

# **Martin Luther King, human rights activist**

**by Rev John Castle**

A sermon given on Sunday 12<sup>th</sup> May 2024 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: Isaiah 40:1-5, James 2:1-9

## **Introduction: Putting faith into action**

The letter of James is all about putting faith into action. In today's reading, James calls out a discriminatory practice that is going on in churches whereby people were being treated differently according to their social status. Treating rich and poor differently, James argues, goes against the "royal law" that we should love our neighbour as ourselves. The Christians he is addressing were not practising what they professed to believe.

Martin Luther King Junior is best known for his "I have a dream" speech, made at the Lincoln Memorial in August 1963. He begins his speech with a message very similar in theme to that of James. In the centenary year of the Proclamation of Emancipation by President Abraham Lincoln, the promise of the American Constitution that all people were created equal and would be guaranteed the "unalienable Rights" of "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" had not been fulfilled. African Americans had been given a bad cheque which had come back with the message "insufficient funds". American society was not living up to the democratic ideals on which it was founded, and which it claimed to uphold.

## Background

Martin Luther King Jnr was born in Atlanta, Georgia, in 15<sup>th</sup> January 1929. His father was a Baptist minister, and his mother the daughter of a minister. Segregation, whereby black people were barred from restaurants, shops, schools and public facilities reserved for whites, was a widespread practice in Georgia and other Southern states, which King's parents resisted. One early childhood experience of the young Martin was when a white boy whom he had befriended was prevented by his parents from playing with Martin because "we are white, and you are coloured".

At an early age, Martin decided to train to be a Baptist minister, and took a bachelor's degree and a doctorate. At the age of 24 he married Coretta Scott, and a year later at the age of 25, he became the pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. It was here that King became involved in the Montgomery Bus Boycott. A black woman, Rosa Parks, had been arrested for refusing to give up her seat on a bus to a white passenger. A group of church ministers asked King to lead a movement in which all black people in the town boycotted the buses. The boycott lasted for 385 days, until the authorities finally agreed to end segregation of seating on the buses.

In 1957 King was a co-founder of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, a group whose aim was to harness the organising power of black churches to conduct non-violent protests to advocate for civil rights.

I haven't time today to go through all the campaigns which Martin Luther King took part in or led in the cause of civil

rights. One significant protest was the Birmingham Campaign in 1963 against racial segregation and economic injustice in Birmingham, Alabama, a city known for racial injustice and police brutality against black people. There were mass sit-ins, boycotts of shops and street demonstrations.

Part of the aim of the organisers was to fill Birmingham's jails with those arrested for protesting in unauthorised public demonstrations. King himself was arrested and held in prison, from which he wrote the *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, justifying direct action and civil disobedience rather than resorting to the courts to fight for equal rights. The letter was in response to an open letter entitled *A Call for Unity* published by a number of white church leaders, criticising King's methods and saying that if rights were being denied, the courts were the appropriate channel for addressing this. King argued that as previous attempts to seek resolution through negotiation had failed, the black community was left with no alternative but to take direct action, albeit peaceful. Moreover, he wrote that "We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed."

Furthermore, King justified breaking the law by reference to St Augustine's statement that "an unjust law is no law at all" as well as other great Christian thinkers.

The police brutality unleashed on the peaceful protesters, using water cannon and police dogs, even against children, was reported in the national media, and helped to galvanise national public support for the cause of civil rights, as was

the imprisonment of King. President John F Kennedy himself arranged for King to be released, and his wife contacted King's wife to give her support.

### **March on Washington, August 1963**

In the same year, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference joined with other civil rights groups and trade unions to plan the March on Washington, in which a quarter of a million people attended a rally in the nation's capital, with speeches given at the Lincoln Memorial. Martin Luther King was given the honour of being the last speaker, and it is his speech which included the repeated words "I have a dream", which has gone down in history as one of the speeches which has had the most effect on the promotion of human rights. The speech, and the whole rally, was credited with easing the passing of President Kennedy's Civil Rights Act in the following year.

In his speech, King argued that what the civil rights movement wanted was the fulfilment of the promise of equality, opportunity and freedom which is part of the American Dream, and guaranteed in the Constitution. He made a strong appeal to the principles of democracy, and urged all involved in the civil rights movement not to give in to hatred and bitterness, and to avoid all physical violence. He also warned black people not to distrust all whites, as many of them had come to realise that "their freedom is inextricably bound to our freedom".

Twice in the speech King quoted from the Old Testament prophets. The first time was the statement that "we will not be satisfied until "justice rolls down like waters, and

righteousness like a mighty stream" a quote from the prophet Amos<sup>1</sup>. The second time was at the climax of the most famous section in which he talks of having a dream of a future when the nation would be true to its belief that all people are created equal, when "the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood," when "my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character", and when, in the words of Isaiah, "every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight; and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together<sup>2</sup>."

### **The example of Martin Luther King**

What lessons can we learn from Martin Luther King's example? These are the main points I draw from his story.

First of all, as I mentioned at the beginning of this sermon, he believed that real Christian faith demanded action. Seeing the oppression of his African American brothers and sisters, he felt he had to use his position and his gifts to work for change.

Secondly, he believed that change is possible. In his Washington speech, after saying that the promise of freedom was like a bad cheque that had been returned with "insufficient funds", he goes on to say "But we refuse to

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<sup>1</sup> Amos 5:24

<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 40:4-5

believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. And so, we've come to cash this cheque, a cheque that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice.” His speech ends with a great message of hope and faith. “With this faith, we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.”

And this brings out my third point: King was a man who believed in perseverance, even if that meant suffering. King was arrested 13 times, his phone was tapped by the FBI, he received threats to his life and his house was bombed, fortunately without injury to him or his family. In April 1968, King had gone to Memphis, Tennessee, to take part in protests against poverty. In an informal speech he said these words. “I’ve seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. And I’m happy tonight.” The next day, as he stood on the balcony of his hotel, he was shot dead.

The fourth and final point I come away with is that King knew the importance of working with others. The Southern Christian Leaders Conference was a team that worked together. They also co-operated with other civil rights groups. There was certainly disagreement within the movement about tactics, and to what extent they should work with the Federal Democratic Government headed by President Kennedy to achieve a common cause. But King and

the others in the movement knew that they were stronger together.

## **The challenge for us**

So what about us? Have you ever taken part in a demonstration, boycotted goods or services because they were created through unjust practices or from a country ruled by an oppressive or unjust regime? Have you ever written to your MP to express your concern about social issues or government policies?

It's easy for us to hear on the news about protests and campaigns for justice and to sit comfortably on our sofa thinking "I'm glad someone else is taking action about this".

So I leave you with these questions. Will we put our faith into action in the choices we make about products we buy, campaigns we might support through our giving or through taking part in some form of lobbying or action?

We may not need to put ourselves in danger, but we may choose the inconvenience of spending some of our time, effort or money to help make the world a more just place, and to end the oppression of others.

When we pray "thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven", are we willing to take action to be part of the answer to our prayer?

Will we share Martin Luther King's dream for a day when all people will live in harmony? And will we work to make it come true?

## **Resources for learning more about Martin Luther King:**

The Washington Speech

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vP4iY1TtS3s>

Documentary about Martin Luther King by Trevor MacDonald made for ITV:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=csL6htjAE2k&t=17s>

Wikipedia article (quite detailed biography):

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martin\\_Luther\\_King\\_Jr.](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martin_Luther_King_Jr.)