

Sermon – Epiphany 2 – Dr Martin Luther King Jr

Church of St Luke and St Matthew, Brooklyn

In Montgomery, Alabama the Civil Rights Memorial is located across the street from the Southern Poverty Law Center and around the corner from the Dexter Ave King Memorial Baptist Church. It is a fitting location for the memorial as Montgomery, Alabama was so closely linked with Dr Martin Luther King Jr.'s early ministry and the civil rights movement. The Dexter Ave Baptist Church was under Dr King's leadership from 1954 – 1960 and he directed, amongst other things, the Montgomery bus boycotts from there in 1956.

The Civil Rights Memorial was designed by Maya Lin, the designer of the poignant Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington DC. The memorial in Montgomery consists of a large round block of black granite which has been set so the top is perfectly level. Etched into the top are the names of the martyrs of the civil rights movement and the key moments in history of the civil rights struggles. Out of a hole in the center of the block comes water which flows over all the inscribed names and places as if uniting them into a whole. You can easily reach over and trace your fingers across the inscribed names and be united with them in the ongoing struggle of justice for all.

A black granite wall is the backdrop to this record of history and over it water flows in endless procession. Inscribed on this wall in large letters are the words from the prophet Amos "...until justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream." Dr Martin Luther King Jr. spoke these words in his speech from in front of the Lincoln Memorial on August 28, 1963. I have used a photograph of these words from the Civil Rights Memorial as the banner on my sermon website to remind me of my own commitment to social justice.

King's speech that day was about the struggle for recognition and equality for African American men and women, the long road of justice seeking, his dream for full equality and his hope that his faith in God, and the faith of everyone, would eventually lead to unity of all peoples.

The struggle for unity of peoples and justice for all spans the full arc of human history from Amos' time, through multiple civic upheavals, through the great civil rights struggles of the 1950s, 60s and 70s to this very day. The work of justice and peace for all is ongoing through each generation and is a core component of our own Christian faith.

Tomorrow is the annual day of remembrance for Dr King. This day sits between two feast days of the church – the Confession of St Peter, commemorated last Friday and the conversion of St Paul, to be commemorated this coming Friday. The time between these two important feast days is also the traditional period for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. It is fitting that these significant commemorations of Dr King's life and Christian Unity sit between the commemorations of these two great pillars of the Christian Church.

For Christians, this time should be a time of deep reflection and prayer for justice, peace, prayer and unity amongst all people. It should also be a period of contemplation for the rich blessing of the

diversity of peoples across the world. It would be a terribly dull world if we were of the same heritage.

Each year the focus of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity changes from country to country. It is truly a worldwide action. This year the Christian church in Indonesia set the scripture texts and prayers for the week. Indonesia is the largest Islamic country in the world with 265 million people scattered across 1,700 islands. The population is 86% Muslims with about 10% Christian from different traditions. The republic was founded on five equity-based principles called Pancasila, and their motto is *Unity in Diversity*.

The key text chosen for this week of prayer is a passage from Deuteronomy Chapter 16, versus 11 thru 20. The theme of this pericope is rejoicing before the Lord, everyone in community celebrating their release from slavery in Egypt. God had called them to celebrate three times a year and to give generously out of the blessings that the Lord had bestowed upon them.

Verse 20, the last in the set text is the theme verse for the week of prayer. "Justice, only justice you shall pursue so that you may live and occupy the land that the Lord your God is giving you." God implores them not to distort justice, not to show partiality and not to accept bribes. Justice is the aim for the righteous life in unity with our Lord and with each other. God had blessed them with freedom and new lands, however God's gift came with the responsibility to act justly.

This octave of prayer opened last Friday with the prophet Amos' words from Chapter 5 v24, "Let justice roll down like waters." This familiar passage sets the tone for the week and rightly so because our world is experiencing a significant rise in disunity and injustice. Wouldn't it be great if the leadership of this country took this week of prayer to heart and sought to reduce injustice in our country and the world? Our leaders are abrogating their responsibility to lead by example and to hold world leaders and others accountable for their unjust actions in stirring up division, supporting corruption and imprisoning those that would oppose them.

The civil rights era in this country was a culmination of decades, indeed centuries, of injustice towards people of color, immigrants and the poor. The movement led by Dr King and others sought to shine the bright light of justice on all the unjust discriminations. The movement was shaped by average men and women who put their lives on the line for the cause. Brave people like Rosa Parks, Emmet Till, William Moore, Medgar Evers, Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair, Carole Robertson and Cynthia Wesley, Rev Bruce Klunder, Jimmie Lee Jackson, Rev James Reeb, Viola Liuzzo, Jonathan Daniels and many others. Their names or their actions remembered forever and etched into the Civil Rights Memorial.

Today we still ache for the injustice in this world and even in this city. We ache for the lives of black men and women unjustly killed by gun violence. We ache for refugees who flee violence and oppression in central and south America only to be met with more hostility at our borders. We ache for the children separated from their families for no reason other than to punish their parents. We ache for lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans people, especially youth, who are still bullied and ostracized by their peers and by institutions of society like conservative, evangelical religious organizations. We

ache for women and girls who are discriminated against and abused by men throughout the world, subjected to unequal wages and more likely to live in poverty. We now ache for the many federal works going without pay because the country's leadership can't agree on border security. I could go on and on.

Our work for justice is never done. We must continue to chip away at unjust practices and be prepared to speak up. If we don't speak up, then who will?

Our baptism calls on us to take the message of Jesus into the world. This is a prophetic mission and our prophetic witness. It can be daunting to speak out against injustice and oppression in a world that seems to foster both. If we find we are reluctant to respond with a prophetic voice we would join many that have gone before us in feeling apprehensive. Moses and Jeremiah were reluctant. Elijah too was reluctant and when the going got tough for him he fled and pleaded with God to take away his life (1 Kings 19). Jonah too was reluctant and fled to Tarshish rather than go to Nineveh where God had called him to go. Even Jesus seems to be reluctant in the account of the wedding in Cana in our gospel reading today. "My hour has not yet come," he says.

We have a natural fear I feel of speaking out against the prevailing culture when it becomes necessary to do so. Our human tendencies make us much more likely to 'go with the flow,' to mirror the behaviors of others in the community. But for the good of the nation we need the prophetic voice to rise above the masses, a voice to call attention to those issues where injustice is being promoted.

If not us, then who?

Martin Luther King Jr. was a prophet for the time but one who still felt some hesitation about returning to the south with its system of injustice and oppression that he had grown up in. In his book "Stride Toward Freedom" he wrote that after some hesitation and discernment and "despite the disadvantages and inevitable sacrifices, [he and his wife's] greatest service could be rendered in the south." He concluded he said, "that we had something of a moral obligation to return."

Dr King's prophetic message must resonate with us today. Like many of the prophetic voices of times past he was silenced in the hope that the movement and actions he championed would be halted or reversed. Of course, that didn't happen and his voice continues to be heard, as does the voice of Jesus, John, Jeremiah and Elijah.

Injustice as many of us know happens all around us every day. Our prophetic witness is the antidote the world needs. Our witness can shine the light of Jesus into those dark places and we can do what we can to unify and arrest the complacency of the world to overturning injustice and oppression.

So, if not us, then who?