

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time

Psalm 138 is a peaceful prayer of thanksgiving, one you could use any time you want to express your gratitude to God. It's one of the psalms recommended for blessing food on Thanksgiving Day each year. It includes lovely verses such as these: "I thank you, Lord, with all my heart; you have heard the words of my mouth.... I give thanks to your name for your merciful love and your faithfulness. On the day I called, you answered me."

Today we sang the last verse of that psalm as our refrain, "Lord, your love is eternal; do not forsake the work of your hands." After all of the thanksgiving, the psalm tells God at the end, "You're not done yet. You have taken care of us so far; we are grateful for that, but we are begging you not to forget to help us again because not everything is going well right now, and you love is eternal."

We sing these words today because of a not so peaceful circumstance in today's first reading. Through the prophet Isaiah we learn that God has not been happy with Shebna, the master of the palace. We don't know what Shebna did to earn God's wrath, but you can hear the Lord yelling at him through the prophet: "I will thrust you from your office and pull you down from your station.... I will summon my servant Eliakim... I will clothe him with your robe, and gird him with your sash, and give over to him your authority." If you ever get unhappy with someone in authority in government, at work, or at school, you would probably applaud to hear God speak similar words to relieve the burden you feel.

That's the situation for which the lectionary gives us these words to sing today: "Lord, your love is eternal; do not forsake the work of your hands." God fashioned us and loves us forever. The last verse of Psalm 138 holds God to some accountability: Do not forsake us. We need good leaders.

Americans commonly get angry at our leaders, and we even expect candidates for office to get angry with one another. We say we'd like civil, thoughtful conversation about issues that divide us, but we frequently complain and criticize instead, rarely acknowledging the thanks we owe even to people with whom we disagree. It's just easier to get angry and be done with it.

Well, each of us holds positions of responsibility, and though we may not be aware of it, there are probably people angry with us, who are praying that, as the Lord did with Shebna, God would thrust us from office, pull us down from our station, and hand over our authority to someone else.

All these thoughts circulate through the readings today because progressing through the gospel of Matthew this summer, we have come to the point when Jesus appoints Peter as a leader. As the Lord promised the people of Isaiah's day that he would fix the new leader "like a peg in a sure spot," so Peter would be the rock upon which the Lord would build his Church.

When we hold positions of authority in families, at work, or in society, we sometimes feel called by God. If so, we need to act like it— staying in touch with what God wills, being faithful to what God demands, and carrying it out with firm resolve. Our society needs virtuous leaders in whom we place our trust. When we are that leader, we represent the eternal love of the Lord. We are to be the answer to the prayers of those who ask God not to forsake the work of his hands.