

# Chosen, Called, Commissioned

Clergy Conference 2025

## Commissioned

Keynote: Bishop Howard Gregory

Allow me to use the opportunity to express our greetings from the people of the Diocese of Jamaica and the Cayman Islands. I do so on behalf of the Bishop-elect present, being the retired Bishop myself. Our brothers and sisters share their good wishes for you as a diocese and as you share in this clergy conference.

I would like to express thanks to Bishop Steven Croft for the invitation to share in this clergy conference and for the part he has played in charting the course for this new partnership between the Diocese of Oxford and Jamaica and the Cayman Islands.

I'd also like to those who have already supported the initiative and are committed to pursuing this relationship guided by the Holy Spirit. Let us pray.

Almighty God, in every age you have called men and women to be your faithful servants. We believe you have now called us to join that great company who seek to follow you. Grant unto us today and always a clear vision of your call and strength to fulfill the ministry assigned to us. For we pray in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord.

In the book, Emotional Intelligence for Religious Leaders, the authors West, Oswald, and Guzman speak of the concept of calling in this way.

'Religious leaders have a unique understanding of what it feels like to have a calling from God. Calling is a phenomenal experience by those who feel an intense, persistent, divinely inspired compulsion to live in service to others as their long-term profession. It is defined as the unmistakable conviction an individual possesses that God wants him or her, to do a specific task.'

End of quote. The biblical narrative indicates that God has called and commissioned men and women with a similar aura of mystery as evidenced in the life of Abraham, Moses, Joshua, the prophets in the Old Testament.

And in the New Testament, in the Annunciation to the Blessed Virgin Mary, the call of Jesus to his disciples, and the Great Commission of Matthew 28, all characterised in one way or another by the threefold theme of this conference, Chosen, Called, Commissioned.

It is difficult to make a selection of a single text or individual that captures the entire range, depth and scope of God's call and commissioning of persons and the call and commission by our Lord Jesus Christ.

Additionally, it is difficult to separate the various dimensions of the themes for this conference as they all intertwine in the lived experience of those who are chosen, called, and commissioned. In

this address, I will approach commissioning as the authorisation and empowerment for the execution of specific acts and duties by the divine one. And in the context of the conference theme, focus on the commissioning of those called to ordained ministry and approved by the Church as the institutional source of authority and empowerment and the faithful exercise of that as a manifestation of vocational faithfulness and integrity.

Perhaps as a reflection of my Global South orientation, and for ease of engagement of the subject, I shall reference the call and commissioning of the prophet Jeremiah, while taking note of other biblical figures who were likewise recipients of God's call and commission, as it captures many of the features which are present in the call and commissioning to a variety of roles and ministries.

In Jeremiah chapter 1, the call comes to Jeremiah in an apparently unusual manner, that is, predating his birth. 'Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you. And before you were born, I consecrated you. I appointed you a prophet to the nations.' So God has been intimately involved in scripting his life in terms of call and commission in ways which preceded his sense of consciousness as a person.

So Jeremiah in the moment of awareness of his call and commissioning seeks to claim his independence and to argue his way out of it. Jeremiah draws on his arsenal of excuses. 'I do not know how to speak. I am only a boy.'

Jeremiah's response is not unlike the response of Moses, who advanced his lack of eloquence and slow stammering speech as reasons for rejecting his call and commissioning to the leadership for

the liberation of the children of Israel from bondage in Egypt, or Mary's response to the angel announcing the birth of Jesus, who gives expression to the sense of not being the right person for the mission to which he was being called. 'How can this be since I'm a virgin?'

As a gathering of the ordained, called, and chosen, and commissioned, I assume that we have all had that kind of dialogue. Perhaps no argument with God. Given the reality of the call and commissioning by God, may even now, at this point in our life, be entering into another chapter in our relationship with God in Jesus Christ. The call of Jeremiah to be a prophet is presented as a confrontation and dialogue with God, which proceeds through several stages.

And here I will make some assumptions which may not be in sync with biblical scholarships in a centre like Oxford.

There is a stage of being chosen. That is when God identifies or fingers the individual. 'This is the one.' There is a call when God communicates with the individual indicating the nature of the mission to which one is being called and to be commissioned.

This is the point at which the one being called first responds, usually with all kinds of disclaimers, expressions of unworthiness, and that God should look elsewhere. The commissioning comes when God speaks in response. It does not mean that the resistance or conflict is resolved, but God offers assurances, bestowing authority, and power.

And so ultimately, it is not the resolution of the unworthiness preoccupation that drives the execution of the commission, as in the case of Jeremiah, but it is the faithfulness of God to God's assurances and the pursuit of the commission with a sense of integrity.

In the case of Jeremiah, the commission is clear and direct from the very outset. 'Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, and before you were born, I consecrated you. I appointed you a prophet to the nations.' And this is followed by a symbolic reinforcement of the commission. So we read.

'Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth. And the Lord said to me, 'Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.'

And then follows the directive to put into action the commission accompanied by assurances. That phrase which Bishop Steven's mentioned, 'Get up.'

'But you, gird up your loins, stand up and tell them everything that I command you. Do not break down before them or I will break you before them. And I for my part have made you today a fortified city, an iron pillar, and a bronze wall against the whole land, against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests, and the people of the land. They will fight against you, but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you,' says the Lord.'

The commission becomes the basis for the authority exercised by the messenger of God. And hence that word, thus said the Lord.

But the call with the attendance sense of authority does not stand alone. Bishop Steven pointed out this morning the symbolic giving of authority to the ordained with that scripture, that Bible. The authority must be manifested in appropriate behaviour, attitude, and character on the part of the messenger in terms of appropriate relationships, words and actions driven by a strong sense of dependence upon God's guidance and enabling through the activity of the Holy Spirit. St. Paul is very clear about this threat to integrity and holiness in the exercise of this authority. As he remind us, 'we have this treasure in clay jars.'

So that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. Reflection on what it means for one to be chosen, called, and commissioned by God is often couched in the language of activity. However, because our God is personal, the call of God is a call to relationship.

What may have been evident to Jeremiah from the outset is that the call and commissioning by God marks venturing into a relationship that is personal and intimate and which is experienced as awesome and intimidating. Recalling for us the experience of the psalmist in Psalm 139, who finds the intimate and pre-existing knowledge and relationship with God overwhelming and so declares, such knowledge is too wonderful for me. It is so high that I cannot attain it. Where can I go from your spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?

Nevertheless, this relationship is complicated and fraught with conflict and or pain, whether the pain of the Blessed Virgin Mary or the countless manifestations of suffering which St. Paul recounts as part of his experience of faithfulness to his commission. Faithfulness to the commission remains as the constant in these diverse cases, as we shall see in Jeremiah chapter 7- 20, verses 7 to 12, where he accuses God of having deceived him. God did not disclose to him at the outset the challenges inherent in faithful exercise of the commission.

And yet, while Jeremiah laments the reality of his situation, he is deeply aware of the urgency of the imperative to discharge the commission, and which does not allow him to be silent, and so he describes it as fire in my bones. At the same time, he expresses his hope and confidence in God.

As it were, the counterpoint to the most challenging moments in ministry when we feel most down and isolated.

What does it mean to be commissioned by God in Jesus Christ in today's national and Global context? Unquestionably, the clergy of today are not dealing with the same issues or mission as those of 50 years ago. As one from the Global South, whose diocese has embarked on a relationship with this diocese, I believe that the element of commission may be seen through different lenses and may have something to say about how this developing relationship may be conceived and pursued.

One of the things of which we cannot be unmindful is that there was an institutional religious establishment at the time of Jeremiah's call, without concern with the temple, the religious functionaries, the

rituals, the attendant codes and laws, the obligations for the maintenance of the institutional fabric, and no doubt characterised by cultural accommodation to the status quo of the day, not unlike the church as we know it today. Truth is that all was not well in the religious establishment.

The religious establishment was in a state of malay complacency and compromise in its relationship to the leadership of the community of faith and the nation. It was Jeremiah's mission to confront and to engage the leadership of the nation and its religious establishment and the nation as a whole.

This puts him in a critical position of being of the community of faith and a fellow citizen, and yet having to take a critical stance over against these communities and systems.

So what does it mean to be a prophet in this kind of context? The prophetic tradition as it emerged in the time of Jeremiah, as one commentator points out, is one in which the prophet would make pronouncements in the name of God regarding the punishment of Israel for its sins and infidelity, the political situation, the compromising expressions of their religious faith and practice, social injustices, the oppression of the poor by the wealthy and the powerful, and a predictive element which pointed to consequences in the future for inaction and moral and religious realignment.

It should not surprise us that this understanding of prophecy developed during the period of settled living in Israel, urbanisation, the establishment of kingship, the emergence of economic prosperity for some, the emergence of a ruling class, and alliances of various



institutions, administrative, military, and religious to create the operative status quo. Somehow there seems to be something very familiar about these dynamics when we look at the church, and our nations from a national, regional, and global perspective today. It is into this kind of context that Jeremiah is being commissioned to be the prophet for the moment. In the mission to which Jeremiah is being called, there is the implicit mandate to engage and challenge the claim to power and truth implicit in the status quo, because he not only goes with authority, but is empowered by God for the mission. The enormity of the task is spelled out further.

So God says, 'See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and plant.'

This is not a call to preoccupation with the religious liturgy, ritual, matters confined to that space called the spiritual or the temple and its maintenance. The call and mission entrusted to Jeremiah is to engage, to challenge, to confront rulers, institutions, power structures, and the assumptions and values which underlay their *modus operandi*.

The prophetic voice is not a voice of perfection, neither is it a voice of morality. It involves advocacy and education, hospitality for victims. At times, it may involve the mobilisation of people in the face of social injustice or violation of the created order, the environment, all of which are consistent today with our five marks of mission.

Drawing on insights from the work of American theologian Richard John Neuhaus, several Caribbean theologians have argued that the

public square today is morally empty. While speaking of the Jamaican context, the global picture nevertheless seems not very different.

They have argued that the public square ought to be occupied by competing moral visions of faith, non-faith, or other faiths.

What is transpiring today in Palestine, Ukraine, the global inhospitality towards displaced peoples, refugees, and migrants, and the current national and global action of the administration of the United States, are evidence of a dearth of moral discourse and clarity. Likewise, the pressing issues of social and economic inequities, poverty, war, the call for climate justice, racial justice, and reparations are issues which are before us and which we cannot wish away. As people from the Global South and as part of our worldwide fellowship as Anglicans, we must engage questions with global ramifications.

I was interested that one of these youngsters and students in the group yesterday said that the church is the first social media, the way it spread through the world. And perhaps the Anglican communion is part of that movement. So we must ask our question, and we ask these questions from the South in doing our theological and biblical reflection.

Why are the images of poverty underdevelopment and political and national corruption representations of the reality of life in the Global South? Why is it anathema to deny the Holocaust, but inappropriate to have a discussion of black slave experience that extended over 300 years?

Has the final chapter concerning the rights and very existence of indigenous peoples across the world already been written? Why are so many wars being fought across the world in underdeveloped nations, rich, very rich in natural resources, and wars being fought with weapons they do not produce?

At same time, we cannot compartmentalise our faith and see our commissioners want to proclaim and defend the faith within narrow and self-serving political and cultural boundaries, as is manifested by significant sections of the evangelical community in the United States.

The faith of persons and communities must be more compellingly related to the public arena if justice, equality, and democracy are to be preserved. Paying careful attention to the text, you will see that the outcome of the exercise of prophetic calling of Jeremiah is ultimately that of a creative and transformed reality for the kingdom. So the prophet is to pluck up and pull down to destroy and overthrow, but ultimately to build.

So Jeremiah as his commission is faithfully pursued is not the enemy. Notwithstanding the labels that have been placed on him, the threats to his life, the exclusion which he faces from the religious cultus and those who make up the status quo. He is ultimately for the good of the nation, the good for the people.

And so later he becomes the herald of hope for a despairing and hopeless nation that finds itself in exile because of the bad choices that have been made by leaders and people alike.

I propose that our world today yearns to hear a word of hope in the midst of all that seems hopeless and despairing.

However, we may each understand what it means to be chosen, called, and commissioned. May this time of study and reflection, this time at this clergy conference relating together, sharing in a common ministry, become for you, each one of us, a moment when we encounter God afresh, and the ministry to which we have been commissioned, even as God in Jesus Christ assures each one of you, each one of us, as he did for Jeremiah, 'They will fight against you, but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you,' says the Lord, 'to deliver you.'