

“Order, safety and beauty” John 10:11-18

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father.”

Good shepherd. Such a familiar image. Probably one of the most well-known images of God. And how mightily today’s reading begins. With the words which sometimes made people freeze, and sometimes to burst in anger as they heard them spoken by Jesus.

“I am”. These words bring us back to the beginning of the book of Exodus. Moses. The land of Midian. The mountain of God. That’s where Moses for the first time encountered the holy God of Israel. There, standing in awe before the burning bush, it was revealed to Moses who God is.

Remember how God introduced Himself? “I am who I am.” For the Jews in Jesus’ time the short form – ‘I am’ still stood for the name of the Holy One of Israel. It gives different gravity to Jesus claim: “I am ... the good shepherd”.

And even words ‘the good shepherd’ invoke a certain connection, they bring us to the mighty kingdom of Babylon, back to the 6th century BC, where Ezekiel the prophet recorded the promise of God Yahweh given to His chosen people:

“I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep... 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 I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them... And I, the LORD, will be their God... They shall dwell securely, and none shall make them afraid... And they shall know that I am the LORD their God with them, and that they... are my people...” (Ez. 34)

Jesus, the Son of God, is God’s servant David, from the line of the king David, and He Himself is the good shepherd of God’s chosen people. In Jesus we begin to experience the fulfilment of all these promises.

It is interesting, most of translations have ‘good’ shepherd, when the word used in Greek means first and foremost, – beautiful, lovely, excellent, praiseworthy. “I am the beautiful shepherd.”

What kind of a shepherd can be called beautiful and lovely? Jesus explains it right away with the next sentence. “The beautiful shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” This is how the beauty of our shepherd is defined.

He lays down His life for the sheep. This is what makes Him beautiful and excellent, and lovely and praiseworthy. This phrase ‘to lay down His life’ is repeated 5 times [!] in these eight verses. So that no one wouldn’t miss it.

The beauty and excellence of Jesus as our divine shepherd is defined by Him laying down His life for us. It may appear so obvious, because we are so used to it. But think about this, what makes Jesus so appealing, what makes Him so desirable, so beautiful, so lovely in our eyes?

The fact that He is the Son of God? Don’t think so. The fact that He became one of us. Probably not. The fact that He was a wonderful person, the very expression of goodness and virtue and kindness. Probably still not.

It is what He did for us. He laid down His life for us. Not just for us in general. But for each one of you. For you, and for you, and for you... This is what makes our shepherd so beautiful. His self-sacrificial love.

And by the way, this is what makes Christianity so beautiful. This is what makes you as children of God so beautiful. Remember how Jesus speaks about our relationship with Him: “I know my own and my own know me.”

He essentially repeats what He had revealed through Ezekiel the prophet, that He will be our God, that He will know us, and that we will know Him as our God. And where do we know Him as our God?

That’s right, right here. It is here where the Triune God comes to reveal Himself as our God and to make sure that we know that He is our God. And when He comes and when He speaks to us His love and forgiveness, when He unites us with Himself in the Holy Sacrament, we are made beautiful.

As you receive God’s Holy Spirit, as you are shaped by God’s own creative and powerful Word, you are made more and more like Jesus. God pours His love over you and His love fills you up and makes you beautiful just like Jesus.

And then this love flows into our lives as we begin to love one another and our neighbours, not selfishly, but self-sacrificially. I am sure that you would have witnessed this in your lives as well.

When someone is transformed by the Gospel, when they truly experience God’s love and presence, they are made into new beings. They desire to serve others as Jesus serves us. They become beautiful. They become excellent. They become lovely. It is God’s miracle and it is so heart-warming to see it.

But that’s not all. Jesus also speaks about the sheep. And one may wonder, why are we compared with sheep? What do you think? Because of their intelligence? Self-sufficiency? Perhaps none of these.

Maybe because they are considered foolish creatures, for they are not doing that well without a shepherd? This doesn't speak favourably about us, when Jesus compares us with sheep. Proud people can feel bad about such comparison.

Actually I think it is the sheep that need to get offended in this situation. They may be foolish. But they are not evil. Who is? Yes, we are. We are not only foolish, that would be easier to fix, we are also evil.

We can be very smart and evil. The higher our intellectual gifts, the greater potential we have for evil actions. The sheep need to be protected from the wolves. We don't need to be protected from wolves.

Do you know why? Because too often we are like wolves to one another. We, human creatures, are the ones ready to harm and destroy one another. We, and not something else, are the greatest danger to ourselves. Sadly, but true.

There are a few more things that may not be so obvious in these words of Jesus. He speaks about what happens when the hired servants flee from the wolves and leave the sheep on their own. We could say that two things happen. There is no more safety and there is no more order.

Instead there is chaos, filled with fear and unpredictable danger. Perhaps we don't think about these aspects of our existence too often. We don't think about them because, we don't have that much problems with them.

We live in this very orderly and very safe society. The society that has become so safe and orderly only thanks to our beautiful shepherd Jesus. It is thanks to the influence of the Gospel and the work of the Holy Spirit that we now enjoy times where people don't just kill one another for entertainment.

Where strongest don't just take things or people from the weakest, where we can go to bed not worrying about what may happen during the night, where people generally believe that to be polite and kind and just is a good thing. It wasn't always so. It still isn't so for majority of the world.

But we can see chaos and insecurity creeping into our society. Through human beings. Through those who have turned their backs to our Good Shepherd. Who have believed that they know better, that they can do whatever they desire in their hearts. We see this chaos spreading around us.

Think about a guy who lies to a girl just to get her in bed and to abandon her the next morning. Think about a couple where one spouse learns that other have been unfaithful. Think about children who see their parents' hatred to one another and are torn in half between the two people they love.

Think about employees who care only about themselves and can easily choose not to show up if they don't feel so. Think about employers who can fire someone with family, only to have more money to spend in casino.

Think about those coming from broken families, who have never experienced true love, who have been deemed to be useless and unworthy and spent their lives from one doll to another, trying to escape this chaotic world by hiding behind their addictions. There is no peace and no order.

Chaos is growing among us. One should be blind not to see it. And we are not isolated from it. We can't escape this world. Sometimes this chaos intervenes in our lives, sometimes because of what we have, or haven't done, sometimes against our will and we are left hurt, confused and lost.

The reality is that this chaos is not far from any one of us... How blessed we are that there is someone who comes to us, searching for us, calling us. 'I am the beautiful and excellent shepherd. I lay down my life for you, so that you can have peace and order and beauty.'

Our lives may not be always orderly and peaceful. In fact, for Christians it is almost never the case. But then we need to remember one more difference between the sheep and their shepherd, between us and Jesus.

The sheep don't see the big picture. They don't understand much of what is happening around them. They can't see too far. They may have a very incorrect perception about their situation.

Good shepherd sees the big picture. He knows where they are, and he knows where they need to be, and he knows how to get them there. He can't even explain this to the sheep, for they wouldn't understand it anyway.

Similarly it is with us and Jesus. We don't see the big picture. We can't understand that well what is going on in our lives and in the world around us. But, there is something that we can know. That we know. That is as certain as it could be. We know our beautiful and faithful shepherd.

This helps so much. If it seems that there is no order, no safety, don't worry. Jesus is your beautiful shepherd. You are precious in His eyes. He lays down even His life for you.

Besides, He has received all authority in heavens and on earth and no one can snatch you from His hand, and no one and nothing can separate you from His love. Whatever happens in this world in this age, know and remember, you are His, you belong to Him, He cares for you, and He will get you home.

There are going to be plentiful green pastures in New Heavens and New Earth, and this is where you are heading. As for now, hold to your beautiful shepherd Jesus, listen to His voice carefully, for in Him there is order and peace and He is the One who makes you beautiful.

Amen.