



MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. MEMORIAL MASS

Homily by

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Indeed, we have a wonderful example of hearing the tiny whisper of Christ's call to discipleship in the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., whose own courageous voice was muted, but not silenced, on April 4, 1968, almost fifty-three years ago.

This weekend our nation honors a great leader in the civil rights movement, a leader who captured our imaginations and our hearts as he strove to demolish the barriers of bigotry and the walls of oppression. But what makes him great? Greatness lies in the heart. And it is only by looking into the heart that we perceive greatness, just as Christ looked into the heart of Paul, Andrew, John, Peter and Reverend Doctor King.

In the Old Testament, for example, King David is recognized by the Prophet Samuel only because the Lord tells his prophet, "Do not judge from his appearance or from his lofty stature... Not as man sees does God see, because man sees the appearance but the Lord looks into the heart." I suspect, with all due respect to Dr. King, that he sometimes failed to give the appearance of a leader. Many of his biographers point out that he had a reluctance to take a leadership role and he frequently had doubts and misgivings about his decisions, especially when protesters were hurt or even killed. And yet, if we look into his heart, as God himself directs us, we see a genuine leader who overcame his human frailty and allowed God's grace to fashion for Himself a modern day prophet who would lead his people to the promised land of freedom where bigotry, hatred and violence have no standing. He was a great leader because he allowed grace to guide him as he trusted in Divine Providence.

Another reason Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was a great leader is that he had courage of heart and was willing to take risks, leading people on a path less traveled and, as Robert Frost would have it, that has made all the difference! It is true that Dr. King became a great leader precisely because he had the courage to stand up to a cancer that was eating away at the moral fabric of our country, indeed, eroding the very principles upon which our country is based. He realized that the architects of our Constitution envisioned a land where people would live together. He said that these founders "signed a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir." His leadership grew from a burning desire to collect on that note because indeed, we are all created equal by a loving and gracious God. But it is the path that Dr. King chose that made all the difference in his leadership. What is that path? It is the path of discipleship, the path of following Christ.

Martin stood tall as a disciple of Christ, not running away from adversity and not plunging into violence. He "stood with Christ", the lamb of God, as John the Baptist pointed out in today's Gospel. The "lamb" and the "servant", the suffering servant, are connected. No doubt John had this in mind in the Gospel today: the voice at the Baptism of the Lord spoke of his servant in whom he was well pleased. In Aramaic, the word for servant and lamb are connected. And of course, it is the lambs that are sacrificed at the Passover, just as Christ, the servant, the lamb of God, suffered on the cross. Dr. King followed Christ's example and stood up to violence, bigotry, hatred and sin, allowing himself to be sacrificed on the altar of righteousness in the service of solidarity and love, as underscored in Pope Francis's encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*.

This path that Dr. King chose is the path of peaceful resistance. By standing up to the forces of malevolence, Martin Luther King showed his aggressors that if we live and move and have our being in the arms of the one in whose image we are created, we can live together in peace. His witness was a mirror that allowed his enemies to see their own actions in sharp contrast to the peace and reconciliation that he felt called to live.

Peaceful resistance demands more courage, more tenacity, and more conviction than either running away in fear or fighting with our fists. Peaceful resistance is the way of a great leader, a leader like Martin Luther King. It is a way that causes people to think, to grow and to change. But resistance alone is not going to carry the day. The leader who takes this path must also have the ability to chart a new course, to offer an alternative to the violence he or she proposes to eradicate. Dr. King did exactly this by offering to our country an unwavering commitment to the truth, an unshakeable determination to hope and a passion for unity. This Nobel Peace Prize recipient fought the terrorism inflicted on Black Americans with the weapons of truth, hope and unity.

Dr. King once said, "I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality. That is why right, temporarily defeated, is stronger than evil triumphant." Dr. King held fast to the truth that we are all created equal. He embraced the revelation that we are all created in God's image and therefore each unrepeatable human being is a precious gift to be affirmed and not denigrated.

Repeatedly, Dr. King gave voice to the hope deep within the hearts of many that we can overcome injustice and intolerance. In accepting his Nobel Peace Prize, he said, "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." He fought the good fight and had hope that God would lead him and us to the promised land of freedom, human dignity and racial equality. As he once said, "I still believe that one day mankind will bow before the altars of God and be crowned triumphant over war and bloodshed...And the lion and the lamb shall lie down together..."

Martin Luther King allowed the truth to set him free. He was quick to forgive and ready to hope. He did much to make our country a better place, where peace and harmony could thrive. He brought us a long, long way. But we have a long, long way to go.

Black Americans suffer from systemic bigotry, personal prejudice, violence, personal diminishment, shortened life spans, curtailment of freedoms, victimization by white supremacy groups and countless other injustices and abominations. The names of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Freddie Gray, Tamir Rice, Ahmaud Arbery and countless others continue to echo in our ears and hearts.

Yes, we do have a long, long way to go. However, we are emboldened by Martin's unwavering hope. As he said so often, "I still believe that we shall overcome." And as we know from today's Gospel, we are called to abide in Christ. Jesus invited his disciples to "Come and see" where he stayed. That invitation was more than just a house visit. It was an invitation to abide IN Christ. And it is there that we find the courage and the conviction that in Christ, we shall overcome!