

“...to see what will become of his dream”: Martin and Jesus

by Ched Myers

NOT LONG AFTER Martin Luther King was killed, the great American rabbi Abraham Heschel asserted that the very future of our country might well depend upon how the legacy of this extraordinary man would be handled.

Unfortunately, the way King is officially honored on our national holiday has little to do with the leader of the most significant religious and political movement in U.S. history, which dramatically and permanently changed the landscape of American race relations. Rather, King is portrayed as a lovable, harmless icon of peace and tolerance. King’s legacy has been widely domesticated, captive to street names and prayer breakfasts. And his revolutionary message gets typically reduced to a vague and sentimental sound-byte—“I have a dream”—which apparently can mean anything to anyone.

King’s real public voice, however, was prophetic in every sense of the word. His oratory was often polarizing and upsetting to the status quo—and even moreso, his campaigns of militant civil disobedience. This “subversive” voice is perhaps best heard in his famous “Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break the Silence” speech, delivered on April 4, 1967 at the Riverside Church in New York (for the text and an audio excerpt go to www.drmartinlutherkingjr.com/beyondvietnam.htm).

In this talk, King—who was by then a famous civil rights leader and Noble Peace prize recipient—publicly articulated his opposition to the Vietnam war for the first time. Government authorities—most notably FBI chief J. Edgar Hoover—were furious that King had joined his considerable moral authority to the anti-war movement. It is not surprising that exactly one year later almost to the hour, the prophet was gunned down in Memphis.

The Vietnam War was, of course, an earlier example of the U.S. trying to secure “regime change” in a foreign country, as is the current case in Iraq. Thus the *real* King is highly inconvenient for a materialistic, militaristic and racist nation that has canonized him and then ignored his clarion call to overturn those “giant triplets” of evil.

Interestingly, the same can be said of another prophet, Jesus of Nazareth. The portrait we get in the gospels—of an anointed man who ministered among the poor, relentlessly challenged the rich and powerful, and was executed as a political dissident—is a far cry from the stained glass window Christ we encounter in churches.

It seems to be a pattern in human culture: we are far more comfortable with dead prophets than living ones. We honor them publicly only after they are safely disposed of, after which they are put on display in museums and shrines. Jesus understood well this tendency: “Woe to you!” he exclaimed, “For you build the tombs of the prophets whom your ancestors killed” (Luke 11:47).



One of Dr. King’s colleagues, Rev. James W. Lawson (*left*), a Methodist minister who still works tirelessly for justice here in Los Angeles, likes to say that if you want to understand King you must look at Jesus. Yes, he means that King was a committed Christian disciple, who understood the call of the gospel to advocacy for the oppressed and nonviolent resistance to injustice. King prayed as he picketed, he preached to presidents, and he challenged Christians to take their faith out to the streets.

But Lawson means more than that. There are uncomfortable parallels between the Jesus story and the ministry of King. Both came from ethnic minority communities who suffered great discrimination. Both spent time

listening to the pain of the dispossessed and broken. Both worked to build social movements of commitment and conviction. Both proclaimed God's justice in ways that got them into trouble with the authorities. Both were involved in dramatic public protests that resulted in arrest and jail. Both were deemed a threat to national security, and had their inner circles infiltrated by government informers. And both were killed by the authorities because of their work and witness.

It seems to me, however, that the converse also applies: *If you want to understand Jesus, look at King.* That is to say, the more you study the history of the civil rights movement, the more the gospels come alive. Most Christians tend to think of Jesus in a highly spiritualized, even romanticized way, as if he was always bathed in light, clothed in white, everybody's best friend. But Jesus didn't get whacked because he was a nice guy and joined hands with folk singing "We are the World." His times were as contentious and conflicted as King's or ours, his choices were costly, the risks real.

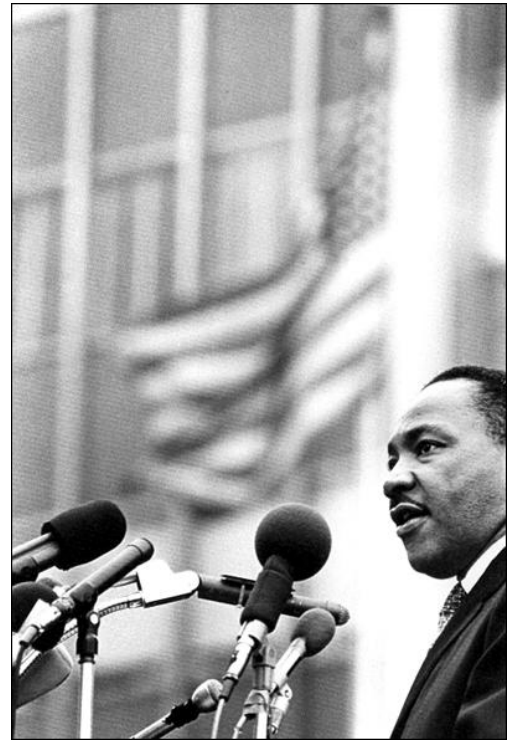
If we take the time to learn about the challenges that Dr. King faced trying to build a social movement for integration in the teeth of the hostile system of American apartheid, it can help us re-imagine how difficult it must have been for Jesus. Jesus' world was not the fantasy-scape we so often imagine the Bible to inhabit, but a terrain not unlike that of the U.S. in 1968, a world of government surveillance and conspiracy, of imperial "justice" meted out by good old boys who can hardly contain their glee when the prophet is killed, then issue stern calls for law and order in the wake of the "tragic death" that *they* engineered.

Jesus, too, was hemmed in by all the political factions of first century Palestinian society. He had to navigate death threats from without and dissent from within his movement; he had as colleagues only a tiny group of feckless, knuckle-headed and betrayal-bound companions. So let's keep it real: struggling for the Kingdom of God in a world held hostage by tyrants, terrorists, militarists, and kingpins, a world that seems to merit only ambivalence from toothless religious leaders and insular academics and distracted young folks—it's *hard work*.

Yet both Jesus and King believed that the movement for God's justice is worth giving our lives to—which they invited us to do. It wasn't that King was so peculiar, says Lawson; it's that he seems that way to us because *we* haven't yet found the commitment and courage to try to change the world. If Jesus or King seem like remote historical figures to us, it is only because we haven't engaged in the struggle for which they lived and died (and in different ways, live still).

But everything they were trying to fix is still broken. And the kinds of folks they sought to heal and to liberate are still crying out for compassion and justice. King protested the war in Indochina because "the poor of America are paying the double price of smashed hopes at home and death and corruption abroad... The great initiative in this war is ours. The initiative to stop it must be ours." The same case could be made of the current war in Iraq and the growing poverty in our own country. But how often was *that* message heard during the public paeans to King delivered by politicians and preachers over the recent national holiday?

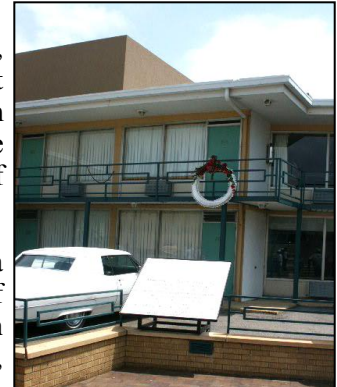
Ultimately, then, a real encounter with Jesus or with Martin will call into question all our comfortable certainties about our selves and our society. For these prophets call us to defend the poor, but we instead lionize the rich; they tell us that our weapons cannot save us, but we instead watch with rapt fascination when bombs drop on Baghdad; they challenge us to forgo idolatry, but we instead keep looking for that next cool thing to buy. Above all, these prophets warn us that the only way of salvation in a world locked



down by the spiral of violence is the way of nonviolent, sacrificial, creative love. That the only way to true transformation in a world of deadened conscience and numbing conformity is the way of committed discipleship.

Dr. King was gunned down on the balcony of the Lorraine motel in Memphis, which has been turned into the National Civil Rights museum. Just below that balcony is a memorial plaque (*right*). The only words inscribed on it are from Genesis 37:19-20, the taunt of Joseph's scheming brothers: "Behold, here cometh the dreamer... Let us slay him... and we shall see what will become of his dreams." Every time I stand before that plaque, I weep.

We do well to honor the real Martin Luther King, a child of the church and a treasure to the nation, who followed his Lord in life and death. The question of what will become of his dream, however, remains posed to us like an unresolved chord. It invites us to discipleship in a world still captive to racism, militarism and poverty.



This is an edited version of a talk Ched gave to students at Concordia University in Irvine, CA on Jan 21, 2005.