

The Elders' responsibility

Acts 20.13-31 / Ezekiel 34.1-19

The word for "Pastor" in English is not a difficult word. It's "Pastor" but when I was young, that word was used very little. My father was a "pastor" but we did not say pastor, we rather said "minister". He was a "minister" of the church. And I remember a friend who had a hard time figuring out what it was, a 'minister' and one day he said to me, 'It must be really cool having your dad as 'Prime Minister'. Almost every time I tell someone that I am a "pastor", they want to know: but what does "pastor" mean? Outside of the church, very few know what a pastor is. And if there is confusion over the role of the pastor, we can be sure that there is confusion over the role of the elder. Even among church members there is confusion. There are those who see that the role of the elder is more of an administrator role. They are there to manage the organizational aspects of the church. And to help us understand the function of the elder, we rely on a picture we find in the Bible. In my opinion, the best picture given to describe the function of the elder is found in Acts 20 where Paul said to the elders of the church in Ephesus: " Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; " According to Paul, God had given the elders in Ephesus responsibility for the flock. He is talking about the wolves who will not spare the flock, the sheep. Hear what the apostle Peter says in 1 Peter 5: "So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder . . . shepherd the flock of God that is among you," For the apostles, the local church is the flock, the sheep of God. The elders are shepherds, those who take care of the sheep. And this image is useful for us who seek to understand the function of the elder. It is not primarily an administrative function. The elder is the shepherd of the flock. Interestingly, in Latin, the word for shepherd is "pastor." Paul and Peter say that the elders are shepherds, "Pastors". And God gives them the task of shepherding his flock. All over the Bible we see God's people described as sheep. We have just sung: "He is our God, and we, his people, his flock, the sheep of his fold" God sees his people as a flock. And that means that God sees himself as a shepherd. Psalm 80 describes God as the "Shepherd of Israel, You who lead Joseph like a flock!". In Psalm 23 we sing: "The Lord is my Shepherd". And then in the New Testament, Jesus describes himself in John 10 as the good shepherd. Clearly we must see God as our great Shepherd. We see Jesus as our good Shepherd. But God also calls elders to be shepherds, under-shepherds. He entrusts them with the care of his sheep.

For the rest of our time this morning, let's take this picture of the elder shepherd to help us understand the role of the elder. I am going to use several passages from the Bible to highlight 4 aspects of the role of the old shepherd.

The elder-shepherd knows his sheep, the elder-shepherd leads his sheep, the elder-shepherd feeds his sheep, the elder-shepherd protects his sheep.

The elder-shepherd knows his sheep - I had the privilege of spending time with a true shepherd in Ireland. He was the father of friends, a member of the church. And one day I went with him into the fields with his sheep. And in front of us, there were a lot of sheep that all looked alike. I saw no difference between them. But this shepherd knew the sheep. He knew those who were sick, those who needed special care. He knew the old, the stubborn. All the sheep, he knew them. He knew exactly what everyone needed. He spent time among his sheep. He walked among them. He touched them, he spoke to them. And in John 10:14 Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd. I know my sheep." Jesus lived his life with his sheep. He talked to them. He listened to them. He was very close to them during the three years of his ministry. Except for times of prayer alone, we always see him close to people. He saw their needs. He understood them. And Jesus asks the elder-shepherds to do the same. He asks them to share their lives with the members of the church. Paul writes to Timothy and Titus that the elder shepherd must be hospitable. Why the emphasis on hospitality? Because it not only reveals a generous heart and an attitude of service, but it also demonstrates the desire of the elder to meet people, to know them, to welcome them into their life. The elder-shepherd wants to be among his sheep to get to know them better. Since Jesus knew his sheep, he knew what teaching they needed. He saw their struggles and their fears. He was with them in their suffering. Knowing his sheep enabled him to speak words that were appropriate to their situation. Think of Mary and Martha following the death of their brother. Jesus was close to these two suffering sheep. The way he spoke to them reveals that he knew them inside out. The elder-shepherd takes the time to know all the sheep in the church, even the most timid sheep. He spends time with the little ones, with the lambs. He is interested in them. He speaks with them. They take pleasure in seeing him. They love him because they know he loves them.

Do you see the relational side of this function? The elder-shepherd cares more about people than planning. An administrator can attend his monthly meetings, participate in discussions, prepare a good schedule for the year without really knowing a single sheep in the flock. But the elder-shepherd knows his sheep.

The elder shepherd leads his sheep. - In the Middle East, in general, the shepherd does not follow his flock. He doesn't wait to see which direction the sheep are going to go. He leads the sheep. He walks in front of his flock in the direction he chooses. And the sheep follow him. Psalm 23: "He leads me near still waters. He leads me in the paths of righteousness. » John 10.3-4: « He goes before them and the sheep follow him." The good shepherd leads and the sheep follow. The elder-shepherd lead. The council of elders don't wait to see which direction the church wants to go and then they "decide to lead." In an elder-led church, you don't put every decision to a vote to see if the sheep agree. The elders rule. Certainly there will be decisions where elders seek to understand the views of church members, but the purpose of leaders is to lead. It is the elders who lead in the church. 1 Timothy 5:17: "Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor." 1 Thessalonians 5: 12-13: "We beseech you, brethren, to have consideration for those who work among you, who lead you in the Lord," The elder leads in the Lord, in the love of the Lord, in the Word of the Lord, in obedience to the Lord, in the service of the Lord. He wants to lead the sheep into a closer relationship with the Lord.

The church needs to be led through times of change, through crises. When there is strife in the church, when the sea is rough, the church should be led to calm waters. The elder-shepherd must lead the church away from dangers, away from rocks that could wreck the church. The elder shepherd leads his sheep.

The elder-shepherd feeds his sheep. - Let us ask ourselves: What is the ultimate goal of the ministry of the elder. The goal of the elder-shepherd is to help the sheep grow in spiritual maturity. It is to help them grow in Jesus. And in order to grow, the sheep of Jesus needs good food. Without food, without the right food, a sheep grows weak and dies. Without the right spiritual food, Jesus' sheep die of spiritual hunger. And it is the elder-shepherd who have the responsibility for the spiritual nourishment of the flock of Jesus. What does this mean, concretely?

Normally in a church there will be an elder trained to teach the word of God. This is his main activity in life. Most of the task of preparing food to feed the flock falls on him. He will have more time to devote to this task. In the case of our church, it's me. But all elders should be able to teach the Word of God. This does not mean that they all have to preach, but they will know the Word of God well enough to be able to explain it, to be able to teach it in a clear and understandable way. It could be Sunday morning. It could be in a Bible study or a one-on-one study with an individual or with a family. The elder-shepherd is able to answer questions, able to explain biblical doctrine and the theological position of the church. This can happen in various and varied contexts. It could be the conversations after worship, the discussions around the table. The elder gives biblical advice, biblical insight in all kinds of situations. He exhorts from the Word of God. He answers questions with biblical answers. We will often hear him say "The Bible tells us that". But the elder-shepherd must also ensure that the food that is served on Sunday after Sunday is of good quality and balanced. It is for the council of elders to guide, to give advice to the teaching elder. Together, the elders will decide which book of the Bible to preach or study, or which topics to discuss in Bible studies. When we read the Bible we see that God wants the reading, preaching, and teaching of the Word of God to be central to the lives of His sheep. It's up to the elders to make sure that's the case. Since the elders know the needs of the sheep, it is up to them to ensure that the food is appropriate for their needs. Is it on a level that the sheep can understand? Is it too heavy, too light? It is for the elders to discern. The elders encourage the sheep in their personal study of the Word, in their family worship. They must be a model to emulate in these areas, men of the Word who feed the sheep.

The elder-shepherd protects his sheep - One of the most important roles of a shepherd is to protect his sheep from danger, attacks from predators, wolves, thieves. Listen to David's example. 1 Samuel 17:34: "34 But David said to Saul, "Your servant used to keep sheep for his father. And when there came a lion, or a bear, and took a lamb from the flock," David was putting his life in danger to protect his sheep. The animals that wanted to eat his sheep also rose up against him. David had to be vigilant, to watch constantly so that he could protect the sheep. And this is true of any good shepherd. His life is devoted to the safety of the sheep. No shepherd, worthy of the name, leaves his sheep in danger if he knows there are wolves roaming the forest next to his farm. And the role of the Elder-Shepherd is to protect God's sheep from evil and spiritual dangers. Acts 20: 28-31 "Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears." Paul tells the elders of a church where he himself had taught the Word of God for 3 years. Three years of teaching from the mouth of the apostle Paul. What a blessing for a church. Three years of teaching from the best theologian the Christian church has ever known. Here is a church that should have a solid foundation, some solid theological knowledge. Here is a church well positioned to fight error. Yet look at what Paul says. "Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock" Be careful! "Cruel wolves will come that will not spare the flock" They will teach "wicked things." "Watch then!" The danger of spiritual wolves is very real, even for the church which had enjoyed 3 years of the teaching of the apostle Paul. In the church of Jesus Christ, the elder-shepherd must protect the church from wolves, false teachers. Paul wrote to Titus of the elders: "He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it." The elder must play both offensive and defensive, he teaches "according to sound doctrine", he "rebukes those who contradict it". There are new people coming to the church regularly. They attend and participate in Bible studies. We have had in our church people strongly influenced by the prosperity gospel, people influenced by theological liberalism. And with some people, we have had to refute their false doctrines to protect the flock from these wolves.

The elder-shepherd protects the sheep against wolves, but he also protects the sheep against themselves. He comes to the aid of the lost sheep, the stray sheep. Jesus tells the parable of the lost sheep. He speaks of the shepherd who leaves the 99 sheep to go and look for the one who had strayed from the flock. He is talking about the shepherd who goes to great lengths, who seeks and who seeks until he finds the sheep. And in the church of Jesus Christ, there will always be sheep that put themselves in spiritual danger, sheep that go far from the flock. Someday it could be you or me. It can be the sin in the life of a church member, a sin that is obvious to all. It could be a member of the church who strayed from the flock over time. And this is the responsibility of shepherds to go to the help of the sheep. Here is one of the most difficult responsibilities for elders. Go to a brother or sister in Christ to warn them of spiritual danger, to tell them about sin, to correct, to reprove, with love, with meekness. The temptation is to do nothing, not to create a stir. But what would you think of a shepherd who lets his sheep run away from the flock without doing anything, who lets them stray near a ravine without intervening? What would you think of a shepherd who sees a sheep hurting himself and does nothing? What would you think of an elder who sees his sheep go astray, sees them fall and does nothing to come to their aid?

In the book of Ezekiel, chapter 34, the prophet prophesies against the leaders of Israel, the shepherds of the people of God. He accuses them of neglect in their care of the flock: "Woe to the shepherds of Israel, who feed themselves! Shouldn't shepherds feed the flock?". Listen to one of their failings: "You did not bring back the one that went astray, you did not seek the one that was lost."

It's too easy just to let the sheep go astray, to let them do what they want, regardless of danger. To protect the sheep, we take the trouble, we put ourselves in danger. The shepherd can be attacked by the wolves. He can even be attacked by his sheep. I remember a sheep in the field behind our house in Ireland. She was stuck in a barbed wire hedge. She couldn't break free. And I intervened to help her. I was acting for her good. And she gave me a big head butt and a lot of kicks. I wanted to help her and she reacted violently. And when the elder-shepherds step in to rescue a lost sheep, it's sad to say, but often the sheep react with violence and do great harm to the elders. This is why many elders let the sheep continue in their straying, in their sin. We wouldn't do that with real sheep and we certainly shouldn't do it with the sheep of God. The elder-shepherd protects his sheep at all costs.

The elder-shepherd knows his sheep, he leads them, he feeds them and he protects them. It takes a huge investment of his time, energy, soul and heart. Shepherding God's flock is a huge responsibility. It is a matter of immense joy when we see the sheep grow, when we see them grow in their love for the Lord. The elder will shed tears of joy. But he will also shed tears of sadness when he sees recalcitrant sheep, sheep that stray from the flock. Why does an elder shepherd do all of this? Why does an elder shepherd invest in God's flock? Why does he bother? He does it for the sheep because the Good Shepherd did it for him. He does this to imitate the Good Shepherd.

In John 10:15 Jesus says: "I lay down my life for my sheep". Jesus loved his sheep and he gave his life for his sheep. He left the glory of heaven for his sheep. He agreed to suffer for his sheep. He denied himself, he took up his cross and he gave his life for his sheep and he did this out of love for his sheep. And if the elder is to serve in the Church of Jesus Christ, his service must be motivated by his love, his love for the sheep, and his love for the Good Shepherd. If he is motivated by selfish desires, by self-aggrandizement, by the prestige of office, if he seeks the approval of the sheep instead of the approval of God, if it is ruled by the fear of the man instead of the fear of God it will be a catastrophe for the sheep. He must love the sheep, but above all he must love the good shepherd of the sheep. In John 21, Jesus asks Peter if he loves him. Peter answers that, yes, he loves the Lord. What does Jesus say to him? Take care of my sheep. Take care of my sheep because you love me. Dear friends, you need the elders who love the Lord before anything else. Jesus is their Shepherd. Jesus is their model and their goal is to lead the sheep to Jesus' feet. May God give this church shepherds who are imitators of Jesus, our good shepherd.