

Martin Luther King – An Unforgettable Fire

*“Sleep, sleep tonight
And may your dreams be realised”
‘MLK’ by U2*

On April 4, many people around the world, and in the south of the United States in particular, will observe the 40th anniversary of the death of Martin Luther King.

When I first began to explore Dr King’s life in my late teens, I saw a man whose passion, faith and conviction I wanted for myself. Here was a man who gave his life to the kingdom of God, who from the bottom of his heart was totally committed to what was right. In the spirit of Moses of old, he boldly confronted the powers that be with the cry ‘let my people go’.

King drew his inspiration from people like Gandhi, as well as from Jesus himself. His conviction that it was redemptive non-violence that would save his nation and bring justice to his people was what drove him to his dying day. That and his faith in the power of love, a love both inspired by the example of Jesus and driven by the power of the Spirit.

It was this conviction and obedience to the call of the Spirit that would give Dr King the strength to say, after constant persecution,

“We shall match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. We will meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will and we will still love you...throw us in jail and we will still love you. Bomb our homes and threaten our children, and as difficult as it is, we will still love you. Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our communities at the midnight hour and drag us out on some wayside road and leave us half-dead as you beat us, and we will still love you. Send your propaganda agents around the country, and make it appear that we are not fit, culturally and otherwise, for integration, and we’ll still love you. But be assured that we’ll wear you down by our capacity to suffer, and one day we will so appeal to your heart and conscience that we will win you in the process, and our victory will be a double victory.”

What courage! What manhood! Throughout his short life King had the boldness to speak out publicly, and forcefully proclaim that the human race must learn to forgive in order to survive, lest the forces of hate come in and take over. “We have the choice of nonviolence or non-existence” was his prophetic warning to America and to the world.

Martin Luther King was indeed a prophet to his generation, a man called by God to seek freedom, not only for his people, but for America as a nation. To me he was the greatest person of the 20th century and one of the greatest who has ever lived. Dr King made Jesus more attractive to me. His final sermon about having been to the mountaintop and seeing the promised land never fails to move me close to tears. It was in this sermon that he perhaps had a taste of his own destiny as well, for it was on this night that he told his people that while he has been to the top of the mountain, he may not get to the promised land with them. Tragically he was right. 24 hours later he would be dead, cut down by an assassin’s bullet, one more person in history who lived for what was right being the victim of violence, just like Gandhi before him, Bobby Kennedy a couple of months later, and of course Jesus of Nazareth 2,000 years before.

At his funeral, his own words bellowed out again –words from his ‘Drum Major Instinct’ sermon. They were a simple request that:

“If any of you are around when I have to meet my day, I don’t want a long funeral. And if you get somebody to deliver the eulogy, tell them not to talk too long...I’d like somebody to mention that day that Martin Luther King, Jr. tried to give his life serving others. I’d like for somebody to say that day that Martin Luther King, Jr. tried to love somebody...I want you to be able to say that day that I did try to feed the hungry. And I want you to be able to say that day that I did try in my life to clothe those who were naked. I want you to say on that day that I did try in my life to visit those who were in prison. I want you to say that I tried to love and serve humanity.”

Dr. King, you did all of these things and more. I have always thought that King is the first person I want to meet when I get to heaven. I want to thank him for his life, his legacy, his courage, and his passion. I want to thank him for showing me Jesus. I reckon I might have to wait in line for a while to see him, but I won’t mind - I’ll have plenty of time. I look forward to getting to know those others in the line who have also been inspired by this man and who would also like to thank him for teaching us that love will triumph in the end, that it was all worth it, that justice will indeed roll down like a mighty stream and that the glory of the Lord has finally been revealed.

by Nils von Kalm
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