

20140209Epiphany5Sermon

Pete Seeger died last week at the age of 94. Those of you who are my age might remember him as the Peter in the folk group Peter, Paul and Mary. Pete Seeger the Original Hipster - "I fought for peace in the fifties" Before Weeds, before Peter, Paul and Mary, Before the peace movement was cool, in the face of persecution - there was Pete Seeger. "I still call myself a communist, because communism is no more what Russia made of it than Christianity is what the churches make of it."

Today's reading deal with this very issue. They do something that used to be criticised in the old SA under apartheid - they mix religion with politics. Christianity is not what the Church makes of it . . . it is what Jesus makes of it and what Jesus tells us about it.

Now it seems wrong that one should critique the Christian Church for not being Christian enough and it especially seems wrong coming from the pulpit inside of the Church. It seems that one should say: "If you don't like what the Church is doing then leave it and form another organization." But internal dissent is what the Church is all about really. As a Church Historian I can point you to Martin Luther and many others whose dissent within the Church was aimed at reforming the Church and bringing her more in line with what Jesus taught. Unfortunately, as with many reform movements, it resulted in a split in the church.

Our OT reading from Isaiah 58 is a classic insider critique. The people of God "seem eager to know God's ways," writes Isaiah. As evidence of their faith, they point to their fasts. Surely these were pleasing to God as they were following what God had instructed. But Isaiah dissents. To him a privatised religious fast that ignores public ethics like economic exploitation is bad faith. A "true fast," says Isaiah, "looses the chains of injustice, sets the oppressed free, feeds the hungry, clothes the naked, and shelters the wanderer."

Many of Jesus' critics complained that he ignored Jewish laws, and even wanted to destroy the temple. In some ways that's true. Jesus becomes an internal dissenter to the religion in which he was born.

If we had not celebrated Candlemas last week we would have had heard perhaps the most famous passage from Matthew's Gospel if not the entire NT read to us as our Gospel Reading – the Beatitudes. Today's Gospel follows immediately on the Beatitudes. And the reading is saying that the Beatitudes must not only be lived but seen to be lived too. The Gospel reminds us that it is essential for the Christian disciple both to be seen and heard. Christianity is not a private religion. I am not just a Christian for me only. Christianity is a vision which is meant to change the world and there is no doubt that, to a great extent it has.

Jesus uses a string of images to express this: He wants his disciples to be the salt of the earth. Salt is a basic and essential item in our diet but it had a particular value in ancient culture. It is a purifier, a seasoning and a preservative. Today we tend to take too much salt and are warned against it. But in older times it was a precious and often expensive commodity and because of its value it was often a favourite item of taxation. Gandhi had a famous campaign against the salt tax which the British imposed in India.

What Jesus emphasises is salt's distinctive taste. We often judge food by saying it has too little or too much salt. Christians then, by their Gospel-centred lives, are to give a distinctive taste to society. Those who really have the spirit of the Beatitudes (including non-Christians) will permeate the world, renew it and retard its social and moral decay.

Salt only produces its effect when it is totally merged with the food. It is indistinguishable from the rest of the food but its presence or absence is very obvious. The Christian, too, can only be truly effective when he or she is fully a member of society and, at the same time, gives an unmistakable taste to that society.

In the past and even today in some Christian and so-called Christian Churches there are those who believe they should retreat from the world. Monks and nuns, who were among the most committed Christians, built large walls around their property to keep the "world" out. Weird Christian sects live in private secure compounds in order to keep unbelievers or non-followers away, keeping themselves purified from the world. Their very separation from the rest of society and the lives they lead are meant to be a challenge. In a modern pluralist secular society such a witness gives a very different and often less effective message of Christianity.

How do you take salt with your food? In polite society, I've noticed people often put salt in a little pile on the side of their plates. This might be the correct way with salt, but it isn't with our Christianity! It is like the Christian who does add taste but who lives on the fringes of society and makes no impact on it. This can happen very easily when, for instance, we have a parish which is only concerned with its own spiritual well-being and makes no effort to reach out. There are many parts of our society where the Church is often totally absent. The first minister here at St Paul's was the Rev Edward Judge. He came out to the Cape to serve as a teacher at what would later become the South African College or SACS and from that, UCT. He resigned because the board of governors had decided that the College should be completely secular. UCT is a secular university so the Church has to employ and pay for its own chaplains to care for the students at UCT.

Besides being on the edge of plate salt can be totally immersed with the food, but there is the problem when a Christian is totally immersed in secular society but has nothing to give it. This is like the tasteless salt which is good for nothing that Jesus spoke about.

Last week we spoke a lot about light. Jesus said of himself that was the light of the world. Now here he is saying to us, his followers, "You are the light of the world..." We are then called to be and to do what Jesus did for the world. The Gospel message is to shine out through our words and actions. He uses two more images to emphasise the essential visibility of the Christian. He speaks of a city built on top of a hill. It sticks out like a sore thumb. There is no way to hide it. And he speaks of a lamp on a lampstand. What is the point in lighting a lamp then covering it up? What is the point in getting baptised, joining the Christian community and then become completely invisible to others, especially to those who are not Christians? For instance, how many of my neighbours know that I am a believing and practising Christian? How many of my colleagues at work know? How many of my friends?

Something else to notice... Salt and light share a funny characteristic. Each of them is discernible by sense perception — we taste salt, and we see light — but neither of them is usually meant to be a direct or main object of perception. Nobody makes salt for dinner. We put salt on the chicken, but the chicken is the dinner. The chicken tastes better if we salt it; and enjoying the chicken, not the salt, is what we are want. Light is like this, too. We turn on a light not in order to look at the light, but in order to look at other things by means of the light.

So if a Christian is the light of the world, he is enabling the world to see something other than himself. And what Jesus goes on to say makes it clear that this something else is in fact the Lord. A Christian is to let his light shine in such a way that the world glorifies God. The worldly people couldn't glorify God even if God were in their dark world with them. So a Christian's life is to shine in such a way that what people see is the Lord.

The image of salt is similar. If a Christian is the salt of the earth, he makes something else appealing to the taste of earthly people. And that will be God too. So to be light and salt is to live our lives in such a way that the non-believer is drawn to Jesus.

Pete Seeger was a person who was willing to rock the boat in order to do what was right. He was at the forefront of the labour movement in the USA, the struggle for Civil Rights, the peace and anti-war movements there, and the fight for a clean world. He has been a beacon for hope for millions of people all over the world. He was the internal dissenter within the USA when so many American were viewing their nation as the paragon of all that was right. Pete Seeger was willing to point out the faults, just as Isaiah did to the religiously smug Israelites, just as Paul did to the worldly-wise Corinthians, just as Jesus continues to do in our lives and in the life of the church today.

Jesus says that he didn't come to abolish but to fulfil the law. He picks up where Isaiah left off and goes even further. External compliance with a religious code isn't enough, said Jesus; there's a deeper level of interior transformation. Are you open to change in your lives? Are you willing to become the internal dissenter within your heart?

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