

Fr. Nick Dant's Homily, Saint Matthew Catholic Church, Indianapolis
Twenty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time, Aug. 22-23, 2020, Cycle A

Our scriptures this weekend, especially the Old Testament passage from Isaiah and the gospel passage from Matthew, afford us an opportunity to reflect on the nature of leadership for those who call themselves followers of God. Christians especially, who claim to follow a person who proclaims himself to be the Good Shepherd, need to reflect from time to time on how Jesus defines leadership.

In the Old Testament passage from Isaiah, God proclaims He will pull down Shebna from his position as the Master of the Davidic Royal household, because Shebna has been a dishonest and unjust leader. God will replace Shebna with Eliakim, and God calls on Eliakim, to be a true father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and the house of Judah. As a true father, God will place the "key of the House of David on Eliakim's shoulder; when he opens, no one shall shut, when he shuts, no one shall open."

In the Gospel passage, Jesus also calls Peter to servant leadership of the household of faith. Jesus calls on Peter to be the Rock on which the Christian Community can always depend – a sure and solid foundation. Peter is to be an impregnable fortress, protector of the flock, and the one through whom all could gain access to the graces of God. Jesus says: "You are Peter (Petros, Cephas) and upon this rock I will build my church (ecclesia), and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it. Whatever you bind on earth; shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." To our ears, on first hearing, it sounds like Jesus is granting Peter unimaginable power and authority, but it is not a leadership of power that Jesus is calling Peter to or Jesus is calling any ordained leader of the flock to.

In the very next scene in Matthew's gospel, Jesus defines exactly what leadership for the Messiah (who Peter claims Jesus to be) means, and what leadership means for those who are called upon to follow this Messiah. Jesus says, "he must go to Jerusalem and suffer greatly from the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and he be killed and on the third be raised." And we all know how Peter reacted to the idea of a Messiah who lays down his life. But Jesus tells Peter and all the disciples, "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me." Jesus is saying, He calls his followers to a leadership of service, where they lay down their lives for the sake of others. Those in authority are first and foremost to lead with love and by example, to be solid rocks for the flock – true anchors of faith upon which the household of faith can depend on, in both good times and bad.

Up until 1963 when the man elected was installed as Pope, the papal master of ceremonies would pass before the Pope-to-be with a smoldering reed three times proclaiming as the reed burned away, "Sancte Pater, Sic transit Gloria mundi." "Holy Father, thus passes the glory of the world," reminding the Pope worldly glory is transitory, and he is called to an authority of service, and to walk in the footsteps of the master. Maybe we should perform this smoldering reed ceremony for all who take upon themselves positions of leadership.