Martin Luther King Sunday (1/20/19)  

The Rev’d Joseph Wolyniak

Almighty God, whose Son our Savior Jesus Christ is the light of the world: Grant that your people, illumined by your Word and Sacraments, may shine with the radiance of Christ's glory, that he may be known, worshipped, and obeyed to the ends of the earth; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Following our custom in the parish, today we commemorate the life and witness for the Rev’d Dr Martin Luther King, Jr.—whom our nation honors with an annual holiday on the succeeding Monday closest to his birthday (which was January 15, 1929). As I’ve noted before, Monday will not mark the church’s feast day commemorating Dr King. We do have one, but it is on April 4: that fateful day in 1968 that he was assassinated, or martyred, on a hotel balcony in Memphis. We Christians celebrate a saint's dies natalis (or “birthday”) the day of their death, which marks their birth into heaven. Yet, as the country turns its attention to this great prophet and martyr, it behooves us to dwell on his witness—which, despite his untimely death, lives on.

The curious thing about King, though, is that nowadays everyone seems to claim him. Whereas he was a deeply divisive figure in his day, today just about everyone—except the most fringe elements of our society—pays him homage. We all seem to think we’re on his side—or, more to the point, that he’s on ours. Tomorrow you will hear politicians and talking heads of every persuasion teasing out elements of King’s life and witness, all effectively seeing themselves in some continuity with the thrust of his prophetic summons. And I want to suggest to you this morning that there is something problematic about that. Leaving aside, if just for a moment, the partisan politics of our day, there is a deeper danger here in our relationship to our prophets: that we have coopted their message into the status quo. The irony. For the prophetic witness of King, like all of the prophets before him, was meant to accomplish the exact opposite: to awaken our consciences from complacency, to shake us out of the status quo, to help us see beyond the world as it is to the world as it ought to be.

Stanley Fish once suggested that “those who detach King’s words from the history that produced them erase the fact of that history from the slate, and they do so, paradoxically, in order to prevent that history from being truly and deeply altered.” What is helpful, indeed necessary, to remember is that King offered us not a series of groundless platitudes designed to fit into fridge magnets and Facebook memes. What King offered us was a intensely engaged witness that spoke directly to, first, the people and, second, the policies of his day. He was not speaking to us in the abstract. And he was not afraid to take sides.

This morning, I’d like to dwell with you on his speech at Stanford University (April, 14 1967—ominously, almost exactly one year to the day before he would be assassinated). Titled “The Other America,” the speech offers us a snapshot into the thinking of a mature leader already beginning to reflect on the movement he’s led for over a decade: pondering where they’ve been, where they are, and, especially, where they should go next in their struggle for true racial equality. In the speech, King offers some poignant reflections on, for instance, “the Birmingham movement” which, King surmised, achieved “a great deal to subpoena the conscience of a large segment of the nation to appear before the judgment seat of morality” and led to the 1964 the Civil Rights Bill. So too “the Selma movement,” with those unforgettable dramatic images on the Selma Bridge pricking the
moral sense within everyday Americans and leading to the 1965 Voting Rights Bill. “And all of these things,” King contends, “represented strides.”

Note how local, how specific, indeed how political King is here. While we often think religion and politics best not mix, here is this intensely religious, profoundly personalist, moral leader reflecting on how the specific actions of specific persons in a specific time and place led to specific pieces of legislation—legislation, we might add, King takes as crowning achievements of what he set out to do. St Martin and company were in history, but also shaping history. And be sure: at the time, there were those who were for and against these efforts. There were reasons, arguments, opposed philosophies, competing visions articulated. King came down decisively on one side. And his movement urged you to join him.

Much had been accomplished, King reflected—looking back on a movement he’d led for over a decade, since the mid-1950s. “But,” he noted further, with some notable realism, “we must see that the struggle today is much more difficult.”

Why? Well, for starters, as King noted:
our nation has constantly taken a positive step forward on the question of racial justice and racial equality. But over and over again at the same time, it made certain backward steps. And this has been the persistence of the so-called white backlash.

Now that doesn’t sound at all familiar, does it? For all that King and company achieved, there remained those who devoted the entirety of their energies and their being to oppose, obstruct, contravene, and contradict any assumed achievements. And apparently this came as no surprise to King, who suggests that “America has been backlashing… for more than 300 years.”

King goes on to paint a stark contrast between what he saw as two Americas: a land of prosperity and promise for the well-connected and positioned (and, not to mention, those of the right race and nationality); a land of deprivation and desperation for those who lack the right connections or birthplace position. It is a trenchant, thoroughgoing critique of the world as it is. And I wish I could say it was dated. Instead, I commend it to your reading and reflection tomorrow on this day we have off to do just that (copies are in the back or email me)—see for yourself just how sadly relevant it is, now some fifty years later.

While we might want to think that we’re on King’s side (or that he’s on ours), while we might want to think that he fits neatly into the status quo (the world as it is now), King relentlessly points out the work that is left undone. While none of us like to think that we are racist, King mercilessly points out the structural racism that we all participate in (and mostly without a peep, let alone a protest… or, even more, personal sacrifice). “Negroes generally live in worse slums today than 20 or 25 years ago,” King cites as one statistic:
In the North, schools are more segregated today than they were in 1954 when the Supreme Court’s decision on desegregation was rendered. Economically the Negro is worse off today than he was 15 and 20 years ago. And so the unemployment rate among Whites at one time was about the same as the unemployment rate among Negroes. But today the unemployment rate among Negroes is twice that of Whites. And the average income of the Negro is today 50% less than Whites.

Again, I wish we could say this speech was outdated.

Eviscerating the status quo, the world as it is, and reflecting on the work yet still left to do, King surmises troublingly:
The struggle today is much more difficult... because we are struggling now for genuine equality. It's much easier to integrate a lunch counter than it is to guarantee a livable income and a good solid job. It's much easier to guarantee the right to vote than it is to guarantee the right to live in sanitary, decent housing conditions. It is much easier to integrate a public park than it is to make genuine, quality, integrated education a reality. And so today we are struggling for something which says we demand genuine equality.

Genuine equality. After a decade and a half of marching, galvanizing a movement, that is what King was turning his attention to in what would be the last year of his life: genuine equality.

I am not suggesting that to admire the thrust of King’s witness you must necessarily agree with him on all the finer points of his program. But I am suggesting that neither should we so generalize the thrust of his moral movement that we abstract him to the point of irrelevance. King stood for something in his day. His convictions were concrete. We would do well to take heed, to respond, to think about how they might translate into our own day and time—the social, economic, political, I dare say spiritual battles that beset us today.

How do we really, truly honor his life and legacy? How might we really, truly carry forward his movement? Are we on the right side of history in our own day?

And one final note: if anyone might justifiably give into despair, it would be King. It is not as if his antagonists by and large recognized his moral courage and were won over—demonstrating a conversion of heart and mind, policy and practice. Some did, of course. Most didn’t. But King summarily refused to give into the paralysis of hopelessness. He summarily refused to give into that 300+-year pattern of backlash. Even if he looked ahead and saw a mountain of inequality to overcome, “somehow,” he said, “I maintain hope in spite of hope.”

I still have faith in the future. And I still believe that these problems can be solved. And so I will not join anyone who will say that we still can't develop a coalition of conscience. … [If] the inexpressible cruelties of slavery couldn't stop us [people of color], the opposition that we now face, including the so-called white backlash, will surely fail. We’re gonna win our freedom because both the sacred heritage of our nation and the eternal will of the Almighty God are embodied in our echoing demands.

The eternal will of the Almighty God. That, in the end, King firmly and unwaveringly believed, would win out over all. That was his hope, his faith. And “with this faith,” he said, “we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope.”

St Martin of Georgia, pray for us. Amen.