

The rule of the weak link

The exile and the promise/ 20 - Salvation (even of the political and economic kind) cannot fail to come

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«After praying at home, I was sitting on the sofa when a man of magnificent appearance, dressed as a shepherd, came in. He greeted me and I greeted him. He immediately sat down next to me and said: 'I was sent by the most venerable of angels to live with you the remaining days of my life'»

The Shepherd of Hermas,
Revelation V

«Woe to you shepherds of Israel who only take care of yourselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? You eat the curds, clothe yourselves

with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock» (Ezekiel 34,2-3).

Jerusalem had fallen. In his desolate land of exile Ezekiel, the sentinel-prophet, sees a flock dispersed by the neglect of his shepherds: «You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally. So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered they became food for all the wild animals» (Ezekiel 34,4-5). They are not shepherds but "mercenaries" (John 10:12), because they exploit the fattest sheep to gain profit for themselves.

The profession of being a shepherd is a complex art, and very much loved by the Bible, the prophets and many ancient civilizations. It centers on a relationship of reciprocity with the flock, a composite and varied entity. Next to the fat and healthy sheep, there are five categories of fragile animals, categorized through an equal number of adjectives: weak, infirm, wounded, scattered and lost. The greater part of the flock is hence made up of sheep in need of special and specific care by the shepherd. There are those that are weak, perhaps because they are still lambs, those that are permanently infirm due to impairments and accidents, or wounds from the attack of wolves or wild boars, some that are lost after a bad storm or an assault, and some sheep that have no longer been able to find their way after a difficult nighttime crossing. A good shepherd is a shepherd who has developed an ability to watch the whole flock, who has widened his gaze to include them all, starting with the last ones. In 1971, the philosopher John Rawls defined the *maxi-min* criterion, in which when faced with a series of possible social alternatives, the one where the last ones fair the best is the one that should be preferred above all, as the cornerstone of a democratic, fair and fraternal society. Long before this happened, the shepherds had already known for millennia that the quality and goodness of their work depended on the ability to take care of their most disadvantaged animals. The first indicator of the goodness of a shepherd is not in fact the milk or the wool he obtains from the sheep, but the balance and harmony of the flock as a whole, and *hence* how he treats the most vulnerable sheep. How many wounds he has healed, how many scattered sheep he has been able to find again, and how many of the weak animals he has managed to strengthen.

The kind of leadership waged by a shepherd is unique and different, when compared with that of a general in battle, the captain of a ship during a storm or, today, with corporate leadership. Its goal is not

to maximize individual interest or economic profit, because if this were the case, it would not make sense to devote energy and special care particularly to the most fragile and sick animals, to the 'rejects'. The management culture of a shepherd is a culture of the *common good*, that is, the good of each and every one - of the whole flock and of each individual sheep. A leadership based on the maximization of economic interests however centers on efficiency, and therefore to the neglect and discarding of the less productive elements in order to focus on the best and most deserving ones instead. The care that comes with the common good cannot exclude anyone, because each individual is linked to all the others, and the loss of a single sheep would be seen as a general failure. Hence, the care of the flock follows the *rule of the weak link*: the strength of a chain depends on the strength of its most fragile link, and neglecting it, in order to focus on the strongest links instead, makes the whole process extremely vulnerable. The good shepherd takes care of the weak links in his flock, because he knows that the quality and the good performance of all his work depends on them, including the quality of the performance of the strongest elements. The kind of leadership waged by the good shepherd is therefore capable of wasting time on long night searches, of slowing down the march of the whole flock if only one is suffering; it knows how to set the rhythm of everyone's journey based on the pace of the slowest. It is anti-meritocratic, because the logic that guides the shepherd's action is not one of *merit* but one of *need*, dictating his orders, priorities and the hierarchy of his interventions. A fat and robust sheep does not have more merits or value than a scattered and wounded one, and even if it had more value, it would still not be preferred due to its merits; the weak sheep attracts more care merely because it has greater and more *needs* than the stronger one.

The image of the shepherd as a paradigm of good governance and management of communities has deeply inspired western humanism, which over the centuries has given rise to a political culture centered on the priority and objective of not losing its most fragile components - welfare is nothing more than a mature translation of the humanism of the good shepherd. The 21st century, however, is writing a different story, also in Europe. The corporate culture of leadership, heavily focused on the aspects of efficiency and meritocracy, is steadily becoming a universal paradigm, slowly leaving the mere economic sphere of society, and entering the civil and political spheres of the world as well, (and soon perhaps also that of religions). It is convincing everyone that the care for the weak and fragile should be subordinated to the more important aspects and constraints of efficiency, hence becoming meritocratic - we will throw away the last residues of social *welfare* the day a hospital begins to wonder if a patient who arrives at the emergency room really deserves treatment.

The prophet's judgment and condemnation are not limited to religious and political leaders. He also includes the economic elites, who have used their strength and power to crush and oppress the weakest: «Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture? Must you also trample the rest of your pasture with your feet? Is it not enough for you to drink clear water? Must you also muddy the rest with your feet? Must my flock feed on what you have trampled and drink what you have muddied with your feet?» (Ezekiel 34,18-19). The more robust members of society have abused their dominant position to increase their advantages, making the lives of those below them even harder and poorer.

Here, we must take note of an aspect of extreme importance. In order to describe the moral and spiritual decadence of his people and the breaking of the Covenant with their different God, which is the cause of their tragedy of defeat, Ezekiel does not resort to religious or worship related arguments. He does not invoke theology or idolatry. Instead, he speaks of good governance, politics and economics, the betrayal of the vocation of the shepherd, and the denial of the law and economic justice. This is the great *secularism* of prophecy and of the Bible: in the most terrible *de profundis* of Israel's religious identity, he finds no other topics more 'religious' than politics and economics; he does not find words of greater impact than the very humble ones of the shepherd's profession. Just as another Good Shepherd did, who while taking up these words by Ezekiel revealed (Matthew 25) his criteria and his spiritual indicators to us, all enclosed in a few secular words: hunger, thirst, bareness, prisons, diseases, and strangers. It always affects and moves me when I reread it, that in the most 'heavenly' and eschatological text in the Gospel there is no reference to the practices of religious worship but only to practices of human fraternity, where the bare facts matter more than the intentions: 'you did it for me'.

Suddenly, however, a ray of sunshine penetrates into this desolate landscape, and everything brightens up: «For this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them... I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down. I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice» (Ezekiel 34,11-16).

Great words. In those dark and terrible days, with the temple destroyed, their God defeated, the people deported to Babylon, in a foreign and idolatrous land the prophet sings of hope and prophecies that the "bars of their yoke" will be broken (Ezekiel 34,27), intoning the salvation that is coming because it cannot fail to come. This is what the real and great prophets are like. In a time of illusions, they announce the harsh and bitter truth of the imminent defeat; but when the day of devastation comes, they become the voice of a possible good future, singing of life in the midst of the rubble of death, rekindling tomorrow in the extinction of today. And while they sing of the future they pray to it, asking for it to their God, hoping that the words of those songs become true while saying them.

But his new song does not end here: « I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd... I will make a covenant of peace with them and rid the land of savage beasts so that they may live in the wilderness and sleep in the forests in safety... I will send down showers in season; there will be showers of blessing. The trees will yield their fruit and the ground will yield its crops; the people will be secure in their land» (Ezekiel 34,23-27).

And so, David, the little shepherd, the king according to the wishes of the heart of God, returns. And with him the messianic expectation of a new David who, finally, will be a good shepherd as well. Isaiah, the Immanuel, the prophecy of eternal and universal peace, the end of suffering and fear, returns. It is a promise of a new covenant of peace - *berit shalom* - a pact of prosperity, which will include animals, trees, the entire creation. When the prophets have to announce a great salvation in the midst of the darkest of tragedies, they tend to feel that the human sphere alone is insufficient. After the flood and the ark of salvation, the animals, all creatures, the rainbow and the entire cosmos must also find a place in the Covenant. In the days of great resurrections, the words of human beings are too poor. We remember the faces and words of those magnificent times, but we also remember the sounds and flowers, and we remember the light.

What if we were capable of a new covenant of prosperity today, celebrated with new policies, new economies and new management cultures. However, the trees, the animals, the air, the sky, the light would also be part of it. And if we should prove ourselves capable of fraternity with them as well, 'you did it for me' will become the song of both heaven and earth.