

'Called to be the Presence'

A sermon preached by Nick Moir at St Andrew's, Chesterton, on Sunday 9 February 2014

When the choirmaster of the church I was helping at heard that I was to be the Chaplain of St John's College here in Cambridge he was clearly worried. He invited me in for some music lessons and his parting gift to me was one of these [tuning fork]. In a place like St John's Chapel, you see, it is considered vulgar and poor form to give the minister a note on the organ at the beginning of the responses. You have one of these, which you discretely bring up to your ear and everyone thinks you're pitch perfect. And mostly that should be enough but there was one particular set of responses that were so devilish to sing that those near the chaplain's stall, if they listened carefully enough, would hear the responses punctuated by faint pings as the chaplain desperately and sometimes vainly tried to hit the right note.

Not a bad image of what Jesus expected his followers to be – the salt of the earth, not obvious, discrete but there to stop the world going out of tune. Salt's primary purpose until the invention of the refrigerator was not to flavour things but to stop them rotting; the meat or fish was salted to preserve it.

You, said Jesus speaking to his disciples in the Sermon on the Mount, you are the salt of the earth. Let's pause for a moment to remind ourselves what an extraordinary statement of faith that was. Those in front of him are the people of the beatitudes, the ones he in the opening words of his sermon he has addressed as the poor in spirit, the mournful and the meek, the reviled and persecuted, the ones more likely to be known as the dregs of the earth, not the salt of the earth; a few score of undistinguished outsiders from a remote part of a remote country, whom this preacher sees as the ones who are going to transform the world. Matthew throughout his gospel sees Jesus as a new Moses, a new liberator bringing an oppressed and downtrodden people out of slavery into a new Promised Land; they are a new Israel, a new People of God, with a new covenant and a new law revealed on a new mountain. The Sermon on the Mount is the giving of the new Law just as Moses brought the old Law, symbolised and summarised in the Ten Commandments, down from Mount Sinai. This Law is summarised in the two commandments to love God and to love your neighbour. These provide the twin lenses through which all of the Old Testament law should be read and understood. Jesus does not abrogate the old Law – 'do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil.' In the Sermon on the Mount he goes to make clear that he is not trying to make the moral demands on us easier – in fact he makes them tougher, but he couples that with the injunction not to judge others: 'do not judge that you may not be judged; why do you see the speck in your neighbour's eye, but you do not notice the log in your own eye?' Loving your neighbour means not judging them but extending mercy and compassion. I suspect that's one reason why he taught us to pray by going into a room privately; so that nobody can sit in judgment on our prayer lives and neither can we judge others.

It is the church's calling to be the people of the Sermon on the Mount, to be God's people, to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Being salt means not losing your saltiness. That would be very easy for us to do in our day: in a world where abusiveness makes better copy than politeness, where sexual fidelity is concerned by many as quaint, where marriage vows are so easily broken, where you can't these days trust that formerly respected professions will tell the truth even under oath – and I use all these examples because they're the ones that Jesus uses (see later in

Matthew 5) – in this world it is easy for us in the church to follow the crowd, to lose our nerve and to lose our saltiness, our edge. But on the other hand the mistake the church so often makes is to cling on to sets of rules that are clearly past their sell-by date. And so the world looks on to the Catholic Church, for instance, and sees what it has to say about contraception and then hears a damning United Nations report about its failure to deal with priests responsible for abusing children and they wonder who has the speck in their eye and who has the log.

Jesus doesn't lower the bar on moral standards but he does seek to move his people away from judging others and to live out mercy and compassion. We never see him condemning ordinary people; it is the religious leaders who draw his ire: later in Matthew –

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. [Matthew 23.23]

Until about the 1950s and 1960s the Western world looked to its churches to be their moral compass. For reasons that are not just our fault, but are at least partly our fault, people have increasingly looked elsewhere, to figures such as the American folk singer, Pete Seeger, who died this week. He was well before my time but it wasn't until I read his obituary that I realised how many of his songs were part of the soundtrack of my life: 'If I had a hammer', 'Turn! Turn! Turn!', 'We shall overcome', 'Where have all the flowers gone?' You may not have bought all his politics – neither did most Americans – but he reached a sort of secular living saint status in the States because he always kept his integrity, was never a style-and-fashion person and he acted as a conscience to the nation. He was once hailed as 'America's tuning fork'; he reminded them of the right note, what it is to be in tune; he was society's salt. In 2009, at the age of, 90, he sang at President Obama's pre-inauguration celebrations and I read this about him:

As so often before, Seeger performed with his head tilted ecstatically upwards, 'a smile on his face as though he could see the sunny uplands in the distance, his calm, reasonable tones the epitome of integrity and decency.'

I think, you know, that our world yearns to have figures that can be its moral tuning fork – and actually it's quite open to the Church and its leaders having that role again. Look at the reception Archbishop Justin received for his comments about the loan shark industry and his commendation of credit unions – more of that anon – and look at how Pope Francis has captured the public imagination. He has just been on the cover of 'Rolling Stone' magazine – where historically you'd have expected Bob Dylan or Pete Seeger to be, not a religious leader, least of all the Pope. And that's not because he's changed Catholic teaching but because he's changed the tone to one of compassion, mercy and humility.

Our high calling is to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. 'You are the light of the world', said Jesus. The one who was the light of the world, the very Presence of God amongst us, the light to lighten the Gentiles that we were reminded of last week, says that his disciples were to be the light of the world. You may remember that last week we heard how in John's gospel Jesus is the temple, the place of the divine Presence. Both St Peter and St Paul in their letters speak of us as the temple, living stones being built into a spiritual house. We are the place where the world is meant to encounter the divine Presence. That is some calling. Lent is fast approaching, a chance to retune, to listen again to our calling, to hear its pure tone so that we can help the world to hear it

too. As our Lent course this year we are going back to the beginning to consider our baptism, the promises we made or that were made for and that we affirmed at our Confirmation. We are going to be Pilgrims, and retracing our first steps of faith so that we can tune up again and be God's people again, the salt of a decaying earth, the light of a dark world.