak the word of God. Sometimes this proclamation is a daunting task, and the servant of the Lord can be discouraged. Jeremiah knew this truth:

*Whenever I speak, I must cry out,
violence and outrage I proclaim;
The word of the LORD has brought me
reproach and derision all day long.
I say I will not mention him,
I will no longer speak in his name.
But then it is as if fire is burning in my heart,
imprisoned in my bones;*

I grow weary holding back,

I cannot. (Jer 20:8-9)

Called to speak the word of God, the prophet as missionary, must do so because, in its best form, this word has become a fire within. One must cast the flame forth or be consumed by it. This message is a confirmation of the missionary's knowledge of the Lord:

Because he dispensed justice to the weak and the poor,

he prospered.

Is this not to know me?—

oracle of the LORD. (Jer 22:16)

3) The Missionary as Apostle: Obedience in being sent

The nature of a missionary is, of course, to be sent. We should be attentive to what that needs to mean for us. The response to the Vincentian vocation is not simply charity or generosity, but obedience. Having been called to this way of life and accepted the summons, we are then sent and our response must be characterized by an attentive compliance of mind and heart as well as body. Where we are sent and what is asked of us are not (totally) within our power. This element is clear in the commissioning of the prophets as well as the life of Jesus who always recognizes his being sent by the Father and who responds with obedience.

In the context of the "new evangelization," the being sent does not necessarily involve our being transplanted from one country to another, but an embracing of the missionary attitude. We are always "sent" to those whom we serve and thus our attitude is not simply maintenance, but growth and challenge. We proclaim the Gospel as if for the first time, as if we were speaking to people who had never heard it before, or at least heard it well. We emphasize that which is most basic and important about our faith. This is not to say that we speak or teach as if we were dealing with children—many of those in our communities may be better educated than we—but it is to recognize that sometimes the essentials of our faith and practice are not as clearly perceived as they might be. An intelligent, respectful, thoughtful proclamation of our faith can be appreciated by everyone and provides a true evangelization.

We note how Vincent was eager to send the early confreres forth on mission and how they were to speak about what was most important and fundamental. That continues to be good advice for the missions which we continue to carry forth.

And, we are always sent to the poor in some fashion. Sometimes, we have the privilege of dealing directly with those who have great needs. We take advantage of this opportunity with joy and desire. Sometimes, our mission may bring us to places where the poor are less evident; in these situations, the needs of the poor must always be in our heart and on our lips. Vincent was most effective in organizing and sensitizing others to the stories of the marginalized. He did more through the ministrations of others than he could possibly do himself. When we are sent to these situations, our Vincentian vocation, our call to be prophets, continues to be primary and needs to be evident.

CONCLUSION:

A reflection upon other passages from the Scriptures which Jesus might have used to characterize his ministry is a useful and suggestive exercise. To seek those citations within the writings of the prophets offers a particular invitation to reflect upon his work of being sent, of proclaiming God's word, and of doing so with originality and boldness. The prophet did not simply speak God's message, he lived it and its consequences. Jesus brings that role to completion.

Vincent invites us to follow the modeling of Jesus in our ministry. As we prepare for our Assembly, we can reflect with them upon the missionary vocation of Jeremiah:

*“To whomever I send you, you shall go;
whatever I command you, you shall speak.” (Jer 1:7)*