

Dear Friends,

'The Dream'

The fundamental equality of all human beings in the eyes of God lies at the heart of the Christian gospel. One reason why the authorities in ancient Rome persecuted the Early Church was because the latter posed an anarchic challenge to what they saw as the natural, hierarchical order within society: starting from the aristocratic male leaders at the top and moving down through the ordinary male citizens to the women, children and slaves at the bottom. When Paul in his letters addressed everyone in his letters as equally his "brothers and sisters" in Christ regardless of their social status (eg 1 Cor.1:10; Gal.1:2,11), he would have been suspected of undermining this supposedly natural order.

"In Christ Jesus," Paul wrote, "you are all children of God through faith ... There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3:26-28)

The American civil rights activist Martin Luther King Jr. Proclaimed a similar message. In his famous speech delivered on August 28th 1963 from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, he appealed for an end to racial inequality:

"I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal.' I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood..."

His message was unambiguous, and no decent person could reasonably have objected to it. But sinful prejudice, fear and hatred were deeply ingrained within American society, and just as Paul and the first Christians were seen as a threat to be extinguished, so was Martin Luther King. On 4th April 1968, almost exactly fifty years ago, he was shot on the balcony of the motel where he was staying.

Some reckon that he saw it coming. During a speech given on the previous evening, in which he urged his audience to continue fighting for racial and economic justice, he spoke of God taking him up "the mountain" and giving him a glimpse of "the Promised Land."

"I may not get there with you," he told them, "but I want you to know tonight that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land."

Progress has undoubtedly been made since that day when Dr. King was murdered. The election of Barak Obama as President is perhaps the most potent sign of that. But inequality remains a problem. The staggering number of black men who are imprisoned, the recurrent killings of unarmed black youths by police, and the economic gulf which can still be observed between black and white people in communities throughout the USA speak for themselves.

During the recent fiftieth anniversary celebrations, the good and the great fell over themselves in their eagerness to applaud the aspirations and achievements of Martin Luther King. In practice, however, change has been painfully slow and even Christians have seemed at times reticent to translate their gospel message into practical action. It is still very much a work in progress. Pious sentiments are not enough. Let us live together as 'brothers and sisters'. As Jesus once retorted, "Blessed are those who hear the word of God *and obey it.*" (Lk.11:28)

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