

## Lecture: Martin Luther King

Introductory music: Two's Company [Track 2]

Hymn 710: 'I have a dream,' a man once said

The Revd Dr Martin Luther King is one of the great people of the twentieth century. He was a Baptist minister who became an internationally recognised and respected civil rights leader. King is the best known African-American in his nation's history. Someone has called the movement which he led as 'the most significant and redemptive moral revolution of the twentieth century.' He was a man of immense faith and we cannot ever separate his work in the civil rights movement from his faith. He had a strong biblical faith and he regularly drew on biblical imagery in his civil rights speeches. During this evening's lecture I, with the help of William at the sound desk, intend to let you hear Dr King speak for himself using recordings of his speeches.

When Dr King preached for his first charge, his first pastorate, Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Montgomery, in 1954, he chose the text from the Book of Revelation, chapter 21, beginning at verse 1:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

Then at verse 16:

The city's length and width and height are equal.

This same sermon he preached on several occasions, including at Westminster Abbey, ten years later in 1964, the year he won the Nobel Prize for Peace. This was his favourite sermon. The sermon's title is *The Dimensions of a Complete Life*. The new city, with its length, width and height all equal, represents the city of ideal humanity. There are no imbalances in this new community. The length, said Dr King, represents not longevity but 'the push of a life forward to achieve its personal

ends and ambitions.’ The breadth of life is ‘the outward concern for the welfare of others’ and the height of life is ‘the upward reach for God.’

The length of life, the push to achieve personal ends and ambitions, is less about selfish desire and more about doing one’s best, one’s utmost, in life. Dr King wrote:

Every individual has a responsibility to be concerned about himself enough to discover what he is made for. After he discovers his calling he should set out to do it with all of the strength and power in his being. He should do it as if God Almighty called him at this particular moment in history to do it. He should seek to do his job so well that the living, the dead, or the unborn could do it no better.

This high ideal of how we live our individual lives may not always be attainable. I do not know that Martin Luther King would himself claim to have lived up to this ideal all of the time. But it is the preacher’s task to present to himself and his people the ideal which God lays before us all. In his sermon, King continued:

To carry this to one extreme, if it falls your lot to be a street sweeper, sweep streets as Raphael painted pictures, sweep streets as Michelangelo carved marble, sweep streets as Beethoven composed music, sweep streets as Shakespeare wrote poetry. Sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will have to pause and say, ‘Here lived a great street sweeper who swept his job well.’

This was part of Dr King’s favourite sermon. In it we hear something of the passion for God, his loyalty to God’s demands and the drive to do one’s utmost in the short time that we have on this earth.

The second dimension, the breadth of life, is the outward concern for the welfare of others. In his sermon, Dr King reflects on the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Typically, we understand the priest and the Levite to be hurrying to an important appointment. So they leave the beaten man at the side of the road. Dr King said:

I would rather think of it another way. I can well imagine that they were quite afraid. The same thing that happened to the man who was robbed and beaten could have happened to them. So I imagine the first question that the priest and the Levite asked was this: ‘If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?’ Then the good Samaritan came by, and by the very nature of his concern reversed the question: ‘If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?’

King said that the Samaritan was great because ‘he had the mental equipment for a dangerous altruism. He was great not only because he had ascended to certain heights of economic security, but because he could condescend to the depths of human need.’ We almost expect Dr King to say that the Good Samaritan asks, ‘If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to me?’ In that case, religion would be about fear of God, whereas it is about love: ‘If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?’

The third dimension, the height of life, is the upward reach for God. King quotes Plato: ‘The visible is a shadow cast by the invisible.’ He said:

You look at me and you think you see Martin Luther King. You don’t see Martin Luther King; you see my body, but you must understand, my body can’t think, my body can’t reason. You don’t see the me that makes me me. You can never see my personality.

And so, King says, it is with God. The universe in all its complexities is a visible shadow cast by the invisible. We are to seek and discover Him as the power in our life. This was the content of his sermon to secure his first pastorate. It was first preached long before the civil rights movement reached its crisis point in 1963 but I have spent so much time on it because it represents the theology and the witness of Dr King over the years that were to follow, right up to his death on April 4, 1968.

Michael King, the son of an influential Baptist minister of the same name, was born in Atlanta in 1929. In 1934, following a journey to Europe, Michael King Snr changed both his name and that of his son to Martin Luther King. Martin Luther King Jr, known to his family as M. L. was reared in a middle class black Baptist home. His family included a long line of Baptist preachers and outspoken advocates of freedom and justice. M.L. admired his father as ‘a man of real integrity, deeply committed to moral and ethical issues.’ His father had also been involved in civil rights and had been president of the NAACP in Atlanta (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People). King wrote of his father:

From before I was born, he had refused to ride the city buses after witnessing a brutal attack on a load of Negro passengers. He led the fight in Atlanta to equalise teachers’ salaries and was instrumental in the elimination of Jim Crow elevators in the courthouse.

‘Jim Crow’ was a term which originated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when Thomas Rice, a white entertainer, blackened his face with charcoal paste and danced to the song, Jump Jim Crow. The term evolved into a derogatory description of African-Americans and was used as a name for the prevailing system of segregation. Martin Luther King Snr fought against such discrimination before M. L. was born. How true it is, I do not know, but one commentator writes that many people, including M. L., were frightened of King Snr, that he beat young Martin many times and that M.L. twice tried to take his own life. Many books written on Dr King are very sympathetic and tend, on the whole, to avoid in any great detail areas of personal pain or embarrassment, such as his relationship with his father or his sexual activity outwith his marriage.

In his autobiography, Dr King mentions two incidents from his childhood which caused him great pain. In his preschool years, his closest playmate was a white boy whose father owned the shop across the street from the King’s family home. When they went to school, they attended separate schools. One day the parents of the white boy told M. L. that he could no longer play with their son ‘because we are white and you are colored.’ At the dinner table that night, M. L.’s mother said to him, ‘You must never feel that you are less than anybody else. You must always feel that you are somebody.’ Years later King wrote of that day:

As my parents discussed some of the tragedies that had resulted from this problem and some of the insults they themselves had confronted on account of it, I was greatly shocked, and from that moment on I was determined to hate every white person.

When he was eight years old he was in a ‘downtown store’ in Atlanta when, he said, “all of a sudden someone slapped me, and the only thing I heard was somebody saying, ‘You are that nigger that stepped on my foot.’ And it turned out to be a white lady.’ For over two hundred years before the 1950s Africans had been shipped, bought, sold and worked like cattle in America. After the civil war in which they were freed from slavery, African-Americans were not free to live where they wanted, to work where they wanted, to vote nor to eat, travel, shop or play where they wanted. African-Americans descended from slaves and had become the captives of segregation. Like all other African-Americans, M.L. had firsthand experience of being treated as less than human.

At the age of 18, he became the Assistant Pastor in the Ebenezer Baptist Church, Atlanta where his father was the minister. He was ordained to the Baptist ministry on 25<sup>th</sup> February 1948 at the age of 19. He graduated from the all black Morehouse College with Bachelor of Arts in Sociology. While at Morehouse, he came to know about the theory of non-violent resistance through his reading of Henry David Thoreau. Thoreau was a nineteenth century philosopher who wrote about civil disobedience by individual citizens against unjust governance. Thoreau's work inspired Mahatma Ghandi and the essay entitled, 'On Civil Disobedience,' was read by King repeatedly. By 1951, he gained his Bachelor of Divinity and by 1955 he was awarded his PhD in Systematic Theology from Boston University. It was in 1954, at the age of 25, he became the Pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Montgomery, Alabama. The church building is situated directly across the street from the State Capital building. King married Coretta Scott in 1953. They had four children: Yolanda, Martin Luther, Dexter and Bernice.

In 1954, the US Supreme Court declared segregated public schools were unconstitutional in the case of *Brown vs. the Board of Education*. On 1<sup>st</sup> December 1955, Rosa Parks, a seamstress and local NAACP activist, refused to vacate her seat on a city bus in Montgomery, Alabama, Dr King's hometown. Parks was arrested. Her challenge to segregation on city buses was the beginning of struggle lasting almost a year ending on 13<sup>th</sup> November 1956 when the Supreme Court ruled that segregation was illegal. Black passengers paid the same fare as white passengers but were required by law to give up their seats to white passengers and move to the back of the bus. Insult was added to injury as many bus drivers and conductors referred to African-Americans as 'niggers' and 'black apes' on a daily basis. Failure to capitulate meant immediate arrest, charges and imprisonment. Five days after Rosa Park's protest a committee was formed to carry on the momentum of the struggle. Black passengers decided on a bus boycott. The Committee formed the Montgomery Improvement Association and Dr King was elected its president. For King, the key to success was ensuring that the African-Americans never resorted to violence. Car pools were set up to help maintain the bus boycott. Though many people used the term 'boycott', Dr King regarded the Montgomery bus protest as *an act of massive*

*non-co-operation*. He did not want bankruptcy for the bus company but justice in business.

During the struggle of 1956 Dr King was arrested, received up to forty threats a day by telephone and letter and his home was bombed. Three days before his home was bombed he was disturbed in the middle of the night by a telephone call. He answered and the voice said, 'Listen, nigger, we've taken all we want from you; before next week you'll be sorry you ever came to Montgomery.' So disturbed was he by this call, he could not go back to sleep. He paced round the house and finally, on the kitchen floor, he broke down and prayed: 'Lord, I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I've come to the point where I can't face it alone.' In his distress and silence, heard an inner voice, 'Martin Luther, stand 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.' It was a spiritual experience which gave him strength for the immediate fight and for years to come. He wrote:

At that moment I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never experienced before. Almost at once my fears began to go. My uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything.

On the night his home was bombed, he was out at a mass meeting. Until he reached his house, he did not know if his wife and child had survived. A large crowd of supporters gathered together with the white mayor and police commissioner. Dr King addressed the large crowd from what was left of his front porch:

We believe in law and order. Don't get panicky. Don't do anything panicky at all. Don't get your weapons. He who lives by the sword will perish by the sword. Remember that is what God said. We are not advocating violence. We want to love our enemies. I want you to love our enemies. Be good to them. Love them and let them know you love them.

Following the Supreme Court's ruling that segregation on buses was unconstitutional, African-Americans went back to using the buses. King said that their return to the buses must be with the intention of turning enemies into friends. The Montgomery bus boycott or act of massive non-co-operation propelled Dr King on to the national and international stage.

In 1957, Morehouse College granted Dr King an honorary doctorate. The President of the College said to King:

You are mature beyond your years, wiser at twenty-eight than most men at sixty; more courageous in a righteous struggle than most men can ever be; living a faith that most men worry themselves into nameless graves when here and there a great soul forgets himself into immortality.

In 1958, Dr King wrote his first book, *Stride to Freedom*, which was a firsthand account of the Montgomery bus boycott. In September of that year, he went to New York to promote his book. While signing books in Harlem, a woman said to him, 'Are you Martin Luther King?' 'Yes,' King replied. The woman plunged a letter opener into his chest. Later, his doctor told him that, so deep was the wound, he would have died if he had sneezed. King received letters of support from across America, including the President and the Governor of New York. Among the letters, one stood out in his memory. It was from a white high school student who had read of his suffering and wrote: 'I'm so happy you did not sneeze.' During his period of convalescence, the King family went to India to learn at firsthand of the life and work of Mahatma Gandhi.

By 1961 more and more whites were joining with blacks in demonstrations against segregation. Demonstrations did attract white racist violence. In May 1961 King and others were trapped in a church in Montgomery by a violent white racist crowd outside. Not until the intervention of the Attorney General, Robert Kennedy, did federal marshals disperse the crowd and free those trapped inside.

1963 was perhaps the most significant year in the civil rights movement. King and the other civil rights leaders decided to confront the city officials and white citizens of Birmingham, Alabama. The city was described as the bastion of segregation. Dr King said that the city leaders were oblivious to history, the Founding Fathers, the American Constitution and the Supreme Court's ruling in 1954, which outlawed segregation in public schools. During one mass protest, Dr King was arrested. It was at this time he wrote his well-known letter from Birmingham jail. It was written in response to eight clergymen who endorsed an article which spoke out against

peaceful protests. They were critical of demonstrators who disregarded law and order. It is a long letter but Dr King made the point that, 'Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere,' and that his fight was their fight. King said that the suffering of the Negro people had gone on for too long. To the eight white clergymen he wrote:

I guess it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say 'wait.' But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick, brutalise and even kill black brothers and sisters with impunity....when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her little eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children....then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait.

During the mass protests the Police Commissioner, 'Bull' Connor, put on a strong display of force. Police dogs attacked unarmed and unprotected marchers. The fire department was called upon to help suppress the marchers using water. Many people were knocked clean off their feet. The non-violent protest and the violent police response were broadcast on national television. The philosophy and practice of non-violence had never been more effective. America began to see that the blacks were being victimised by the law rather than being protected by it. On May 2<sup>nd</sup>, large groups of people with their children descended on the city to join the protest. By the end of the day, almost one thousand children had been arrested. The following day more protesters were blasted with fire hoses, beaten with clubs and attacked by police dogs. Finally, on May 10<sup>th</sup>, under pressure from the federal government and international condemnation, Birmingham city officials gave way on segregation.

In June 1963, Medgar Evers, the secretary of the NAACP, was murdered on his front porch. There were riots throughout the summer. Not until 1993 was his killer brought to justice. In August 1963, Dr King delivered his most quoted speech before the Lincoln Memorial which was the keynote address of the Freedom March on Washington DC. The speech as a whole, popularly referred to as the *I have a dream* speech, has been said to lack the sheer force of his oratory which we can easily find

elsewhere, but the Dream itself was articulated with eloquence. We are going to listen to that Dream now:

So I say to you, my friends, that even though we must face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed – we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, sons of former slaves and sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day, even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream today!

I have a dream that one day, down in Alabama, with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of interposition and nullification, that one day, right there in Alabama, little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers. I have a dream today!

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places shall be made plain, and the crooked places shall be made straight and the glory of the Lord will be revealed and all flesh shall see it together.

This is our hope. This is the faith that I go back to the South with. With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood.

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. This will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with new meaning – “my country ‘tis of thee; sweet land of liberty; of thee I sing; land where my fathers died, land of the pilgrim's pride; from every mountainside, let freedom ring” – and if America is to be a great nation, this must become true.

So let freedom ring from the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire.  
Let freedom ring from the mighty mountains of New York.  
Let freedom ring from the heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania.  
Let freedom ring from the snow-capped Rockies of Colorado.

Let freedom ring from the curvaceous slopes of California.  
But not only that.  
Let freedom ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia.  
Let freedom ring from Lookout Mountain of Tennessee.  
Let freedom ring from every hill and molehill of Mississippi,  
from every mountainside, let freedom ring.

And when we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and hamlet, from every state and city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children – black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Catholics and Protestants – will be able to join hands and to sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, "Free at last, free at last; thank God Almighty, we are free at last."

One month after this great day, four young black girls were killed when they were bombed while at Sunday School at the Birmingham Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. Dr King spoke at the funeral and we listen to the end of the eulogy which he offered.

At times, life is hard, as hard as crucible steel. It has its bleak and painful moments. Like the ever-flowing waters of a river, life has its moments of drought and its moments of flood. Like the ever-changing cycle of the seasons, life has the soothing warmth of the summers and the piercing chill of its winters. But through it all, God walks with us. Never forget that God is able to lift you from fatigue of despair to the buoyancy of hope, and transform dark and desolate valleys into sunlit paths of inner peace.

Your children did not live long, but they lived well. The quantity of their lives was disturbingly small, but the quality of their lives was magnificently big. Where they died and what they were doing when death came will remain a marvellous tribute to each of you and an eternal epitaph to each of them. They died not in a den or dive nor were they hearing and telling filthy jokes at the time of their death. They died within the sacred walls of the church after discussing a principle as eternal as love.

Shakespeare had Horatio utter some beautiful words over the dead body of Hamlet. I paraphrase these words today as I stand over the last remains of these lovely girls: 'Good-night sweet princesses; may the flight of angels take thee to thy eternal rest.'

King, like the rest of the nation, was hugely distressed by the bombing. He saw them as martyrs. Two months later the President was shot. This was a time when serious questions were being asked about the violent nature of American society.

Through 1964 to 1968, Dr King attended a march in St Augustine, Florida, a stronghold of the Klu Klux Klan. He met the Pope at the Vatican and was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace. He was present in the White House with President Johnson when the Civil Rights Act was signed. Dr King led campaigns in Chicago and Mississippi and he became co-chairman of the group *Clergy and Laity Concerned about Vietnam*. He also published two more books: Why we can't wait and Where do we go from here: chaos or community?

On April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1968 the Revd Dr Martin Luther King travelled to Memphis. He travelled to Memphis to support a strike by the city's sanitation workers. He was persuaded to speak in the evening at the Mason Temple. It had not been his intention to do so but his speech that night was truly inspired. It was his final public speech. We shall hear part of that speech in a moment. From the moment Dr King first arrived at the motel, Memphis detectives, FBI agents and two special forces sharpshooters were present. Tactical squad police units patrolled the area. A well-dressed white man aged about forty took a room in a run-down house one block away. He signed in as John Willard. His real name was James Earl Ray, a career criminal who had recently escaped from the Missouri penitentiary. In his bare room with his rifle bought four days previously he had a clear view of the Lorraine Motel. On the evening of April 4, Dr King dressed for dinner and was ready to leave the motel. Those who were with him on the balcony left his side, and for a brief moment, he stood alone. A loud cracking sound was heard. Dr King lay on his back. The bullet had exploded in his right cheek and jaw and severed his spinal cord. The first person to reach Dr King was an undercover Memphis policeman who tried to stop the bleeding. Dr King died an hour later.

At his funeral in Atlanta, 200,000 people followed the coffin. The mourners listened to a recording of a sermon preached by Dr King two months earlier. King said:

If any of you are around when I have to meet my day, I don't want a long funeral. And if you get somebody to deliver the eulogy, tell them not to be too long. Tell them not to mention that I have a Nobel Peace Prize, that isn't important. Tell them not to mention that I have three or four hundred other awards, that's not important. Tell him not to mention where I went to school.

I'd like somebody to mention that day, that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to give his life serving others. I'd like for somebody to say that day, that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to love somebody. I want you to say that day, that I did try to feed the hungry...that I did try in my life, to clothe those who were naked....that I did try to visit those who were in prison. I want you to say that I tried to love and serve humanity.

Yes, if you want to say that I was a drum major, say that I was a drum major for justice; say that I was a drum major for peace; I was a drum major for righteousness. And all the other shallow things will not matter. I won't have any money to leave behind. I won't have the fine and luxurious things of life to leave behind. But I just want to leave a committed life behind.

Let me close my lecture by us listening to the final paragraphs of Dr King's last public speech. You will remember the story of the little girl who wrote to him expressing her delight that, when he had been stabbed, he had not sneezed.

And I want to say tonight, I want to say that I am happy that I didn't sneeze. Because if I had sneezed, I wouldn't have been around here in 1960, when students all over the South started sitting-in at lunch counters. And I knew that as they were sitting in, they were really standing up for the best in the American dream. And taking the whole nation back to those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the Founding Father in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. If I had sneezed, I wouldn't have been around in 1962, when Negroes in Albany, Georgia, decided to straighten their backs up. And whenever men and women straighten their backs up, they are going somewhere, because a man can't ride your back unless it is bent. If I had sneezed, I wouldn't have been here in 1963, when the black people of Birmingham, Alabama, aroused the conscience of this nation, and brought into being the Civil Rights Bill. If I had sneezed, I wouldn't have had a chance later that year, in August, to try to tell America about a dream that I had had. If I had sneezed, I wouldn't have been down in Selma, Alabama, to see the great movement there. If I had sneezed, I wouldn't have been in Memphis to see the community rally around those brothers and sisters who are suffering. I'm so happy that I didn't sneeze.

And they were telling me, now it doesn't matter now. It really doesn't matter what happens now. I left Atlanta this morning, and as we got started on the plane, there were six of us, the pilot said over the public address system, 'We are sorry for the delay, but we have Dr Martin Luther King on the plane. And to be sure that all of the bags were checked, and to be sure that nothing would be wrong with the plane, we had to check out everything carefully. And we've had the plane protected and guarded all night.'

And then I got into Memphis. And some began to say the threats,

or talk about the threats that were out. What would happen to me from some of our sick white brothers?

Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And 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. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.

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