

## Sermon

Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> April, 2008

Lessons        Acts 2: 14a, 36 - 41        1 Peter 1: 17 - 23        Luke 24: 13 – 35

### Prayer of Illumination

Let us pray.

Grant us, O Lord, teachable minds, receptive to Your Word, and quick to understand it; that being imbued with heavenly Wisdom, we may ever rejoice in the truth; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

On April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1968 the Revd Dr Martin Luther King, Jr 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. 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<sup>th</sup>, 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.

It is right that, whatever else we do in worship today, we remember the life and witness of the Revd Dr Martin Luther King Jr. He was a giant of the faith, a modern-day saint. Dr King is one of ten 20th-century martyrs from across the world who are depicted in statues above the Great West Door of Westminster Abbey. Posthumous accusations of marital infidelity and plagiarism have not dented his public reputation. Saints, in the biblical and Christian sense of the word, are not people who are perfect, but men and women who strive to be faithful to Jesus. What I find instructive and inspiring about Dr King was his ability to combine an unrelenting passion for justice with an unconquerable love towards those who opposed him and, through it all, the confident and unapologetic articulation of his faith.

Dr King's most quoted speech was not delivered in a pulpit or to a church gathering in a community hall. The speech, popularly referred to as the *I have a dream* speech, was delivered before the Lincoln Memorial as the keynote address of the Freedom March on Washington DC in August 1963. In this speech, Dr King skillfully weaves

the American dream with God's dream. He quotes the American 'creed': 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.' He dreams that 'black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with...white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.' If the faith that drives Dr King is not at this point obvious, he goes on to make what is implicit explicit right in the middle of his speech:

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.

His speech closes with these words:

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 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.'

If the Gospel of Jesus Christ is about nothing else, it is about the unity and community of humanity. Writing in 2004 and reflecting on the events of 9/11, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, said:

Instability and despair in the third world lead to terrorism and instability in the first world. God says there is no way in which we can win the war against terrorism as long as there are conditions that make people desperate. It is the logic of being human. It is something we should have learned long ago and we keep not heeding – we cannot be human on our own. We can only be human together.

In his own setting, Dr King knew this fundamental and basic truth: we can only be human together. As he faced the racism and injustice in Alabama and elsewhere in the United States, he knew that desperate conditions lead to desperate people which lead to desperate measures. Though he had experienced racism as a child, Dr King's entry on to the public stage came in 1956 with the arrest of the seamstress, Rosa Parks. Parks was arrested in Montgomery, Alabama, Dr King's hometown. She had

refused to give up her seat on a city bus. Black passengers paid the same fare as white passengers but were required by state law to give up their seats to white passengers and move to the back of the bus. Bus drivers and conductors regularly referred to African-Americans as 'niggers' and 'black apes.' Dr King helped organise a protest, an act of massive non-co-operation. Black passengers stopped using the buses. Dr King was clear: black people wanted justice, not the bankruptcy of the bus company.

During the struggle of 1956, Dr King received up to forty threats a day by telephone and letter. Three days before his home was bombed, he was disturbed by a telephone call in the middle of the night. 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.' Understandably, he was so disturbed by the call he could not go back to sleep. He paced 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 through the silence, he heard an inner voice say, 'Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And lo, I will be with you always. Even until the end of the world.' It was a spiritual experience which gave him the strength for the immediate fight and for years to come. Dr King 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 road to Emmaus, Cleopas and his friend walked home. They walked in sadness. They were at the end of their powers. They had nothing left. They were broken. Jesus himself drew near to them. They laid before him their despair. It

was in their darkness he visited them. Our darkness is a place where we can expect to meet with God and, though in our darkness He will be ministering to us, often He remains illusive, unrecognisable and an absent Presence. Cleopas and his friend experienced the Divine as they had never done before. For Dr King it seems his kitchen floor was the Road to Emmaus.

Three days later his home was bombed. His family was in the house at the time. As news of the bombing spread, a large crowd gathered outside. Standing beside the white mayor and police commissioner, Dr King addressed the largely black crowd:

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.

Dr King is a saint. He is a saint not because he answers prayers from heaven, nor because his name is associated with superstitious stories of curing those with incurable diseases. He is a saint because he stood outside his house on what was left of the porch with representatives of his enemies beside him and a crowd eager for revenge on his behalf before him and said, 'I want you to love our enemies. Be good to them. Love them and let them know you love them.' In this world that is miraculous. Was it not the Risen Christ, whom he had met on his own Road to Emmaus, who gave Dr King the strength to love his enemies? It was as if Jesus himself was speaking. Whatever else we do in worship today, it is right that we remember the life and witness of the Revd Dr Martin Luther King, Jr.

Amen.

