

21ST SUNDAY in ORDINARY TIME, CYCLE A

Isaiah 22: 19-23; Psalm 138; Romans 11: 33-36; Matthew 16: 13-20

Holy Spirit Church: August 23, 2020

Shebna is master of the palace in Jerusalem, and he makes his authority felt. He has far-reaching authority over the king's household and the king's possessions. Shebna abuses this power by taking advantage of the perks of power, like the royal chariots, for his own personal use. He even makes a beautiful carved tomb for himself (Isaiah 22: 16-18).

God lifts up Eliakim to supplant Shebna. Eliakim will exercise authority with fatherly compassion and care, not with self-promotion, domination, and greed. Eliakim imitates the way God makes use of authority by serving His people, not by lording it over them.

This small snippet from the prophet Isaiah reveals how God wants leaders to exercise their power.

God does not want leaders to do so by lording their authority over others and making their importance felt but rather through self-sacrificing service. (Matthew 20: 25-26)

Keys are given not to lock away the treasures of the kingdom and hoard them, but to open the gates that all might enter in and experience the riches God has in store for them.

It is with this kind of understanding of leadership that Jesus chooses Peter to lead the early church and gives him the keys to the kingdom of heaven, symbol of his authority.

Peter is to lead following the example of Christ Jesus, the Son of the Living God, who came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

That is why Peter is called the "rock," the foundation of the church. Instead of being "over" others, he is to be "under" them, even to kneel down and wash their feet.

His position of leadership does not mean Peter is raised above others, but that he would be beneath them to support them.

Jesus also chooses Peter because Jesus knows how much Peter relies on His mercy.

Peter's weakness and his sinfulness means he is constantly turning to Jesus for mercy. Like the Canaanite woman of great faith, Peter cries out constantly: "Lord, have mercy on me."

Before his profession of faith in Jesus as the Son of the Living God, Peter sinks like a rock while walking on the water toward Jesus, crying out, "Lord, save me." Immediately Jesus stretches out his hand to save Peter, so Peter knows he cannot save himself, he does not have that kind of power. He needs a Savior.

After Peter's profession of faith in Jesus as the Son of the Living God, when Jesus lays out what it means to be the Christ, to be anointed and chosen by God, that it will mean suffering and death on the cross, Peter reprimands Jesus. Peter is strongly rebuked by Jesus, who says, "Get behind me, Satan, you are not thinking as God does but as human beings do." Peter, as leader, has to figure out what that difference in thinking is by living in humility.

Of course, the most famous example of Peter's need for the saving compassion of God in Christ is when he denies knowing Jesus, the night before Jesus before he is crucified. Peter crumbles under the interrogation of a servant girl, who rightly identifies Peter as one of Jesus' companions. Peter three times denies knowing Jesus in order to save his skin.

Peter, aware of his own weakness, as leader of the early Church can have compassion on the weaknesses of others. Peter, painfully aware of his own sin but even more aware of the Lord's mercy toward him, can be merciful toward the sinful people he leads.

The modern-day successor to Peter, Pope Francis, leads with this kind of authority. He does not make his importance felt but rather lives in a simple room in a hotel. He does not lord his authority over others, but kneels to wash the feet of juvenile offenders.

When he was selected as Pope some 7 years ago, he asked by a reporter, "Who is Jorge Bergoglio?" His reply: "I am a sinner in need of God's mercy." Thus, Pope Francis associate himself with Peter, and he unites himself with the people he leads, who are all broken by sin and in need of God's saving mercy.

In his homily at his installation Mass as the newly chosen Pope, Francis said: “Let us never forget that authentic power is service, and that the pope, too, when exercising power, must enter ever more fully into that service which has its radiant culmination on the cross.”

Pope Francis’ association with sinners and the outcasts of society, like Jesus, is a threat to those who hold power and use it only for their own advancement. His servant leadership threatens those in the Vatican who are power hungry and want to hold onto power at all costs.

His model of Church as a field hospital, as existing to care specifically for those wounded on the battlefield of life, threatens priests and bishops who feel their perks of power threatened, who want to remain safe and secluded from the world’s pain.

Pope Francis is a strong voice for the voiceless, speaking out on behalf of the millions and millions of people who struggle to survive on less than \$1 a day, shaking up those who have and hoard so much of the world’s goods and only want to have more and more. Our pope desires a church that is poor and for the poor.

As Pope Francis gives voice to Creation, which is silently crying out because of the abuse suffered at the hands of heedless humans, he rattles those whose only concern is to plunder the earth for more and more riches.

As it is for any father who cares deeply for his children, our Holy Father continues to challenge us to do the right thing, to show by our actions that we are sons and daughters of the living God.

So he challenges those who hold power to use their power in service of the least ones.

He challenges those who are privileged, and that includes you and me, reminding us that the only reason we have privilege is not for our own use but to care for our brothers and sisters who are hurting.

Fr. Joseph A. Jacobi