

The Third Sunday of Easter, 6 April 2008
Saint Paul's Parish, Kent
The Reverend Allen LaMontagne

A sermon preached on the Gospel according to Luke 24.13-35 "On the Road to Emmaus"

"Their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight..."

Friday last week, in remembrance of Dr. Martin Luther King on the fortieth anniversary of his assassination, I read *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, which King writes in April, 1963 while in jail for participating in civil rights demonstrations in Birmingham, Alabama. His open letter comes in response to Birmingham ministers who publish an open letter a few months earlier in which, among other things, they counsel King to "wait" and not take "direct action." They urge him to continue his battle for integration through local and federal courts, not in the streets. They fear his non-violent actions will incite civil unrest and violence.

Everyone should read this entire essay. I'll only touch on how Dr. King speaks to the issues raised by members of the white religious community out of his experience of dealing with institutionalized prejudice and segregation. What Dr. King sets out to do in his *Letter* is to open the eyes of his clergy brothers and the people they represent. He wishes them to see that the civil rights struggle has become necessary, and is what prophetic discipleship must look like in the light of the demands biblical freedom, justice, and equality place on people of faith. Forty years later, in the light of the Gospel today, we are challenged to consider still what Christians are called to do and to be in the present age. The public argument between Dr. King and the religious community of his day calls into question our understanding of the call of discipleship in today's world.

As a young man coming of age in the nineteen-sixties, I have my own eye-opening conversion experiences to recall. When I meet up with Campus Crusade for Christ, we may as well be on the way to Emmaus as I, a cradle Episcopalian, engage the Christ of the Bible as my personal Savior from a much different perspective that what I've learned in the church of my childhood. As my eyes open in a more evangelical faith context, everything about me seems to change. I am re-created, born again, born from above, a new person in Christ. I become, admittedly, both zealot and a royal pain in the priesthood. It is all my liberal Protestant and Roman Catholic family and friends can do to keep some humor as I seek to convert everyone to my new religious point of view. God does something else during my "zealot years," another profound transformation. During a rare gathering of black and white churches, I come face to face with a young person of color. As a child growing up, I easily befriend black children, or negroes as we call them then, whom I meet as fellow YMCA day campers. But the innocence of youth fades as my teen years coincide with the civil rights movement. I am fourteen when President Johnson's Voting Rights legislation is enacted; almost eighteen when Dr. King is killed, the year I graduate high school. The chasm between whites and blacks in Springfield, Massachusetts is deep and wide. I am carefully taught at home not to go where "they" are. I hear the code words, the jokes; I learn to laugh as though on cue. It

may not be formally called segregation. There may be no signs saying "for colored" on drinking fountains in Western Massachusetts, but the prejudice written on our hearts and minds seems deeply etched. In the words of Janis Ian's song of the times entitled "At Seventeen," it is remarkably impressed on me that "those people" are "not our kind."

But on this particular night in church, with enhanced vision, I look into the face of a young black man and I see myself. My eyes don't stop at the color of his skin but peer deeply enough to see the face of Christ looking back, smiling at me no less. It's a fleeting encounter. I return to familiar enclaves, still bastions of prejudice and distrust. But I remember that face, and how my heart burned within me while we talked of things that interest young people regardless of skin color, silently struck by a palpable sense of kinship forged purely in the Spirit of Christ's children of every stripe gathered in his name...

I read King's *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* and peruse *A Time to Break Silence* and I realize these are dangerous words, provocative ideas. And then I see I must preach this sermon, not to espouse some political ideology, but to encourage all of us to look into the eyes of poor white people, men, women and children as well as poor people of color, and to do the right thing in the biblical tradition of prophetic discipleship; and that is not to keep silence when people suffer, people whose suffering can be relieved when people of means take action and begin to make right what is wrong. When Dr. King is assassinated in Memphis, he takes a detour before entering a new territory that is to be called the Poor People's Campaign, Dr. King being nominated as its chief protagonist. His death would seemingly take that campaign to the grave with him, for much that needs to change does not, and although black people no longer live under unjust American laws and government, poverty now ironically knows no color boundaries. No group, no individual, is ineligible to join the population of people living in poverty. A downward economic spiral can be cruelly indiscriminant.

The danger isn't in saying these words, I realize. What impels me to have the courage to say something is the inherent risk that if I, a clergyman, remain silent, I go a long way towards reinforcing beliefs that there is little or no such problem as poverty in this country. What frightens me more these days are the consequences of saying nothing about what we do know exists right in our own communities. King's crime for which he would serve time in jail on earth and for which he enjoys the rewards of heaven, is that he knows and believes what the Bible says about justice, and he does something to further God's just cause on behalf of people in need, as do the early Christians suffer and die for that which they believe in. In 1963 King reflects on the state of church in his day (and it would seem, no less so in our day): "Things are different now. The contemporary church is often a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. It is often the arch-supporter of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church's silent and often vocal sanction of things as they are. But the judgment of God is upon the church as never before. If the church of today does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authentic ring, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning..."

To be a Christian is to embrace the sometimes hard truth that the Gospel is an eye-opening phenomenon. When Jesus calls us friends, we do not automatically win the world's favor. In fact, the opposite is more likely to be true. People and power structures that include a few and exclude the many from justly sharing wealth have more to lose from practicing Christian principles.

This Saturday, a group from here will go to a diocesan conference centering on *purpose*. Pray that we will have our eyes opened as we go and return to bring a new vision of what it means to live purposefully in community with a God who gives all of himself in love for others. Pray that we will be unafraid to open our minds to hear and engage new thinking, even if it makes us somewhat uncomfortable. Pray that we are able to look one another in the eye and see Christ clearly in us; in the name of God.