

Martin Luther King

Two days ago marked the fiftieth anniversary of the assassination of Dr Martin Luther King on 4th April 1968.

Dr King was an American Baptist minister and activist. Between 1954 until 1968 he was the most visible spokesman and leader of the civil rights movement in the United States. Motivated by his Christian faith and also inspired by Mahatma Gandhi he worked to advance civil rights through nonviolence and civil disobedience. He gained much respect and very many admirers. In 1964 he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for combating racial inequality through nonviolent resistance. Perhaps not surprisingly he also gained many critics and enemies.

Dr King is commemorated as a martyr by the Episcopal Church of the United States and our Bible reading just now (Luke 6.27-36) is the Gospel passage appointed for that day.

The jury is perhaps still out as to how much has been achieved in the last fifty years. As a result of Dr King's campaigning just days after his assassination the US Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1968 which prohibited discrimination in housing and housing-related transactions on the basis of race, religion, or national origin, later expanded to include gender, familial status, and disability. There is also surely now a greater awareness of the issues involved. Yet there is still racial inequality not only in the United States but also in our own country. There is still much work to be done, work both of justice and of reconciliation.

It is good to be able to celebrate the determination and achievements of this great man of peace, to honour his memory and to pray that his work is continued. For there is much in our world that needs healing. There are still voices advocating prejudice, intolerant, hatred, violence that need to be challenged and confronted.

The only true way forward is the way of dialogue and peace. Difficult as it is we are called by our Lord to love your enemies, to do good to those who hate us, to bless those who curse us, and to pray for those who abuse us.

The Collect for his day perhaps says it all and is a fitting summary of Dr King's life and witness:

Almighty God, by the hand of Moses your servant you led your people out of slavery, and made them free at last: Grant that your Church, following the example of your prophet Martin Luther King, may resist oppression in the name of your love, and may secure for all your children the blessed liberty of the Gospel of Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

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Kingsley Boulton