



## **A Prophet of Our Time Letter from Birmingham Jail**

I have long thought that if the canon of Scripture was ever re-opened, Martin Luther King's Letter from Birmingham Jail should be the top candidate for addition. The circumstances in which it was written have particular meaning for me – in a minute I'll tell you why.

Early in 1963 King and others in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference had decided to focus on one of the county's most segregated cities, Birmingham, Alabama. The goal was to desegregate downtown businesses, using methods of nonviolent protest including sit-ins, kneel-ins at local churches, and a march to the county building to mark the beginning of a voter registration drive.

They knew it would be rough going because of Birmingham's fearsome Commissioner of Public Safety and police chief, Bull Connor. The first thing Connor did in response to the protests was to force through a ban on all public displays of resistance. The protest leaders knew this was unconstitutional but geared up anyway for mass arrests. Following a protest on Good Friday, King was arrested and thrown into solitary confinement.

Denied access to his lawyers or even contact with his wife, a friend smuggled in a copy of that day's Birmingham News – for which I used to write -- which contained an open letter written by eight moderate white clergymen, which criticized the demonstrations and King himself. "We recognize the natural impatience of people who feel that their hopes are slow in being realized," the letter read in a patronizing tone. "But we are convinced that these demonstrations are unwise and untimely."

King immediately began drafting a passionate response in the margins of the paper. Ultimately he scribbled more than 7,000 words across the margins of that edition, which was then smuggled out and eventually published in the Atlantic that August. Schoolchildren know his "I Have a Dream" speech, but it is this letter that will continue to lead us forward as a people rooted in Christ and committed to God's justice in our time. Where is that scribbled edition? For years I tried to find out – to no avail. But thanks be to God it made it out of the jail.

To the white clergymen who questioned his purpose, King wrote, "I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the prophets of the eighth century B.C. left their villages and carried their "thus saith the Lord" far beyond the boundaries of their home towns, and just as the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the Greco Roman world, so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home town.

"Moreover, I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a

threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”

King often said that Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount had inspired the character and dignity of the Civil Rights Movement, and in his speeches King drew frequently on the Old Testament prophets. "I Have a Dream" reaches its highest point with these soaring words from the prophet Isaiah: "I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low ... and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together." In our first reading we heard Isaiah speak as he whom God has called to be a light to the nations. It was certainly this 8<sup>th</sup> century prophet to whom King was referring in the excerpt we heard from his Letter from Birmingham Jail, as one who is compelled to bring God’s word of justice far beyond the boundaries of his own hometown.

Biblical prophets were not saints but ordinary people who God called, often against their own will, to speak out against injustice using language that God inspired in them. Their vocation was not fortune-telling, but truth-telling. They tirelessly urged people to recognize how they had abandoned God and were now living in ways that were contrary to God’s nature. At the same time, the prophets conveyed magnificent visions of the reconciliation of all creation in God’s love—when the wolf will dwell with the lamb, the desert shall rejoice and bloom, and all people shall see the glory of the Lord.

The prophets did not believe that conscience is a still, small voice, but that it thunders or it does not speak at all. They were articulate, passionate, and fearless, attacking injustice and corruption wherever they saw it – in their kings or in their own people. They had no security guards; frequently the subject of ridicule and scorn, they went among the people with no shield other than truth.”

We need the Biblical prophets and Martin Luther King, the prophet of our age, because they taught that to love God was to love justice, and that each human being has an inescapable obligation to denounce evil where they see it. Like them, King understood realize that silence may temporarily preserve status or security, but that to live with a lie is an affront to God. “The Hebrew prophets are needed today,” King said, “because we need their burning courage.”

Like those prophets, like John the Baptist, King never tried to call attention to himself. He always pointed toward the truth. His main concern was also injustice, but with a peculiarly American twist: If we are all children created by the same loving God, how is it that some are treated differently simply because of the color of their skin?

The injustice that the Civil Rights Movement peacefully protested was not just a matter of whites and blacks at different lunch counters. Segregation was an entrenched social, political, and economic system that placed blacks in an inferior position, disfranchised them, and was enforced by custom, law, and official and vigilante violence. It involved brutal, dehumanizing forms of oppression that even tore into the souls of young children. What is one to do, King writes in his Birmingham Jail letter, “when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six year old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and [you] see tears welling up in her

eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and [you] see ominous clouds of inferiority beginning to form in her little mental sky....?”

Laws have changed in the sixty years since then, but racism lives on. The truth King articulates with prophetic vision in his Letter from Birmingham Jail is that we are all in it together.

The image of a garment helps us visualize the implications of injustice committed by God’s people against each other. Imagine a finely knit shawl that, under stress, begins to come apart. Here a tear, then there, then several places, then all across its width. The shawl begins to lose its shape. The design becomes distorted. Finally, in tatters, it can no longer serve the purpose for which it was created.

Our garment of destiny is Jesus Christ. In him we are freed from the demons that tempt us to judge, to lord it over others, to dehumanize those who are different from us in whatever way – skin, beliefs, political persuasion. I wonder what King would think, though, if he could witness the way in which issues of race still tear at the fabric of American life, driven by divisions that only seem to be growing deeper.

This is why the church is more important than ever. If Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount shaped the character of the Civil Rights Movement, I believe that King’s Letter from Birmingham Jail can shape our destiny as a people with its truth that is clear, uncompromising, and rooted in the inherent goodness of the world God made.

“A just law,” he writes, “is a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law. Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust.”

What can we do to live out this commitment as a community of faith located at the corner of Broad and Main? We already have beautiful and vibrant outreach projects through which we work to balance the effects of systemic injustice by collecting food, clothing, hygiene items and money for those who, for whatever reason are not able to enjoy the fullness of life that we do.

Now, as we move into the new year, I want to challenge you to find ways to meet these people face to face. Paraphrasing King, how might we leave our hometown—or home turf—to take the gospel into the world?