

BEHOLD A DREAMER

preached at a service commemorating the life of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
in the Cathedral Church of SS. Peter & Paul, Washington, D.C.
Sunday, 19 January 1992

And they said to one another, "Behold, this dreamer cometh. Come now, therefore, and let us slay him, and cast him into some pit; and we will say, 'Some evil beast hath devoured him.' And we shall see what will become of his dreams." — Genesis 37:20

It is a distinct pleasure and privilege to be here this morning in this great cathedral church, and to stand in the very pulpit from which Martin Luther King, Jr., preached his last sermon, as we gather to celebrate the life and witness of that great American. I am most grateful to my dear friend and colleague, Dean Nathan Baxter, for affording me this opportunity.

In an attempt to offer a few thoughts on the life of Martin Luther King, Jr., I would like to suggest that he is not merely a saint to be revered by African-Americans, but one who has bequeathed a rich legacy to all of us who inhabit "this fragile earth, our island home." I invite you all, therefore, to meditate with me on these words from the 20th verse of the 37th chapter of the Book of Genesis:

And they said to one another, "Behold, this dreamer cometh. Come now, therefore, and let us slay him, and cast him into some pit; and we will say, 'Some evil beast hath devoured him.' And we shall see what will become of his dreams."

We have come here this morning to give thanks unto Almighty God for the life and witness of a man who was a dreamer, a man who did more to change the course of the history of this nation than any other person in living memory. We have come to honor a man whose quiet yet effective ministry caused a world to sit up and take notice; a man whose dedication never ceased to amaze those who came into contact with him; a man whose living out of the imperatives of the Christian gospel, and whose commitment to world peace earned him the Nobel Prize; a man whose vision of humanity, whose dream of a new heaven and a new earth cost him his life.

The practice of eliminating dreamers who do not conform to the expectations or who challenge the preeminence of the status quo, or who do not fit into society as the powers that be define it, is as old as humanity itself. Scripture is replete with examples, and we have chosen perhaps the most famous example in the Old Testament. Although some last-minute pangs of conscience prevented the actual slaying of Joseph, the murderous intent of his brothers was no less evil. Indeed, selling him to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver, and convincing their father that Joseph had been slain by a wild beast might be viewed as acts even more contemptible

than murder itself. Their homicidal will was born of envy, fear and greed. They begrudged Joseph his position of favor with their father, and were afraid that Joseph would have dominion over them, and that that would, in turn, result in a reduction in their inheritance. His dreams confirmed their fears. So Joseph had to go.

The practice of eliminating those whose dreams pose a threat became even more commonplace in the early Christian era, when witnesses to the faith — the *marturioi* (which, as my Greek professor would jokingly say, comes from our English word, “martyr”) — suffered death in the gladiators’ arena. It was felt that if only such people could be expunged, the movement would be over. But it seems that quite the opposite proved to be the case. I believe it was Tertullian, one of the fathers of the early church, who wrote: “*Sanguis martyrorum semen ecclesiae*”: “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.” Movements take on new meaning, new life, new hope when their leaders are slain. It was true of the church’s early martyrs from the Holy Innocents to Saint Stephen to Saint Cyprian; and it is no less true in our own age of *Martin Luther King, Jr.*

Martin Luther King was a dreamer. He had the temerity to dream of a society where black, white, yellow, red, and brown people could live together in harmony. Martin dreamed of a society which was not hell-bent on its own destruction. And precisely because the realization of his dreams would tend to upset the political applecart; precisely because the realization of his dreams would “put down the mighty from their seat and exalt the humble and meek,” his jealous brethren reasoned together, as they had reasoned when the other dreamers of the Sixties — John Kennedy, Malcolm X, and Robert Kennedy — dared to dream their dreams, and said, “Come, let us slay him, and cast him into some pit, and we shall see what will become of his dreams.”

What was Martin’s dream? Perhaps we can best understand it by listening to the words of the speech he delivered when he received the Nobel Peace Prize:

I refuse to accept the view that mankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality. I refuse to accept the cynical notion that nation after nation must spiral down a militaristic stairway into the hell of thermonuclear destruction. I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality. This is why right temporarily defeated is stronger than evil triumphant.

To Martin, racism and war were two sides of the same ideological coin, because he believed that “racism is a philosophy based on a contempt for life. It is the arrogant assertion that one race is the center of value and the object of devotion. Racism is total estrangement,” he wrote. “It separates not only bodies but minds and spirits. Inevitably, it descends to inflicting spiritual and physical homicide upon the outgroup.” Attacking racism at its roots,

therefore, to Martin, was the surest method of ensuring world peace. Racism to Martin Luther King, then, was no mere philosophical tenet; it was for him a profound theological problem. He firmly believed that because racism denies the dignity of every human being as a child of God; because racism precludes the possibility of our loving our neighbor as ourselves, that racism is sin.

We needn't look far for examples of this sin in our society. The Howard Beach incident proved to be just the tip of the proverbial iceberg, as bias-related crimes continue to occur with alarming and frightening regularity in our nation's cities. In the halls of academe, minority students are subjected to the most unspeakable injustices. And in the political arena, a former Ku Klux Klan wizard can boast that, although defeated in a bid for a gubernatorial post, he garnered the majority of the white votes in his state. Meanwhile, the resident of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, trying very hard to ensure that that continues to be his address, goes to great pains to dissociate himself from such embarrassments within the ranks of his own party, all the while hoping that the American public has forgotten about Willie Horton.

What has become of the dream of Martin Luther King? — that dream which he so eloquently articulated at the March on Washington in 1963, in words which reverberated over the Mall and were heard in every corner of the world: "I have a dream that one day, on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit together at the table of brotherhood." Today, nearly a quarter-century after Dr. King's assassination, that dream is getting mixed reviews. Those who would have us believe that the dream has been fulfilled will point to the alleged rise of the black middle class. They cite the statistic that there are some 7,500 black elected officials in the United States today, as opposed to a mere five hundred of so in the late sixties. They point with pride to the fact that a black man sits in the Executive Mansion in Richmond, the seat of the old Confederacy. They boast of the accomplishments of Colin Powell, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, catapulted to fame by the Gulf War. But those who are in a position to make a more analytical assessment of this nation's health do not speak in such glowing terms. In light of evidence that would suggest a decrease in racial harmony, and a growing distrust between racial groups, Ron Brown, the chairman of the Democratic National Committee, said this week that Martin, "who gave his life for the American dream, would be appalled at the state of America." The president of a national group of black directors of social service agencies, lamenting the effect of budget constraints on the government's ability to provide human services, commented: "Dr. King's dream is being deferred, diminished and virtually destroyed." And the Mayor of New York City summed it up, perhaps, when he said of Martin: "How sad he would be to see how far we have strayed" from that dream.

My sisters and brothers in Christ, I would like to suggest to you this morning, that Jesus, the Physician of our souls, would not be content if we sat idly by as we listened to these devastating prognoses, simply waiting for the patient to lapse into an irreversible coma. If we

are to be instrumental in realizing the dream that Martin Luther King had for this nation, we must ask ourselves: What can we do, especially we who confess and call ourselves Christians, to ensure that these dreams come to fruition, and do not disintegrate into nightmares?

Above all, we must combat racism even when it occurs in the bosom of our holy mother, the church. I single out the church, first, because it is that arena in which we all live, breathe, move, and have our being; secondly, because somehow we expect it to be devoid of this sin (although we must own the fact that eleven o'clock Sunday morning is still the most segregated hour in America); and thirdly and most importantly, because the church which purports to preach the Gospel of the Prince of Peace, who came reconciling the world to himself, must stand for that "unarmed truth and unconditional love" of which Martin speaks.

We can realize his dream by helping to ensure that the church is inclusive. Inclusiveness is a concept which we encounter nowadays almost always in relation to the practice of sexism. The individual sensitive to such issues goes through mental, theological and grammatical gymnastics. Lectionaries and hymnals have been revised; whole pericopes of Scripture are ignored; and the English language has accommodated such new words as *chairperson*, *clergyperson*, and restaurant employees known as *waitpersons*. Should we not be just as concerned with inclusiveness as it regards those who belong to a different race, culture, or class? How ironic it is that we profess allegiance to a man who associated with wanton harlots, greedy tax collectors and unwashed Samaritans — and yet, we have a church today, especially our branch of it, which all too often, though often deservedly, enjoys a reputation of being a bastion of exclusiveness and elitism.

The struggle towards inclusiveness must begin in our own congregations, where we are all too fond of setting up "degrees and pedigrees" — a highly developed pecking order for membership and acceptance. There is a story told about a lady from a church known to be somewhat more emotional in its liturgical expression, who sat in the front pew of an Episcopal church (thereby giving herself away). After each point the preacher made, she would utter "Amen," which caused the congregation to look at her askance. As the preacher became more animated, the woman shouted "Praise the Lord!" — and the faithful began to pray for her miraculous removal. At the climax of the sermon, the woman jumped to her feet and exclaimed "Alleluia!" The congregation was in panic (it being Lent) and dispatched a pin-striped usher to investigate. "Is something the matter, madam?" he queried. "No," she replied. "I got religion." "That may well be," responded the usher, "but you certainly didn't get it here."

What has become of the dream of Martin Luther King? To realize Martin's dream we must be about the business of breaking down, and not reinforcing the barriers which separate us. Our love must be unconditional and not selective. We cannot love that starving Ethiopian child or the Salvadoran refugee, because they represent fashionable causes, while ignoring the homeless in our own cities, who are no less hungry, no less destitute.

What has become of the dream of Martin Luther King? We can realize his dream by helping to ensure that the church is prophetic. The church has been for too long a non-*prophet* organization. We have often exercised a ministry, not “with the cross of Jesus going on before,” as the hymn reminds us, but “with the cross of Jesus bringing up the rear”! According to an apocryphal tale, the founding fathers, having drawn up the Constitution, went across the street and founded the Episcopal Church. Ever since, the church, by and large, has been a mirror image of the society at large. We have been a chaplaincy to the status quo, and not a champion of the oppressed. A prophetic church is not one which looks into a crystal ball and tells the future; rather it is a church which reads the signs of the times, interprets them, and charts a course of action, even if it be an unpopular one. Martin Luther King was a prophet in this sense, and he can be described in the words of the prophet Ezekiel: “Whether they hear or refuse to hear, they will know that a prophet has been among them.” If we are to realize Martin’s dream, the church of Christ must be prophetic.

What has become of the dream of Martin Luther King? Finally, if we are to ensure that Martin’s dream comes true, we must as a church be compassionate. We who are members of a church accused of being made up of “God’s frozen chosen,” we who have been called “the bland leading the bland” must allow our façade to be penetrated. We must let go and let God. It is not enough to engage in the type of outreach designed to keep others out of reach. It is not enough to run a soup kitchen if we ourselves find it difficult to ladle out the soup. If indeed we are to minister to people in our midst we must show compassion — and compassion, and its Greek cognate, sympathy, both mean *to suffer with*. Our ministry is suspect if we exercise it from a social and spiritual distance. Disenfranchised groups in our society are tired of being worked *among*. They want to be worked *with*. They want to have a say in their own destiny. The Lady Bountiful approach to mission has had its day.

My friends, as members of Christ’s Body, the church, an institution unlike any other committed to the betterment and upliftment of those not its members; as members of Christ’s Body, the church, which regards each human being as made in the image of God, we are best equipped to realize Martin’s dream. For we know that homelessness, poverty, crime, and despair are people problems — problems that exist not for want of know-how, technology or even resources. They exist by and large because this nation lacks a sense of moral vision and commitment. Martin said,

We as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin the shift from a “thing-oriented” society to a “person-oriented” society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered.

Our job is to work towards the conquering of these “isms” so that Martin shall not have lived, and died, in vain.

I read a story in the *New York Times* some time ago that brought tears to my eyes. It was about a young black firefighter in Newark, hired in an affirmative action campaign, who, in an attempt to rescue an hysterical woman from a burning building, slipped while transferring her to the ladder. He fell to his death, but saved the woman's life by breaking her fall. Later, his heart was transplanted into the chest of a man who had congenital and terminal heart disease, thus enabling that man to live a normal life.

Somehow, this story is a paradigm of the life of Martin Luther King, Jr. He gave his own life in the process of saving the life of his nation. He tried to restore a sanity to this nation, hysterical as she was, about the business of waging simultaneous racial wars, one in the streets of her ghettos, and the other in rice paddies halfway 'round the world, and he succeeded in giving her a new sense of direction.

But having done that, his heart still beats in the breast of this nation, because the blood of this modern-day martyr has truly proved to be the seed for a movement for the liberation of every oppressed segment of this society. Martin Luther King laid the groundwork for racial equality, to be sure, but the struggle for liberation on the part of women, homosexuals, and other minorities could not have taken place when they did — or to the extent that they did — had it not been for Martin's witness.

As we celebrate his life, therefore, it is a cause for rejoicing, rejoicing in thanksgiving for a man who gave a nation — nay, a world — a new moral direction; a man who came, like the Lord whose soldier and martyr he was, not be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life as a ransom for many.