

August 23, 2020 | 21st Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)

[IS 22:19-23](#)

[PS 138:1-3, 6, 8](#)

[ROM 11:33-36](#)

[MT 16:13-20](#)

By Dianne Bergant, CSA

We are in the middle of summer, trapped in our homes in fear of a viral enemy we cannot even see. In such a situation, what do the Sunday the readings place before us for our reflection? The theme of leadership! Hardly a comforting idea. Under the circumstances, this is actually an explosive theme. Everywhere you turn there are discussions or arguments about leadership, whether mayoral, gubernatorial, or national. Everyone has something to say about the effectiveness of our leaders or their abysmal performances in the face of multiple crises. We might feel that there is nothing we can do about it, and we are fed up thinking about it. But then, what are we to do with the readings.

Both the first reading and the gospel passage speak about leadership. However, the leadership of which they speak is not the result of an election; it is not the prize of victory over others. In both readings, leadership stems from having been chosen by God and the authority such leadership exercises is characterized in the passage from Isaiah by three rather interesting metaphors: father, key, and tent peg

Probably the most prominent and best-known metaphor in these passages is 'key.' Who has not heard of the keys of the kingdom? However, contrary to common understanding, in neither passage does this metaphor suggest that some people are warmly admitted to the kingdom while others are locked out. Rather, both passages indicate that the key symbolizes authority in governance. The kind of leadership sketched in the first reading is enhanced by the metaphor 'father.' The father was the head of the ancient household. Such a household consisted of several generations of blood kin as well as household servants and slaves who were probably the spoils of war. The last metaphor is 'peg.' Just as a tent peg holds the tent in place, so the good leader – the father - guarantees the stability of the household. These metaphors tell us that the leadership sketched in these readings is certainly structural yet familial in nature and characterized as governance over diverse people of various ethnic backgrounds, social standings, and often religious beliefs.

The gospel is clearly speaking about the reign of God, not some political drama like the one that unfolds before us on the evening news. It is a way of living that is more like a household than it is a structure of government. One of the most fundamental yet striking characteristics of this household is its inclusivity which is captured in Paul's Letter to the Galatians: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female." In other words, while there surely are such distinctions, they do not mark ethnic, social, or gender privilege.

If this respect for genuine diversity is a characteristic of the household of God, then it is clear that the head of the household, the one who stands in the place of the father, is responsible for ensuring respect for such diversity. Furthermore, the leader's governance consists in working toward the common good. The key that was bestowed on the chosen leader acts as a reminder that the decisions made must provide opportunities for all members to enjoy and to benefit from that common good.

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