

Sermon about Ez 34, 1-2+10-16+31 on Misericordias Domini 2021 in BXL (III^N)

Blessing: Alleluia! Christ is risen!

Bible: (1) The word of the Lord came to me: (2) “Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy, and say to them, even to the shepherds, Thus says the Lord God: Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? (10) Thus says the Lord God, Behold, I am against the shepherds, and I will require my sheep at their hand and put a stop to their feeding the sheep. No longer shall the shepherds feed themselves. I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, that they may not be food for them. (11) “For thus says the Lord God: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. (12) As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. (13) And I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land. And I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the ravines, and in all the inhabited places of the country. (14) I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land. There they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on rich pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel. (15) I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord God. (16) I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice. (31) And you are my sheep, human sheep of my pasture, and I am your God, declares the Lord God.”

Prayer: Almighty and eternal God, who through the death of Your Son has destroyed sin and death, and by His rising to life again restored innocence and

everlasting life, that being delivered from the power of the devil, I might live under You in Your kingdom, grant that I may be forever comforted by true faith in the resurrection of Your dear Son, my Lord. (Amen.) [LBP, p. 136]

Sermon: Opener – Vesselina and her good shepherd: Sunday of the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd who cares for his sheep, the flock, the congregation of Jesus. The shepherd who gives his life for the lives of his flock to save them, not running away from his duty like hired shepherds. – No other old picture of the Bible has such an impact until today. Psalm 23 belongs to the last popular master pieces of Biblical poetry or of all passages which are often still known by people who have lost contact to church and faith. Although the job of a shepherd became almost extinct in our western, post-industrialised world. Who of us knows a real shepherd? When have you seen the last one? – Nevertheless, even the Christian educated children have an idea of a shepherd, even it is a romanticised picture from children’s bibles. If I would ask you now, how the Good Shepherd looks like, I am sure at least some of you would have one particular picture in mind. One of my best pupils in school, knew it very well. With firm conviction Vesselina told me: “The Good Shepherd is a tall man with a brown beard and a white garment and a staff in his hand and the smallest sheep he has around his neck and carries it.” This is how he looks like and nothing else.

Part 1 – Shepherds of sin: But where does the popularity of this picture come from? I think we all need more or less such a romantic, albeit a bit naive pictures, that shelter us from reality and let us experience a totally different world. We all have experienced many shepherds who do not fulfil their duties because of laziness and/or egoism. They do not care for their entrusted people. Basic human behaviour such as sympathy and reliability are not exercised: people who take advantage of crises to maximise their own profit. We see this very concretely these days. Politicians, and people’s representatives, for

example, who organise deals to sell masks and get high provisions for it. Or at the beginning of the pandemic, when dubious companies first hide and then sell old medical ventilators for high profit when other people must choke. Dictators or corrupt elites who live on the stolen money of their people. Also, demagogues who mislead people into hate and strife rather than leading them on the way of peace and freedom to green pastures. But even the Church is not free from these things. Church leaders sometimes tend more to narcissism, and put more effort into being loved, than in fulfilling their duty as servants of the Word. How often churches obscure the Gospel, or hinder its spread, because of political decisions not to deal with this or that church because of theological issues which are not worthy of confessional questioning. – It is very bad when parents or teachers abuse the children entrusted to them, or also partners in relation to one other partner with regard to violence or sexual violence. – Bad shepherds are a numerous reality. It is nothing else than the power of sin – to be self-centred, looking on myself and my advantage rather than taking care of others. This might be a reason that the picture and Gospel of the Good Shepherd is still so popular today.

Part 2 – Shepherd of freedom: In contrast to this, God shows another way of shepherding. A shepherding which deserves the title shepherding, that means caring for the entrusted creatures, looking after their needs first – first, and then and afterwards, if necessary, or if it is for their benefit, the needs of himself. The good shepherd takes responsibility for my life and for your life, personally for you and me. For him it is not just the mass of the flock, as though one or two individuals less do not count – no, for him it is a community of individuals with individual needs, and when he has cared for each of them, and they are together as a safe unity, then they are well. The Good Shepherd, the anti-shepherd to all the bad shepherds of the world, is faithful, even in the greatest distress. He is “someone who collects the personal life with all its

facets, abysses, guilt. Nobody gets lost in a nameless mass of humans but is called by his or her name.”¹ *You* are important for him. Therefore, he gives himself to the uttermost. “Instead of misleading others and seeking shelter for himself, God takes the full risk till giving himself up.”² Now, many people today do not like to be titled as “sheep”. The sheep stands for a simple-minded creature, for dullness, just walking with the mass instead of going his own, emancipated ways. Also here, we see again the tendency of egoism and self-centeredness. But to make it clear: for God it is not about catching dull people from other lords to enslave them for himself. The biblical picture of the Good Shepherd and his flock stands firstly for protection and security, shelter in a life-orientated community. When God shepherds his flock, nobody is left to his own devices. Being part of God’s flock means that my feet are set in a broad place (Psalm 31, 8) and that I am led into the openness (Psalm 18, 19). It means *just not* to be in a confining obedience. The Apostle Paul said it in Galatians with the words (5, 1): “For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.”

Consequence – Sheep become shepherds: Next to the shepherd, the passage of Ezekiel introduces us to God also as physician: “I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak.” God cares for them who are physically and mentally harmed. He sees the outward wounds as well as the inward. He listens to the cries. *Misericordias Domini*, this means “Have mercy on me, Lord.”. It is this cry for help. God knows how to deal with all the different kinds of wounds because he has suffered them himself as well. – This Sunday highlights that “the hope of resurrection comprehends not just the view unto the future world of God of which we have a part through the resurrection, it also alludes to the renewal of this world and its people.”³ You can shelter in God and you do not have to get

¹ Matthias Freudenberg. Predigtmedit. über Ez 34, 1-2(3-9)10-16.31. In: GPM #75/2. Göttingen 2021. Seite 287.

² A.a.O.

³ A.a.O. 284.

lost in your own or foreign abysses. This message also gives the impulse to take part in dressing wounds, showing mercy and sympathy. Leading and taking care of others, to build beneficial shelters for others. If necessary, risking being wounded yourself. These are characteristics of following Jesus Christ; to be a Christian. This is the reason for hope for a better reality beyond bad shepherds and suffered wounds. Sheep become shepherds as well. Good shepherds under the good high-shepherd of our souls Jesus Christ. In this – His – community, we are safe.

Blessing: The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.