

ON THE
OCCASION
OF THE
SUNDAY CLOSEST TO THE
REV. DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. NATIONAL HOLIDAY

Martin Luther King, Jr.: The Vision and The Dream

by

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THE REVEREND EDWARD G. RICE, PRIEST-IN CHARGE

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Good Morning.

It is a pleasure to be with you today as we lift up the life and ministry of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. I bring greetings from the people of the African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas and our rector the Rev. Dr. Martini Shaw. I am grateful to the Rev. Edward "Ted" Rice for this invitation. I first met Fr. Rice when he was serving as interim rector at Holy Trinity, West Chester. It seems that he has a strong affection for "Trinity" churches.

I've also had the pleasure of worshipping here at Trinity Memorial previously – both before and after the fire. One of my most memorable experiences was the radical welcome I received from Fr. Temme and others, perhaps some of you who are here this morning, at one of your first Maundy Thursday services in this sanctuary after the fire. I came here that evening expecting a "traditional" service and instead was treated to a marvelously rich and intimate spiritual recreation of the Last Supper. I understand that wonderful tradition continues.

A few years ago I attended another Maundy Thursday service at "CHT" your sister congregation Church of the Holy Trinity, Rittenhouse Square. The rector emeritus – The Rev. Terence C. Roper – preached the sermon and proclaimed that the message of the Last Supper is a mandate – a commandment – "to be present with Christ in the world."

During this season of Epiphany we celebrate the manifestation of Christ to the whole world. The Matthean gospel reading appointed for January 6th tells the story of the wise men from the East who sought the child born to be the king of the Jews. They passed through Jerusalem, following the star, until they came to Jesus' birthplace in Bethlehem. They paid him homage - meaning that as powerful as they were – they acknowledged that he was the "King of Kings." They offered him gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. For a precious time they basked in his presence. Asleep that night they were warned "in a dream" not to return to King Herod who wanted to kill the child because he tolerated no threats to his power. Surely this must have seemed more a "nightmare" than a "dream." The wise men went away changed, transformed, filled, and determined to spread this transformative news. The Rev. Dr. Sam Portaro reminds us in a reflection on this text that "Those who encounter God come away with more, and better, than what they bring."

Epiphany is also a time when we especially remember that our Baptismal Covenant calls us to strive for justice. It is a time for reaffirming our vocational commitments, for rededicating ourselves to our ministries and our missions, for being transformed. Being “present” with Christ in our world today means opening ourselves to opportunities for personal transformation in order that we can partner with God in the work of transforming the world. In that encounter we will come away with more than what we bring.

Reflect with me for a moment on the theme “Martin Luther King, Jr.: The Vision and The Dream.”

Dr. King’s understanding of his Christian vocation – his ministry - led him to be present with Christ Jesus in the world in a very public and controversial way. Young Martin Luther King, Jr.’s preparation for ministry took him from the hallowed halls of stellar academic institutions like Morehouse College, Chester, Pennsylvania’s Crozer Theological Seminary, and Boston University to the pulpits of black churches throughout the south and the north. Interestingly, the young minister’s first pastorate, Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, provided an opportunity for him to follow in the footsteps of the brilliant and militant civil rights activist Rev. Dr. Vernon Johns. Taylor Branch, in his prize-winning series on America during the era of Martin Luther King, calls Johns, an Oberlin College graduate, “the great forerunner.” But I do not believe that it was *foreordained* that the newly minted Ph.D. - Martin Luther King, Jr. - would involve himself in the struggles that would propel him to the forefront of America’s second reconstruction – the modern civil rights movement. He was pushed into a leadership role in the Montgomery Improvement Association and the bus boycott that sought to overturn the laws that segregated seating on the public buses by race. True, he was inspirational and effective, but he could have stopped after the buses were desegregated – but by then it was too late. His life, his ministry, had already been transformed.

It came to a climax one night. King was restless and unable to sleep. He was deeply distressed by threats against his life and against the lives of his wife and child. Both Taylor Branch, and David Garrow in his book Bearing the Cross, describe a man who felt overwhelmed and powerless. Sitting at the family’s kitchen table he uttered aloud, as if in a prayer, his fears and his doubts. He confessed that he couldn’t do it alone. It was then that he had an experience from which he would continue to draw spiritual strength for the rest of his life. David Garrow reports that King heard “an inner voice” say, “[S]tand up for

righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And lo I will be with you, even until the end of the world." Taylor Branch suggests that it was King's "first transcendent religious experience." Branch further suggests that though the moment "lacked the splendor of a vision or ... a voice speaking out loud, as Vernon Johns said [it would] ... [f]or King the moment awakened and confirmed his belief that the essence of religion was not a grand metaphysical idea but something personal, grounded in experience – something that opened up mysteriously beyond the predicaments of human beings in their frailest [or] noblest moments."

This epiphanic experience changed Martin Luther King's personal faith and his public religion. Pivotal biblical stories in the old and new testaments, with which Dr. King would have been familiar, reference visions and dreams. It gave him a vision. Two years later, in 1958, he wrote about how the Christian faith must transform oppressive social and economic conditions - showing clearly that his mission and ministry was about more than just eradicating racial segregation. These are words that you will not hear over and over again as all too familiar video and audio clips recycle from one media outlet to another. He wrote:

"A religion true to its nature must also be concerned about man's social conditions. [T]he Christian gospel is a two-way road. On the one hand, it seeks to change the souls of men and thereby unite them with God; on the other hand, it seeks to change the environmental conditions of men so that the soul will have a chance after it is changed. Any religion that professes to be concerned with the souls of men and is not concerned with the slums that damn them and the economic conditions that strangle them and, the social conditions that cripple them is a dry-as-dust religion."

Dr. King would also have been familiar with the Old Testament prophets vision of justice as illuminated by Yale theologian Miroslav Volf who reminds us that:

"The Scriptures uniformly call us to do justice. The Prophets are full of appeals to 'hold fast to justice' (Hosea 12:6), to 'establish justice' (Amos 5:15), to 'do justice' (Micah 6:8). Consider [also] the famous words of Amos (5:24):

But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an everflowing stream."

In doing justice Israel was to imitate her God 'who works vindication and justice for all who are oppressed.' (Psalm 103:6)

Doing justice, struggling against injustice, was not an optional extra of Israelite faith" Volf says "it stood at the very core."

According to an article published two weeks ago in the *Jerusalem Post* a script discovered eighteen months ago on a piece of pottery, dating back three millennia to the time of King David, is now the oldest known example of written Hebrew. The text links worshipping God to doing justice – pleading for the widow, the infant, the orphan, the stranger, the slave.

It is consistent with Isaiah's justice-oriented vision of the proper worship of God:

"Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke
to let the oppressed go free
and to break every yoke? (58:6)

Scholars suggest that there are thousands of bible verses on the subject of "justice." We heard one in the lectionary set for today and I will certainly not try to recite all of them this morning.

Dr. King's work with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in places like Albany, Birmingham, and Selma testified to his commitment to "doing justice." King's famous "Letter from Birmingham City Jail" written in April of 1963 showed that King possessed a biblical sense of his mission coupled with a political pragmatism born of redemptive suffering through struggle. Two Episcopal bishops in Alabama, Charles Carpenter and George Murray were addressed in the letter. They were among those trying to hold back the looming tide of social change. Bishop Carpenter had forbidden clergy in his diocese to support the civil rights movement. When he saw the Rev. Robert E. DuBose, a black vicar and chaplain, who had been working cautiously behind the scenes with King in the Montgomery Improvement Association, lead a march with the Rev. Ralph Abernathy in support of students at Alabama State College, Bishop Carpenter forced Fr. DuBose from the diocese. Fr. DuBose and his family suffered much – emotionally, mentally, physically, and financially. Fr. DuBose paid a high price for being present with Christ and trying to transform the world. The Rev. Jesse F. Anderson, Sr.

invited Fr. DuBose to become the curate at St. Thomas. Years later, soon after Fr. Anderson's death, Fr. DuBose was called to be St. Thomas' rector.

I told this story in a talk before the Episcopal Church Club. It shows that lauded southern novelist William Faulkner was right when he said "The past isn't dead – it isn't even past." After my talk Bishop Allen L. Bartlett said that he had known Bishops Carpenter and Murray. He said he had been ordained to the diaconate by Bishop Carpenter, and ordained to the priesthood by Bishop Murray, *and* that he had endeavored, through all aspects of his own ministry, to *fight against* the racial prejudice embodied in so many of the actions of these two men. Fr. DuBose, as rector of St. Thomas, and Bishop Bartlett, as our diocesan bishop, worked together in the early planning of the 1992 national Bicentennial Celebration of Black Presence in the Episcopal Church. Bishop Bartlett knows what it means to be transformed and to be present with Christ in the world.

At the March on Washington in August of 1963 millions of people, perhaps many who'd never heard his name and who had never heard his oratory, learned about this son of a Baptist minister's "dream." A dream about God's created humanity, rooted in love, and focused on freedom and equality. It was a dream that warned the nation about the "fierce urgency of now." It was a dream that demanded that "now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God's children." Rev. Dr. Michael Eric Dyson believes that there has been too much emphasis on the "I Have A Dream" speech. I disagree. I think it has been taken out of context and separated from King's evolving transformation. Taylor Branch said that because of this speech King had the "authority to reinterpret the core intuition of democratic justice."

After the March on Washington numerous violent acts congealed to force Martin Luther King to rethink "the dream." Violence such as the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham that killed four little girls, the seemingly unremitting violence against civil rights workers across the South, and the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy and Minister Malcolm X. His "dream" was becoming a "nightmare." The dream was being transformed as the vision was transforming the dreamer.

On the fourth of July in 1965, a Sunday, Dr. King, just back home in Atlanta, Georgia from Virginia - and headed to Illinois - preached a sermon in his "home church" Ebenezer Baptist Church. He apologized for digressing from the appointed scripture in order to deliver a

sermon titled "An American Dream" in which he revisited the March on Washington "I Have A Dream" experience.

"The whole concept" he said "of the imago dei as it is expressed in Latin, the 'image of God,' is the idea that all men have something within them that God injected. ... this gives him a uniqueness ... worth ... dignity. ... There are no gradations in the image of God. Every man from a treble white to a bass black is significant on God's keyboard, precisely because man is made in the image of God. One day we will learn that. We will know one day that God made us to live together as brothers and to respect the dignity and worth of every man."

This is reminiscent of our own Baptismal Covenant where we are called to respect the dignity of every human being. His sermon also reflects the theme of this summer's 76th General Convention of the Episcopal Church – Ubuntu – interpreted as "I in You and You in Me." Ubuntu, a word from an indigenous South African culture, has been explored by the Rev. Dr. Michael Battle, rector, Church of Our Savior, Diocese of Los Angeles, in his book Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu. Dr. Battle notes that "What is seen in the other when viewed through Ubuntu, is imago Dei, God's wonderfully distinctive creation in the other, the divine life of that person." Archbishop Tutu asserts that his understanding of the imago Dei presupposes a "radical formation" - I would say transformation - of "human identity in the world. No human being is self-sufficient. We can only be fulfilled individually if we realize that we live in a 'network of delicate relationships of interdependence.'"

Continuing with Dr. King's "An American Dream" sermon ...

"About two years ago now, I stood with many of you who stood there in person and all of you who were there in spirit before the Lincoln Monument in Washington. As I came to the end of my speech there, I tried to tell the nation about a dream I had. I must confess to you this morning that since that sweltering August afternoon in 1963, my dream has often been turned into a nightmare. I've seen it shattered. I saw it shattered one night on Highway 80 in Alabama when Mrs. Viola Liuzzo was shot down. I had a nightmare and saw my dream shattered one night in Marion, Alabama, when Jimmie Lee Jackson was shot down. I saw my dream shattered one night in Selma when Reverend Reeb was clubbed to the ground by a vicious racist and later died. And oh, I continue to see it shattered as I walk through the Harlems [hear North Philadelphia's] of our nation. ... So yes, the dream has been shattered, and I have had my nightmarish experiences, but I

tell you this morning ... that I haven't lost the faith. I still have a dream that one day all of God's children will have food and clothing and material well-being for their bodies, culture and education for their minds, and freedom for their spirits."

In spite of all that had happened to shatter "the dream" – "the vision" wouldn't let Martin Luther King "lose faith" in the belief that justice would triumph. The dream was no longer only about racial reconciliation. It was now also about economic justice, civic equality, individual opportunity and social cohesion. It was about the character of a nation.

On Friday Fr. Penniman and I had the opportunity to be with Dr. Sheldon Hackney, former president of the University of Pennsylvania, Penn history professor, and chair of our Diocesan History Committee, when he received the Benjamin Franklin Founder Award. In presentations that focused on Benjamin Franklin's legacy and the American national character Dr. Hackney cited Dr. King, along with Benjamin Franklin, as examples of that trope of American exceptionalism that struggles to make our practice consistent with our ideals. Taylor Branch would agree suggesting that the message of the "I Have a Dream" speech requires that King be regarded as a "new founding father."

At the end of his life Dr. King was focusing all of his energies on the jobs of sanitation workers and the economic welfare of the poor. He had come to see racism, war, and poverty as the triple evils that were turning his dream into a nightmare. We need Dr. King's vision today in order to inspire new dreams about justice. We need justice for people who have lost jobs, homes, and healthcare because of reckless economic ventures. We need justice for people whose lives are at risk because of hurricanes and earthquakes in places where economic disinterestedness trumps a sense of our shared humanity. We still need justice for people whose skin color, nationality, language, faith, age, physical condition, sex, or sexual orientation make them subject to stereotypes, profiling, discrimination, or violence.

Honoring Dr. King by participating in the Martin Luther King, Jr. National Day of Service, or volunteering in a program that feeds hungry and homeless people, or tutoring children, are all commendable and necessary activities. But we also need people who are willing to engage in the activist social justice-oriented advocacy that has the potential to change private attitudes, and public policies, that stand against that which is just.

Dr. King, ends his sermon, after multiple ringing stanzas of "I still have a dream" with an altar call. "We open the doors of the church now. If someone needs to accept Christ, this is a marvelous opportunity, a great moment to make a decision."

Let us open the doors of our hearts and minds. As our journey through the season of Epiphany continues we might ask ourselves, and pray over, the following questions: How have we been transformed through an encounter with the living Christ? Have we heeded the commandment to be "present" with Christ in the world? In what ways will we seek to transform that which is in need of transformation? Do we strive for justice in all that we do? Have we committed ourselves to "do justly" with the gifts God has given us? How can we help others hold fast to justice in their lives? Are we helping to establish justice in our communities, in our nation, in our world? How can we rededicate ourselves to the justice work in which we are already engaged?

May we, as a people, be transformed by visions and dreams inspired by God's will for our lives. Now is the time. See the vision. Dream the dream. Reaffirm your commitment. Work for justice. This is a marvelous opportunity, a great moment in which to make a decision.

In the name of Christ Jesus, Amen.

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p. 1. *"I understand that wonderful tradition continues."* Author's conversation with the Rev. Edward G. Rice.

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