

Truly, truly I say to you, he who hears my word and believes him who sent me,
has eternal life; he does not come into judgment, but has eternal life.

- John 5:24

“Lord, I must confess that I am weak now. I’m faltering. I’m losing courage.” That was the prayer of Martin Luther King, Jr on his kitchen table at Montgomery, Alabama, one midnight after taking a call that threatened him with death. He knew that the caller was a racist, and he knew that the caller meant business when he said, “we’re going to blow your brains out, and blow up your house.” He was scared for his young family, and he did not know where to turn. So, he prayed, in the middle of the night; all by himself, with his wife and young family fast asleep in their bedrooms.. But praying was the most natural thing to Dr Martin Luther King Jr. He later testified that a “nearly-mystical awareness of God’s presence” overwhelmed him. “Rationality left me” he remembered later. “I started thinking about many things. I pulled back on theology and philosophy that I had just studied at universities, trying to give philosophical and theological reasons for the existence and reality of evil, but the answer didn’t quite come (from) there.” He turned, as James H Cone says, to the God of the black experience. He heard a voice addressing him directly right there in his kitchen, “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.”

Three days later, just as the threatener had promised, he was told that his house had been bombed. He was used to these threats to his life and those of his wife and children – about 40 a day at times. He was calm on this occasion, to everyone’s surprise. He later explained, “I accepted the word of the bombing calmly because my experience of God had given me new strength and trust. I knew now that God is able to give us the interior resources to face the storms and problems of life.” He made his way home, and to his relief found his wife and children unharmed. But there was an angry crowd outside determined to retaliate against the arsonists. He had to calm them down and counseled them against violence. “We must love our white brothers no matter what they do to us...” was his ministry to them.

It is that lived faith and that overpowering awareness of being under the guidance of God that we often lose sight of when we celebrate Dr Martin Luther King Jr. He was a “reluctant” prophet and conscience of America, an inspiring preacher and orator, a man of deep and abiding faith in the face of adversity. That, even before he was a social and political activist, a visionary for an America that lived up to its own promises, and that could find it within itself to live in equality and at peace with

itself – black and white America – settler Euro-America, native and African American. For him, America had to live uncomfortably with the prevailing extremes of poverty check-by-jowl with obscene wealth, and answer its calling to be a force for good in the world. Again and again, he called on and reminded Americans of the legacy of its founding fathers.

Martin Luther King Jr could have chosen life as a stirring and popular pastor in the Negro Church mold. He could have been a scholar and a theologian that he was and confine himself to his books and the academe. He could have been the son of a middle class, fairly affluent Black preacher family only and nothing more! It was never in his mind that when he was invited to a pastorate in the inconspicuous Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Montgomery, Alabama that he would soon get thrust into a mammoth movement for change and for the soul of America. He was, by all accounts, a very reluctant leader of the civil rights movement.

From the Black Church spiritual and Biblical tradition, and from a family steeped in the deep psyche of slavery, and a home where faith and intellect were lived as a canon of life, Martin Luther King Jr was bound to be a sensitive, intelligent and critical Christian. He was bound to have an eye for the underdog, but he went well beyond what even his parents could have imagined. He gave his life to the cause of justice and to the task of changing the face and soul of America.

First he was steeped in scholarship. He dug into his studies of theology and philosophy to find answers to the human predicament he personally faced but which he believed actually defined the state of America. At the age of 26 he had obtained a doctoral degree in theology from Boston University, one of the elite universities of America. A student of German philosopher Hegel, he sought an integrated manner of life and that “moral life” in the words of Robert M Franklin, “was an ongoing process in which a person diligently pursues personal balance, harmonic proportion and moderation among the varied elements of life.” From early on he experienced racism in Atlanta, and from his mother’s knee he learnt that he was “somebody” and from them imbibed the notion that the most constant interest in life was “the eloquent statement of ideas.” Rooted as he was in the Black Church, he modeled himself on his mentor and Dean of Moorehouse College, Atlanta, Benjamin Elijah Mays who taught that that “ a minister could be a rational, moral agent who was socially involved, widely read and well-spoken.” This was hugely liberating to the young seminarian.

That was the basis on which he felt called to be a minister in the Black Baptist tradition of his fathers. His graduate studies in Human Fulfillment led him to the

view that the greatest dimension in human self-realisation was to “reach up and discover God.” For him nothing mattered more than being “a man of God.” The Christian faith and the Church of God mattered to him. Human personality meant that humanity was an integrated being – both body and mind. That meant that human nature needed sustenance of the body as well as of the spirit, and therefore that there could be no faith of any meaning if it ignored the suffering of the world. Religion was, for him, a force for transforming persons, communities and nations.

King’s faith practice was Bible-centred and prayer focused. At Ebenezer Baptist Church Martin Luther King grew up knowing the power of prayer and praise, of preaching the Word with power. At the centre of life was God – the God of power who makes all things new. It was that transforming power of faith that drew him closer to the church and for himself to become a preacher. “At Ebenezer”, says James H Cone, “the spirituality of the black church was planted deeply in his being, and it grew to become the sustaining force of his life.” Martin Luther King Jr was studious about reading the Bible. For him the Negro spirituals were a call-back or a clarion call, to the plaintiff simple faith of the plantation slave workers who were sustained in their humanity by the God who put songs into their hearts, the “balm of Gilead”. His speeches and sermons are peppered with Biblical references and allusions. It is evident that he was greatly influenced in this by the biblical prophets, and by the example of our Lord Jesus Christ. His life was also in totality a life of prayer and public witness to the faith.

Although SCLC was an avowedly Christian organization – it attracted many non Christians, It was known that what mattered to King most was daily prayer and the prayerful support of many around the country. Messages of prayer support were vital to him. It is said that when times were hard and he knew that he was under such tremendous pressure, strain and stress so much that he could crack, he sought solace in isolation and silence.

The last occasion was when, on the eve of the Great March of the Poor that he was to lead, he was exhausted and depressed, his co-workers realized that he needed a break, it was arranged that Thomas Merton conduct a Retreat for them as a team. Curtis Paul deYoung says that King was facing exhaustion and struggling with depression and some doubt about the course he had chosen in the face of so much opposition and criticism from within his movement and from without. At the same time he had this “brooding” sense that his days were numbered and he was longing for “silence, for a time to step back, to pray and to reflect.” In other words, time to be with God. After a day or so in Retreat he had to break out of the retreat to rush to Memphis, Tennessee to support the strike by sanitation workers. The result was

that he was forced to find God in the margins, among the messiness of a strike, and the suffering of the poor. That evening, tired, and unprepared he had to preach at a local church, what turned out to be a most memorable sermon from the heart about reaching the mountain-top – a Mosaic reflection, on the destiny of the Messenger of God. The following day 4 April 1968, he was hit by an assassin's bullet. He never did take part in the Poor People's March that he had been looking forward to with such eagerness. He was 39 years old.

The second cornerstone of Martin Luther King Jr system was his calling to be a minister. His sense of vocation was impelling and abiding. He believed that as a minister under God he was under a duty to speak the truth, with love, regardless of who was affected, or of the costs of personal safety and security. He challenged those in his church who were critical of his stance on the issues especially of opposition to the Vietnam War that

“God anointed! No member of Ebenezer Baptist Church called me to the ministry. You called me to Ebenezer, and you may turn me out of here. But you can't turn me out of the ministry, because I got my appointment from God Almighty, and anything I want to say I'm going to say it from the pulpit... The word of God is upon me like fire shut up in my bones... I've got to say it..., I've got to tell it all over everywhere... the God that called me to preach told me that every now and then ... I'll have to agonise and suffer for the freedom of his children. I may even have to die for it...

His view was that being a minister called by God, did not just make one a functionary of the church, but a prophet and an authoritative teacher and expositor of the Word. Above all it required of one to become in every respect and at whatever cost a disciple of Christ. For him it meant that he felt a compulsion to speak out: speak out about the injustice of racial oppression; speak out about the yawning crisis of poverty in American society and the sin of capitalism; he had to speak out above all about the madness of the Vietnam War. In a sermon at Ebenezer Baptist Church he uttered these words that speak to the heart of a costly ministry:

And there comes a time when a true follower of Jesus Christ must take a stand that's neither safe nor politic nor popular but he must take that stand because it is right.

At the height of his activism, he still made time to pen a Q&A Column in *Ebony* magazine. In its month-by-month he fielded questions from the general public on every issue imaginable. It became a “must read” column by the general public, to get an insight into the thinking of the civil rights movement leader and pastor. Robert M Franklin got to name him a pastoral theologian and public intellectual. He was also able through such means to speak bluntly and directly to the sense of self-worth and

humanity of the black person. He had such moral authority that he could say of the ordinary working-class black American that if it falls on you to be a street sweeper "Sweep the streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will have a pause and say, 'Here lived a great street sweeper who swept his job well...'"

Finally I make reference to what is perhaps most well known about Dr Martin Luther King Jr, the Dreamer. He was in every respect an idealist. He insisted on believing the best about human nature. He could do so, he believed, because he knew that God was the Creator of all good things, and that it was within every human person to be good. He held that no one can commit to a Great Cause unless they found someone who was the personification of that cause. "You ought to believe something in life, believe that thing so fervently that you will stand up with it till the end of your days", he said.

His belief system was such that he could not accept that evil in the world was the last and final statement about God. Moral leadership was critical to give energy to the struggle for justice, "we must lift our moral standards at every point..." He believed that freedom was the will of God and that nothing would stop the forward march to freedom. "Let freedom ring..." he concluded his speech at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington DC, and then took the familiar strain of the Negro spiritual, "Free at last. Free at last. Thank God Almighty, we are free at last." His "I have dream" speech was both about the idealism of being a New American who was not bound by the least that America could offer but by its highest ideals Americans could shape their lives and their society. He therefore dared to dream of a new society not shaped by prejudice and greed but by the highest values that shaped the American dream. For him it was possible that that new society was within the possibility of Americans to live by and to shape their future.

Our reading from John's Gospel this evening might well have been the gospel that Martin Luther King Jr might have used to affirm his mystic-spirituality (to use an expression by Albert Nolan). It is that sense of complete identity between the Father and the Son, and through which those who follow the Son as his disciples, also have a similar attachment to the Son, as that of the Father and the Son. Martin Luther King Jr strongly affirmed the gift of life as ordained by God, and which no one can rob from those to whom it has been given. His prophetic call is in that he knows that humanity is under judgment not because God judges but because human actions judge them, and determines their relationship or proximity to God. Humanity is called, in Pauline language, to be one with Christ, to be in Christ, and it is that relationship to Christ that tests our fidelity to the God of faith. Therefore the relationship to God is through the Son who is a window into God, the Father. It is

through that Son that we become sons and daughters of God, and co-inheritors with Christ of the kingdom of God. The nature and character of our relationship with Christ is the measure of our relationship with God.

Martin Luther King Jr was striving with all his spiritual force and rhetorical might to give substance to this relationship. He did so because he believed it explicitly. There can be no such relationship, he held, if the relationships with one another at an horizontal level was without meaning or dignity. His social and ethical concern was to restore that relationship because he believed that it was a moral imperative to do so, and that it was indeed the means to repair our broken relationship with God. In other words, to fail to do so would itself mark a break with the God of Love, the Creator. Sin is a fracture of the fellowship between God, the Creator and God's creatures. In the manner of realized eschatology, John expresses himself emphatically when he says "truly, truly..." (or in very truth..., or Nothing but the truth...) what God wills is already present and realized among us, and what will be is being judges by our faithfulness. God in Jesus Christ is incarnate, but God's glory in him is yet to be revealed in all its fullness. This, say Johannine commentators like John Suggit (*Down to Earth and up to Heaven*, 2003, Richard A Burrige et al (2008)), is the anticipation, if you like, of the Christ of glory, the glorified and Risen Christ. And here we catch a glimpse of that heavenly glory that is to come. It is realized. It is real. It is here and now. That, in my opinion is expressed more powerfully in the following words:

"Practice hospitality ungrudgingly to one another. As each has received a gift, employ it for one another, as good stewards of God's grace; whoever speaks, (speaks) as one who utters the oracles of God; whoever renders service, (renders) as one who renders it by the strength which God supplies; in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ..." (1 Peter 4:9-11).

There are three things I wish to focus on as I draw the spirituality of Martin Luther King Jr to a close. First, a living and a lived faith must surely have implications for the health of our world. deYoung says that a lived faith "is the hallmark of the leadership of mystic activists. They have a depth of understanding of the outworking of God's purposes in their lives, and they have this sense of compulsion about being faithful to Christ rather than to the world. They do have a sense that Christ is at work in the world for good and that evil will not triumph forever.

Second, this power of responsibility translates into faith action: life of prayer, fidelity to the Bible and prophetic witness in the world.

Third, it is, almost in spite of themselves, to dream of a better future, of a better world, and to refuse to be limited in vision by the evil that surrounds us, but to seek to transcend it and overcome it.

Finally, this requires a life lived in faith and for faith. It is a constant challenging of oneself against the exacting standards of Christ, notwithstanding the knowledge that we can never meet such standards.

And now to my last word: the problem we have in South Africa, as if we had never been through *apartheid*, is that we seem to have come to believe that the socio-political and economic dispensation that we have created is unalterable, or God-designed. We seem to say that we must live with the evil of inequality and poverty, and the demeaning conditions to human dignity that stare at us in the face day by day, and which we ignore at our peril; with the society that simply has come to tolerate racism and all forms of inequality, or gender discrimination or homophobia; or that we have simply mainstreamed corruption as if it is what is meant to be so, by the pleasure of God. Surely that is blasphemy. We look away at the pain of the marginalized refugees, and women and children who suffer daily violence, and we have allowed our society, collectively, to be defined by its worst elements. At a time like this we are a nation crying out for a Martin Luther King Jr.

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