



STIFTUNGEN DER EKD IM HEILIGEN LAND
Evangelische Gemeinde Deutscher Sprache
Erlöserkirche – Der Propst

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Your Excellencies, dear brothers and sisters, dear Father Abbot,

Two Irish walkers in an Irish forest saw a large hole in the undergrowth. It was so deep they could not see the bottom, so they looked around for a stone and found a huge rock which they were just able to carry between them. They dropped it into the hole and started to count the passing seconds as they waited for the crash. Suddenly, a sheep came rushing towards them with a fierce look on its face, ran at full speed between the two men and dived straight into the hole.

Needless to say the two men were perplexed. And just then a farmer came along. They told him that a sheep had just run straight at them and then dived into the hole. "Can't be mine" said the farmer, "My sheep is tied to large rock over there!"

Dear brothers and sisters – it might be apparent that yesterday, I spent my afternoon searching the Internet for what Ireland and the Holy Land might have in common. And in the end, I found nothing, except for – sheep.

The green island of Ireland and the barren, rocky, and dusty landscapes of Israel and the Palestinian Territories may be worlds apart from each other. Thus one might ask how the task of moving between them can be performed without a deep cultural shock. However, sheep play a deeply rooted cultural role in both of these geographical regions and societies. The bible is full of metaphors from the pastoral setting of shepherds, sheep, and pastures. And whenever you drive down the road from Jerusalem to Jericho even today, you can see the Bedouin shepherds tending their flocks. On the other hand, sheep seem to be such a common sight in Ireland that most Irish jokes begin by the words: "An Irishman and a sheep..."

Hence I suppose that my dear brother Abbot Gregory brings a most appropriate set of tools from Ireland, in order to fulfill his ministry in Jerusalem: Dear Father Abbot, dear Gregory, you know about the relation about a shepherd and his sheep, and also about the relation between THE Shepherd and his sheep. And maybe, Psalm 23 is as precious to you as it is to me:

*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul.
He leads me in right paths, for his name's sake.*

I love this Psalm because it is so realistic. As humans we might wish that we spend our entire life on the sunny side of the green pastures. And whenever the brokenness of our life and our world becomes all too apparent, we might complain: God, why do you allow evil to happen. However, Psalm 23 continues:

*Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil;
for you are with me; your rod and your staff — they comfort me.*

This is strong: “You are with me” – these words are not linked to the green pastures here, but to the darkest valley of a human life, or to the moments when I fail. Knowing about God’s presence even in times of God’s apparent absence – this is the secret of those who have promised to follow HIM.

Dear Father Abbot, dear Gregory, on behalf of your ecumenical partners I wish you that you may always be certain about God’s healing and comforting presence, all along your ministry in Jerusalem, in times of joy as well as in times of distress. Because our good Shepherd is with you, you will also be able to be a good Shepherd for those who are entrusted to you: for your Benedictine community, for the students at the Dormition Abbey, for other Christians who share your longing for greater Christian unity.

Personally, I am looking forward to many moments we might share together: In prayer, in discussion, or in the most practical *Oikodomé* in Jerusalem. By the way: In the Psalm it is nowhere mentioned that the Good Shepherd would tie his sheep to a rock. In the contrary: One sign of the Good Shepherd is his abundant hospitality – as the Psalm says:

*You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.*

Thus let us dwell together in the house of our Lord. Let us do together whatever is possible between our churches – and from time to time, even a little bit more ;-)

Dear brothers and sisters: On behalf of the Lutheran Church of the Redeemer and your ecumenical partners, I extend a very warm welcome to Abbot Gregory Collins. And as a little sign of our friendship, I brought a historical photograph from the 1930ies, showing a shepherd and his sheep in the Judean desert. Dear Father Abbot, dear Gregory, may this picture always remind you that we are sheep of the same flock.

Ahlan wa-sahlan, barukh ha-ba, welcome, herzlich willkommen in Jerusalem!

Dr. Uwe Gräbe, Propst