

"SOME TWENTIETH-CENTURY MEN OF GOD"

II. Martin Luther King, Jr.

INTRODUCTION Martin Luther King has been and to some degree still is a controversial figure. Perhaps as much as any other American in this century, he has been both criticized and canonized - villified and glorified. When Time magazine chose Dr. King as "Man of the Year" in 1963, the cover story said that his mail brought him "a daily dosage of opinions" of varied extremes from such a statement as "This isn't a threat, but a promise - your head will be blown off as sure as God made green apples" to such lofty appraisals of him as, "A Moses, sent to lead his people to the Promised Land of first-class citizenship".

I make no pretense of being neutral in my appraisal of Martin Luther King. While I'm sure that he had his flaws and made his mistakes, I hold him to be one of God's important men in this country and this century - a Christian prophet who revealed an unusual degree of the love and courage and judgement which were incarnate in Jesus Christ. As we said last week at the beginning of this series, the ultimate judgement about the stature of these men rests with God and history, but with such light and understanding as we have, many of us regard Dr. King as representing greatness in our time.

DEVELOPMENT Let's begin by sketching his life's story. Martin Luther King was born in Atlanta in 1929. His father, a Baptist minister, was the son of a share-cropper and had known the worst about poverty, ignorance and discrimination. He was determined to give to his son another kind of heritage. King, Jr. remembered a day when as a child he went to a downtown shoestore with his father.

"We sat down in the first empty seats at the front of the store. A young white clerk came up and murmured politely, 'I'll be happy to wait on you if you'll just move to those seats in the rear'. My father answered, 'There's nothing wrong with these seats. We're quite comfortable here'. 'Sorry' said the clerk, 'but you'll have to move'. 'We'll either buy shoes sitting here' my father retorted, 'or we won't buy shoes at all'. Whereupon he took me by the hand and walked out of the store. This was the first time I had ever seen my father so angry. I still remember walking down the street beside him as he muttered, 'I don't care how long I have to live with this system, I will never accept it'".

Sensitive of spirit and keen of mind, young King finished high school at 15, and Morehouse College at 19. He thought of being a doctor, a lawyer, at length decided on the ministry. He came north to enroll at Crozer Theological Seminary, a Baptist Seminary at Chester, Pennsylvania. There he was one of six Negroes in a student body of 100. He led his class, both academically and actually as its President. He was given a fellowship to study for his PhD at the university of his choice, and he chose Boston University, where he entered in the Fall of 1951. At both Crozer and Boston, he was introduced to the heritage of great minds and spirits - Kant, Hegel, Thoreau, Gandhi, Martin Luther, Tillich, Niebuh. And in Boston, he was also introduced to the girl who became his wife, Coretta Scott, who was studying at the New England Conservatory of Music.

In 1954, they went to Montgomery, Alabama, where Martin Luther King, Jr. became the pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. That first year was simply a happy year - for the church and for the parsonage family, but then on December 1st, 1955, there came the event - the "moment" that joined with "the man".

Late that afternoon, a Negro seamstress by the name of Rosa Parks boarded a bus to go home from her work in a city department store. She took her seat with other blacks toward the back of the bus, behind the white passengers. When later six whites boarded the bus, the driver asked the black folks nearest the front to give up their seats to the whites. Rosa Parks alone refused. Asked later why she had done it, she said, "I don't really know why I wouldn't move. There was no plan at all. I was just tired from shopping. My feet hurt". The driver called the police who arrested her for violating the city's segregation ordinance.

That event stung and strengthened the blacks in Montgomery as nothing else had done, and Martin Luther King emerged as their leader. The Montgomery Improvement Association was formed with King as President. Almost immediately there developed a boycott against the busses, and for a year the blacks formed car pools, walked, rode mules, drove wagons. From the beginning, Dr. King set the thermostat for the manner of the protest. To a huge mass meeting of his people at the onset, he said:

"Love must be our regulating ideal. Once again we must hear the words of Jesus echoing across the centuries: "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, and pray for them that despitefully use you!" If you protest courageously, and yet with dignity and Christian love, when the history books are written in future generations, the historians will have to pause and say, 'There lived a great people - a black people - who injected new meaning and dignity into the veins of civilization'"

It was a rough year with threats, pressures, arrests, bombs directed at King and his people. But they stood firm and when at length the Supreme Court struck down the city's bus segregation laws, the Montgomery buses were integrated and King had become a national figure. He was only 28, and that is pretty young to be famous and powerful. King knew it and earlier he said to a friend, "Frankly, I'm worried to death. A man who hits the peak at 27 has a tough job ahead. People will be expecting me to pull rabbits out of the hat for the rest of my life!"

The "rest of his life was little more than 11 years" - but those years were crammed with troubles and triumphs. We can only touch the high spots here. He was the guiding spirit in the founding of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which summoned blacks to "assert their human dignity (and) to accept Christian love in full knowledge of its power to defy evil". In 1959, he and his wife went to India to visit Gandhi's country. In 1960, they moved from Montgomery to Atlanta, where the younger King became co-pastor with his father, yet actually devoted most of his time to a ministry that was nationwide. He wrote - he lectured - he led his people during crises in Albany, Ga., in St. Augustine, in Birmingham, in Selma. He challenged old customs and old local laws that were meant to keep blacks "in their place" - meaning an inferior place in a segregated society. He did it with dignity and a steady plea for non-violence. He was often in prison. His home was bombed. He was stabbed, but he went on.

In 1963, he organized the March on Washington - an event that Time described as "a spectacle of disorganized order, with a stateliness that no amount of planning could have produced". Some 200,000 strongs - whites and blacks of all ages - walked from the Washington Monument to the Lincoln Memorial, and there the man gave one of his most moving addresses with the recurring theme, "I have a dream..." In 1964, he won the Nobel Peace Prize - the youngest Peace Laureate in history.

Early in April of 1968, King was in Memphis to rally support for the garbage workers of that city, and at the age of 39 he was killed by an assassin's bullet. And many of us can remember just where we were and what we were doing early that evening as the news came to us, "Martin Luther King murdered". That was four years ago, but as so often happens, a man in death is as much a force to be reckoned with as a man in life. And just as a New Testament writer said of a predecessor, so we can say of King, "he died, but through his faith, he is still speaking to us".

I. FAITH IN GOD

For myself - the ongoing message of his life stems from the Christian characteristics of his life, the first of which is his faith in God.

The manner of this man's life was deeply rooted in the manner of his faith. It was his faith that kept clear his vision or true freedom for his people. "God" he would say, "is working through history for the salvation of his children. As we struggle to defeat the forces of evil, the God of the universe struggles with us!"

And especially it was his faith that gave him a high measure of calmness and steadiness. A favorite passage in his writings concerns a night in Montgomery, when after a particularly strenuous day, his sleep had been interrupted by one more call threatening his life. Sleepless and distraught, the minister went downstairs and over the kitchen table, he prayed aloud in words that later he remembered to be:

"I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But now I am afraid....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"

Wrote King about that particular experience:

"At that moment I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never before experienced him. It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice, saying, 'Stand up for righteousness, stand up for the truth. God will be at your side forever'. Almost at once my fears began to pass from me. My uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything. The outer situation remained the same, but God had given me inner calm".

There is nothing in that experience that has to do with a man's color, his country, his century. That is the experience that God has promised to any man and every man, "My grace is sufficient for you". His faith in God.

II. RELIANCE ON NON-VIOLENCE

Second, his reliance on non-violence. Of the Montgomery protest, he said: "The principle of non-violence became the guiding light of our movement. Christ furnished the spirit and motivation - and Gandhi furnished the method."

If people think of non-violence as synonymous with subservience, timidity, appeasement then Dr. King does not fit the picture. He was determined, insistent, courageous. After his house had been bombed in Montgomery, a crowd of angry black people gathered around, ready to return force with force, and Dr. King calmed them by saying:

"Don't get panicky. Don't get your weapons. He who lives by the sword will perish by the sword. We are not advocating violence. I want you to love our enemies. Be good to them. Love them and let them know you love them".

One night back in the Spring of 1966, I remember hearing King speak at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine and with great Christian eloquence, he proclaimed that love and non-violence were stronger weapons than bombs and bullets. King was a consistent apostle of non-violence, and when increasing numbers of his own people questioned its efficacy, he responded:

"If every Negro in the United States turns to violence, I will choose to be that one lone voice preaching that this is the wrong way".

So he lived and so he died. And though the pendulum for the time being seems to have swung away from his standards in this respect, we need to be reminded that this is part of his legacy and as such is a 20th century expression of a 1st century hope:

"That love is better than spite.....thatn courage is better than fear....that faith is truer than doubt".

III. DIGNITY OF MAN Finally, his concern for the dignity of man. Born a black in a society that was accustomed to treating black people with something less than respect and dignity, and because of an incident in a Montgomery bus when a black lady refused to give up her seat to a white passenger, he found himself the leader of a mighty movement to restore self-respect for blacks and to insist upon equal justice and opportunity. And he did it by reaffirming the Christian ideal and the American dream. In a famous letter from a Birmingham jail, he wrote:

"One day the South will know that when these disinherited children of God sat at lunch counters they were in reality standing up for the best in the American dream and the most sacred values in our Judaeo-Christian heritage."

There is something in our human nature that feeds upon the notion of superiority and supremacy. It is not good. In Jesus' day, it was the Jews over the Samaritans; in Hitler's day, it was the German Aryans over the jews; in our day, it has been the whites over the blacks. All of us who are white have been taught in one way or another, whether verbally or non-verbally, that minority people are our inferiors. Think of the prototype of the American negro to which we were introduced: Amos 'n Andy, Rochest, Aunt Jamima, Stepin Fetchit, porters, maids, mammies, the songs of Stephen Foster. And how little we have been taught about black culture, music, literature, bravery, intelligent contributions in our history. And what we have been taught, we have tried to teach blacks about themselves. Once King said:

"The job of arousing manhood within a people that have been taught for so many centuries that they are nobody is not easy. Even semantics have conspired to make that which is black seem ugly and degrading. In Roget's Thesaurus there are some 120 synonyms for 'blackness' and at least 60 of them are offensive - such words as 'blot', 'soot', 'grime', 'devil', and 'foul'....there are some 134 synonyms for 'whiteness' and all are favorable, expressed in such words as 'purity', 'cleanliness', 'chastity', and 'innocence'. 'A white lie is better than a black lie'. 'The most degenerate member of a family is a 'black sheep' - not the 'white sheep'.

Martin Luther King had a vital part in challenging old concepts and customs and restoring a race to an assertion of self-hood and a sense of dignity. Some-

times we are concerned that the movement that he led has gotten out of bounds and taken wrongs turns. "Black pride", "black power", "black separatism" are present realities to be reckoned with. And whites, who for centuries perpetuated "white separatism" are really not in a position to be too critical or too judgmental about "black separatism". But does not this Gospel of Jesus Christ stand in judgment upon black separatism no less than white separatism. King's ultimate dream was not one of brokenness, but of brotherhood. That day in Washington, in 1963, he said:

"I have a dream that one day....the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood."

Again - a 20th century hope that reminds us of a 1st century dream: "For there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither male nor female - for you are all one in Christ Jesus". The dream and the deed of God in Christ - "when He so loved the world".

PRAYER: O God our Father, Father of all mankind, remind us that to be a follower of Christ is to take neither pride nor shame in the color of our skin. Help us to see all human beings as children of thine. As His followers, help us to be color-blind - for when - regardless of our race - we have grown into that statue of the fullness of Christ, we shall then be truly free. Amen