

Dear congregation!

How is it possible to live with courage and hope these days, and within societal structures over which we have little or no control? What is the ground of hope from which we as Christians may be encouraged when our situation has become oppressive and our very lives and our faith is in danger? What is the measure of the integrity of our relationships with one another and within the larger structures of family, church, work, and citizenship?

The name of this second Sunday after Easter is called “the Good Shepherd: Yes, we need a Good Shepherd, someone to lead and guide, someone to trust and follow, someone to care and nurture us.

That is why we have come today... And today we are guided by words from the first letter of Peter, chapter 5:1-4

*Now as an elder myself and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as one who shares in the glory to be revealed, I exhort the elders among you to tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it – not for sordid gain but eagerly. Do not lord it over those in your charge but be examples to the flock. And when the chief shepherd appears, you will win the crown of glory that never fades away. In the same way, you who are younger must accept the authority of the elders. And all of you must clothe yourselves with humility in your dealings with one another, for ‘God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble’.*

Prayer: Shepherd and Lord of our lives, we pray that you bless your Word to us in such a way that we find the comfort and the guidance we need for our life in faith with you. Amen.

Dear congregation, inevitably we all have dealings with ‘shepherds’ in our daily lives, in one form or another. It begins in our families, with those who have leading roles, and authority figures who have a say over what we do

and how we do it. Many of us are in a position where we have to function as a ‘shepherd’ for others, – for our children, our pupils, students, or colleagues.

Each one of us could probably draw a picture of an image of a shepherd before our mind's eye, and the picture may also be accompanied by certain feelings, either positive or negative, depending on our experiences of shepherds, the types of people who took a leading role in our personal and public lives, and especially how they were leading.

Our sermon text also deals with power relations as they do occur in every place where people live and work together. That includes the place where Christians come together as a congregation. There are shepherds, and there are sheep. In our day and age of democracy and equal rights this is a picture that may not be acceptable any more for many. Sometimes the word shepherd also brings negative connotations of strong willed leaders with the staff, leading the less strong willed, more timid followers. This text in 1 Peter can neither be rightly understood nor be accepted by us as its hearers, if it is misconceived in this way. Because, isn't it really so, that in fact we are all shepherds, one to another. That is exactly what the writer of the first letter of Peter really means: We are all shepherds and preachers for another, one for the other. And nobody stands over anybody else, whether we are pastor, elder or member. Because there are situations where one person leads, comforts and guides another – and a short time after, it can happen that that same person is in need of guidance and comfort themselves. That is why it is important to remain humble, because none of us can be strong all of the time. There is one thing that binds us all together as laity and professionals: our sufferings. And because of that we all need each other. And to be a sheep in a flock is what it means to be sheltered and cared for. All on our own we would perish as Christians in a hostile world. We need each other. And where two or three are gathered in His name, there the Lord, the chief shepherd is amongst us.

Perhaps another helpful way to approach this image of 'shepherd' could be to look at the essentially fundamental aspect concerning the meaning of the word. The picture of the shepherd we are presented with in various scriptural passages, is drawn from the culture of the middle-East and differs quite substantially from our South African perception. According to mid-eastern practice, the shepherd goes out ahead of his sheep and physically leads them to nourishing pastures. The means by which he persuades his sheep to follow him, is by his voice alone. The stick, or staff that he carries with him, he uses to defend and protect the sheep from wild animals, not to hit them. He knows every sheep by name and calls it continually to follow him. These shepherds also did not need dogs to charge after the sheep barking and biting their heels to make them go in a certain direction. The loving voice and loving concern of this shepherd reaches out to each and every one of his sheep and is what lures the sheep to follow him. He also goes after the one lost sheep to save it and bring it back into his loving arms and to the rest of the fold. He goes with them and familiarizes them with His tender voice. And David, being a very capable shepherd himself, recognizes God as his own True and Good Shepherd, as his "soul" (sole) Provider in every need.

As a matter of fact, the true meaning of the word 'shepherd' can only be fulfilled in the One True Good Shepherd – the Shepherd of our souls. Through Christ God came to be among us, to familiarize us with His tender, loving voice. He came to be our True Good Shepherd, yours and mine, guiding and nourishing us, day in and day out. Not as an authority figure we timidly and fearfully have to stand under, but the prime example of a humble, tender, good and faithful shepherd. The kind of person in which we are encouraged to recognize the good and faithful person we are meant to be, and also can be. Peter experienced this first-hand when Christ rehabilitated him after failing miserably by three times denying to even know Jesus. A few

chapters earlier in John, self-assured and over-confident Peter said to Jesus that he was prepared to die with him. Maybe Peter thought he could prove himself to be a hero, an ironman. Perhaps that is the very reason why many men and women are doing the ironman in our city today. They have a need to prove something to themselves and others. It could also be about self-realization, the self-made man or women proving to the self and to others that we are worthy of something great and extraordinary. The other day when I had coffee with a friend at the beachfront we saw a man wearing a T-shirt with the words, "No room for losers" written on it. No room for losers! Indeed, that is the message of our performance-driven world today, isn't it? Peter soon found out that Jesus needs neither heroes nor performers. He also found out that what he really needs is not to prove himself to himself and others, but the grace of God that calls him back and reinstates him in His service despite his miserable failures. God's call is that which remains throughout all our trials and deep, dark valleys where the shadow of failure and death threatens to suck us in. God's loving voice never stops calling us by our name out of the darkness into His marvelous light. And there is space for losers too.

Jesus called and sent out apostles because He recognized and took note of those who were pining away in suffering, who were losing the plot, and who were scattered, like sheep without a shepherd. Peter was one of those who were called by Jesus, who told him: "Feed my lambs!" and "Tend my sheep". To some of us it may sound like too great of a request and too scary. That is why it was so important to first look at the great comfort we have in the assurance Christ gives us. The assurance that He is our True Good Shepherd, personally as well as collectively. That we shall never have to want for anything. Of course, it does not always seem that way – that we have everything we need. Often, we are simply not satisfied and just want more. But often we also endure personal hardships that are very difficult. The valleys where death

and despair cast their shadows are long and deep and wide. But there is no acre of that valley where the Good Shepherd is not willing to go after his beloved, and where He has not already gone Himself.

And so, we are encouraged to take the plunge into the service of humble shepherding and faithful following. In the knowledge that shepherding and following in the church and in the world are from the outset Jesus' own affair, when he says: "Feed MY lambs. Tend MY sheep." We are the instruments, the hired hands, to do the work of life giving service in the name of the True Good Shepherd who leads us. For us it simply means being available for this service in such a way, that Christ can become the One active in us.

How can this come about? Peter says, *"Tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it – not for sordid gain, but eagerly."*

Our task is clearly set out for us by the apostle. Pay attention to the flock, to those around you. Take note of what it is that other might need. Exercising oversight... it takes some practice – don't expect to get it right every time. Who of us can honestly say, pastors, elders, church wardens, followers alike, that we are at all times and in every circumstance fulfilling our God given task at the best of our ability? There is no doubt that we are not good shepherds. Not one of us. Without exception, we are all hired hands, and it is certain that, when we see the wolves coming, we will leave the sheep and flee. That is why we stand nothing else to do, but to, again and again, seek refuge in the arms of the One Good Shepherd, who never leaves His sheep. Not in life, and not in death. We can only listen to Him again and again. His tender calling voice reassures us: *"I am the Good Shepherd. My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life."*

This must be the greatest comfort for the shepherds, the elders, the pastors and followers alike, for the task of service in God's

flock. Because only when we seek our refuge in Him, who is the One True Good Shepherd, will we be up to the task of being shepherds and followers ourselves; fragile and lacking, yes. But all the same, knowing: I stand firm in my God-given task, and that is why I can continue with my work, because *"God opposes the proud"*, those who depend on their own performance and their own holiness, judging the weak and vulnerable. *"But to the humble"*, those who know that they are being strengthened and carried by God's Grace Alone, to those *"He gives His grace."*

Let us therefore lead and follow by example in this: that we set our hope solely on the grace of God, that our being faithful servants of Christ shows in our apparent humility, willingness, patience, and care. Not because in and of ourselves, but because the eternal God is our dwelling place, and underneath us are the ever loving, ever catching and everlasting arms...

Amen.