

Shepherd leadership

The Forth Sunday of Easter (Year B) - 21.04.2024

Acts 4.5-12 | Psalm 23 | 1 John 3.16-end | John 10.11-18

Reading

11 “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. **12** The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. **13** The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. **14** I am the good shepherd. I know my own, and my own know me, **15** just as the Father knows me, and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. **16** I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. **17** For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. **18** No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.” (John 10.11-18)

Prayer

May the words of my mouth
and the meditations of all our hearts
be acceptable in your sight,
O Lord, our strength
and our redeemer.
Amen.

Sermon

I. Super election year 2024

Good Morning!

Having morning rituals might help you start the day off well. In addition, I have morning routines that help me start each day off well: time for morning prayer, a good cup of coffee, and light music in the background; a short lesson from my language calendar; and finally, a look at the most important daily newspapers on my smartphone. That sounds cosy, doesn't it? Despite the fact that reading a newspaper seems a little archaic these days.

A joke goes like this: "It's impossible to talk to my dad during breakfast because he still reads the newspaper. One can say... he is behind The Times."¹ But nonetheless, I still think it is important to keep myself informed.

At the moment, one topic particularly interests me when reading the newspapers: This year, 2024, is a super election year. By the end of 2024, more people will probably have been asked to vote globally than ever before.² Forecasts suggested that there could be new vote distributions in many countries, which could make it more difficult to form coalitions in the future. Political majorities are currently changing significantly. The course will be set for the major issues of the present and the future. Climate change, war, and peace are just a few keywords in this regard. Everyone who, like me, is called to the polls this year to elect good governments has a great responsibility.

II. Philosophical and psychological perspectives on good leadership

Sooner or later, you and I will have to vote somewhere. Think, for example, of our congregation. At Christ Church Vienna, we elect our church council every year. The next election will be at the annual general meeting this coming Wednesday.

1 <https://upjoke.com/newspaper-jokes>

2 Cf. <https://www.spiegel.de/ausland/superwahljahr-2024-in-grafiken-rund-die-haelfte-der-weltbevoelkerung-ist-zu-wahlen-aufgerufen-a-dae06614-a1fb-47fc-baee-9c519b7da694>

All of this year's election just begs us to ask ourselves what good leaders are. What is a good way to govern? What strengths and skills should leaders have? What criteria could give us guidance for leaders, nominees, and voters?

Well, the question of desirable leaders is a very old one. The philosopher Plato, for example, thought about this in ancient times. For him, the best government consisted of wise philosophers. A kind of totalitarian rule in which poetry is frowned upon.³ Not a particularly appealing or joyful vision, in my opinion.

In the 16th century, another philosopher, Nicolo Machiavelli, reflected in his book "The Prince" on governance and the maintenance of power. For Machiavelli, the prince sometimes had to make immoral decisions in order to maintain power.⁴ This is an approach that we can also observe in many governments today. Something that also leaves me with mixed feelings.

In the beginning of the last century, Kurt Lewin wrote about different leadership styles. He was a German-American psychologist with a Jewish background. In 1933, when the Nazis came to power in Germany, he emigrated to England and then to the US. An experience that certainly had a big impact on him.

Presumably, out of his life experience and in the context of the dramatic developments of World War II, he identified different and sometimes problematic leadership styles in this world. But Lewin considered the democratic leadership style to be the most effective. This is a type of management where the leader allows the followers to take part in the decision making process. However, decision-making processes, as we all know, may take a very long time.⁵ The members of the church council, in particular, will know what I mean.

III. Jesus, the true and good shepherd

Now let us discuss these philosophical and historical concepts in relation to today's passage from the Gospel of John. Another name for this scripture is the Good Shepherd's

3 Cf. [https://ia802802.us.archive.org/20/items/PlatoTheRepublicCambridgeTomGriffith/Plato%20The%20Republic%20\(Cambridge%2C%20Tom%20Griffith\).pdf](https://ia802802.us.archive.org/20/items/PlatoTheRepublicCambridgeTomGriffith/Plato%20The%20Republic%20(Cambridge%2C%20Tom%20Griffith).pdf)

4 Cf. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/machiavelli/#PrinAnalPowe>

5 Cf. <https://www.leadershipsuccess.co/leadership-styles/lewins-leadership-styles>

Gospel. This passage also gives us an insight into what makes a good leader. The gospel circles around Jesus as an example of a good shepherd who devotes his life to helping his sheep when they are in danger. He does this of his own free will, not because others force him to do so. The sheep are close to his heart because they are his. He is the owner. He has a personal relationship with his sheep and the flock as a whole. That's why his sheep trust him. And he even takes care of the sheep that are not part of his flock. That is why foreign and other sheep no longer exist. In reality, all sheep are part of the same flock. And the shepherd cares about everyone's well-being.

The shepherd is a central and complex metaphor throughout the whole Bible. God himself can be understood as the shepherd of his people, Israel. Psalm 23 puts it very poetically and beautifully: "The Lord is my shepherd."⁶ And the metaphor of the shepherd refers also to a servant or a leader commissioned by God to look after the well-being of the entire flock.

Exploitation and neglect of the flock are accordingly offences against the owner of the flock, which is God.⁷ These offences we encounter, for example, in the book of the prophet Ezekiel. The prophet warns the leaders of Israel: "Woe, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep?"⁸

John sees Jesus as the genuine and righteous shepherd who, as the flock's owner, is concerned about the well-being of the sheep. In this context, the death and resurrection of Jesus can be understood. In the face of peril, the flock's owner, the shepherd, even gives his own life to save his sheep.

In the narrative of the Passion of Jesus that we heard on Good Friday, John specifies what the sacrifice of Jesus means. There we read this story about Barabbas, a convicted robber, who is acquitted. Instead of him, Jesus, the innocent, is sentenced to death on the cross. The shepherd gives his life even for those who actually deserve condemnation.⁹

6 Psalm 23.1

7 Cf. <https://www.bibelwissenschaft.de/ressourcen/wibilex/altes-testament/hirt-at>

8 Ezekiel 34.2

9 Cf. <https://www.bibelwissenschaft.de/ressourcen/wibilex/neues-testament/hirt-nt>

And we are called to follow this shepherd. We should follow his example. In the first letter of John, it says accordingly, "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us - and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers and sisters."¹⁰

IV. Our mission: Shepherd leadership for each other

So we have a mission. Jesus set a loving example for us to follow. We should care for one another with our entire lives. And not just for those we consider to be part of our herd, ethnic group, nation, or club, but also, and in particular, for those who don't seem to belong. Maybe you could call our mission "shepherd leadership"¹¹ for each other. Accordingly, in contrast to Plato's idea, not only wise philosophers, but all of us have this mutual and loving leadership task.

Furthermore, I think the gospel for today can provide us with some motivation for the enormous responsibility of following Jesus and acting as each other's shepherds. One suggestion on a personal level would be to get to know the flock. And it is important to know both the entire flock and the individual sheep. This is important for mutual trust. But most importantly, we should learn to know the sheep with whom we are having difficulty. Therefore, this is my suggestion for you: What if we made an effort over the next several weeks to have a conversation with someone we have never spoken to before or who we think is the most unlike us? I am aware that this is not an easy task. However, it has a lot of power.

V. An Easter vision: One reconciled flock under one shepherd

And finally, today's gospel may also provide us with criteria that strengthen our responsibility as voters and help us identify good leaders. Remember again that the ideal shepherd or the ideal leader has both in mind the well-being of other people's sheep and their own sheep. Shouldn't good governments, at least as a vision, have the good and best for everyone in mind, even if they are elected for a particular country? There is this delicate balance between caring for a country's population and not losing sight of the well-

¹⁰ 1 John 3.16

¹¹ An inspiring book that attempts to develop a concept of leadership along the biblical image of the shepherd: Steven G Purdon (2023): Shepherd Leadership: Learning to lead with true power

being of the entire human family. And the concern for the supposed outsiders, strangers, and those in need of help is also part of “shepherd leadership”. This certainly has a moral impetus. From a biblical perspective, good leadership must also be measured by concern for the poor. The rights of the poor must not be broken.

We, as Christians, have an Easter vision in which we are one reconciled and redeemed flock led by one shepherd. For there is only one flock, because there is only one true shepherd, Jesus, our Lord. In front of our Lord, we are actually and truly only one human family! This Easterly vision can and should also give us helpful guidance and inspiration, and it can and should assist us in making good decisions for the future. Especially in uncertain and unstable times where people are divided in many ways. I pray for myself and all of us that the Easter vision gives us and everyone we meet hope and strength to make responsible decisions.

Amen.

Summary

In his speech about the good shepherd, Jesus gives an indication of good leadership. Something that can be quite helpful in today's world as well. Jesus ties in with the Old Testament concept of the shepherd. Good shepherds care about both the well-being of other people's sheep and their own sheep. They have everyone's well-being in mind. They are prepared to devote their entire lives to the well-being of all. Jesus is the ideal example of a good leader. He sets an example via his incarnation, life, death on the cross, and resurrection. He invites us to follow his example and live out the Easter vision of a united humanity, one flock under one shepherd.

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