

17. August 2022

The responsibility of shepherds

Ez 34:1-11

The word of Yahweh was addressed to me as follows, 'Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy and say to them, "Shepherds, the Lord Yahweh says this: Disaster is in store for the shepherds of Israel who feed themselves! Are not shepherds meant to feed a flock? Yet you have fed on milk, you have dressed yourselves in wool, you have sacrificed the fattest sheep, but failed to feed the flock. You have failed to make weak sheep strong, or to care for the sick ones, or bandage the injured ones. You have failed to bring back strays or look for the lost. On the contrary, you have ruled them cruelly and harshly. For lack of a shepherd they have been scattered, to become the prey of all the wild animals; they have been scattered. My flock is astray on every mountain and on every high hill; my flock has been scattered all over the world; no one bothers about them and no one looks for them. "Very well, shepherds, hear the word of Yahweh: As I live, I swear it -- declares the Lord Yahweh -- since my flock has been pillaged and for lack of a shepherd is now the prey of every wild animal, since my shepherds have ceased to bother about my flock, since my shepherds feed themselves rather than my flock, very well, shepherds, hear the word of Yahweh: The Lord Yahweh says this: Look, I am against the shepherds. I shall take my flock out of their charge and henceforth not allow them to feed my flock. And the shepherds will stop feeding themselves, because I shall rescue my sheep from their mouths to stop them from being food for them. "For the Lord Yahweh says this: Look, I myself shall take care of my flock and look after it.

Today's reading presents us with the great responsibility of those who have been called to serve as shepherds of God's flock. The degree of their responsibility is particularly high in that they act as God's representatives before men. If they fail to fulfil the task for which they have been appointed, they are threatened with a more severe judgment than others who have not been entrusted with such a high responsibility. We must be well aware of this!

The shepherds whom the Lord addresses in today's reading do the opposite of what they have been commissioned to do. Thus, they bear false witness and mislead the sheep.

Since they are called to be God's representatives, their wrongdoing conveys a distorted image of God to the people, as if he does not care for his own.

The accusation against the shepherds is aggravated by the fact that the sheep entrusted to them fell prey to wild animals, which tore them apart.

For a time, God allows these shepherds to act in order to give them the opportunity to convert and prove themselves worthy of their high office. However, only for a time does he allow it, and if the expected change does not take place, the Lord himself intervenes. In the case of today's biblical text, he does so through the prophet Ezekiel. Indeed, a prophet is independent of the priestly order and also of civil authority. Thus, he can fearlessly proclaim the truth and communicate the oracle of the Lord to those who have failed him.

"Lord Yahweh says this: Look, I am against the shepherds. I shall take my flock out of their charge and henceforth not allow them to feed my flock. And the shepherds will stop feeding themselves, because I shall rescue my sheep from their mouths to stop them from being food for them. "For the Lord Yahweh says this: Look, I myself shall take care of my flock and look after it."

In sending his Son Jesus into the world, God fulfilled this promise. He Himself came to seek His sheep. For His Church, into which He gathered His flock, the Lord instituted new shepherds, called to lead His people to the green pastures and to give them the food He entrusts to them to administer to the faithful.

But what about the responsibility of pastors in our Church?

It is certainly much greater, for what has been entrusted to them far exceeds what was entrusted to the religious leaders in the times of the Old Covenant. Therefore, they too will have to give an account to the Lord as to whether they have preserved and multiplied as good stewards the goods entrusted to them.

Have they kept faithful to the Gospel and the authentic doctrine of the Church, or have they transmitted or even merely tolerated false doctrines? Have they administered the sacraments with reverence and dignity and jealously guarded the great treasure of the

liturgy, or have they permitted or even carried out liturgical experiments, alien to the authentic faith?

Have they warned with discernment of the spirits of the anti-Christian tendencies in the world and in the Church, so that the faithful would not go astray, or did they not even identify them as such, or did they even co-operate with this anti-Christian spirit?

Have they given the faithful an example of holiness by their lives?

"When someone is entrusted with a great deal, of that person even more will be expected."
(Lk 12:48)

Therefore, if the faithful recognise that wrong directions are being taken, they must remain faithful to the Church and not follow these wrong paths, but offer resistance in an appropriate way.

At the same time, a noble and important service that the faithful can render to their pastors is to pray for them, that they may fulfil the mission entrusted to them and turn away from the paths of perdition if they have embarked on them, so that they may be saved.