

RACIAL JUSTICE SUNDAY

8 September 2013



Dreams of the 'Beloved Community'

Introduction

August 2013 marks the 50th anniversary of Dr Martin Luther King Jr's monumental 'I have a dream' speech (given on 28 August 1963) which spoke about all God's people living in freedom and peace in a world governed by truth and justice. Dr King joined over 250,000 of his fellow Americans that day in Washington to commemorate the centenary of President Abraham Lincoln's 'Emancipation Proclamation' to free African-Americans. Lincoln, who was the USA's 16th President, is often known as the Great Emancipator for his historic act.

Dr King was in Washington to argue that the freedoms promised by President Lincoln to the newly-emancipated African-Americans never really materialised, and the March on Washington was an attempt to encourage all Americans to re-commit themselves to the Emancipation Proclamation's original promise. Dr King's speech still remains an inspirational call for us to work for an equitable world.

These resources offer a service for all ages together, with a range of ideas and activities around the theme of dreams, visions and the 'Beloved Community'. They consist of:

- Gathering
- Word
 - Reading
 - Sermon ideas
 - Ways of presenting the reading to all ages
 - Explore the Word with all ages
- Prayers
- Response
- Sending out

About the author

Richard Reddie is a writer and researcher. His book 'Martin Luther King Jr: History Maker' was published by Lion Hudson. He worships at St James Church (CofE) West Streatham, London.



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Gathering

Gathering activity

Beforehand, make three big placards (about A2 size) out of plain cardboard, each with a stick fixed to one side. On the first, write in large words 'Freedom is...?', on the second, 'Justice is..?' and on the third, 'Equality is...?' Ideally, these words should be on both sides of the banners. At the start of the service invite younger members of the congregation to come forward with the banners and to march in a small circle. Then place the banners at the front of the worship space.

The banners can be used again later in the service; see *Make a placard* in the *Response* section.

Gathering prayer

Father of 'every nation, tribe, people and language',
we stand before your throne saying:

Praise the Lord, for the beauty of your diverse creation.

Hymn

Play one of the following hymns which are linked to Dr King and the civil rights movement. Invite the congregation to sing along if they know it. They can all be found on YouTube.

'Take My Hand, Precious Lord' (Mahalia Jackson's version)

'His Eye on the Sparrow' (Mahalia Jackson's version)

'Just a Closer Walk with Thee' (Ella Fitzgerald)

You could sing a congregational hymn, such as *Jesus Christ is waiting, waiting in the streets*

Word

Readings

Dr King's dream centred on a 'Beloved Community', a society built on justice, equality and freedom for all God's people which was rooted in scripture, particularly in **Revelation 7.9-10**.

After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying,

'Salvation belongs to our God
who is seated on the throne,
and to the Lamb!'

Genesis 41.14-36

This is from the story of Joseph – Pharaoh's dream.

Sermon notes

- Dr King was sometimes criticised as a ‘dreamer’ who needed to wake up to the nightmare facing African-Americans at that time. Moreover, his notion of a ‘Beloved Community’ was denounced as utopian nonsense – something that would never happen in America or the world.
- Dreams and visions feature heavily in the Bible, especially in what we know as the Old Testament. In the book of Genesis we read about Joseph, a man who knew a thing or two about freedom and slavery. Like Dr King, Joseph was also something of a ‘dreamer’ (Genesis 37 and 40), and was told by his brothers that his dreams were fanciful.
- Joseph had dreams, and he also interpreted those of others. What is interesting is that some of those dreams came true almost immediately. The Cup Bearer’s and the Baker’s dreams came to fruition in three days (Genesis 40). Conversely, Joseph’s dreams, for which he received his brothers’ ire, only culminated when he became an adult (Genesis 37.1-11). What is more, the dream that brought Joseph to national prominence in Egypt, Pharaoh’s seven years of abundance and famine dreams, involved the hard work and diligence of the people for it to come true (Genesis 41.1-41). God revealed to Joseph what would take place in Egypt, but the Egyptians had to act in order for the prophecy to become reality, to avoid tragedy, and to make their country a place to which others would flock.
- The terms ‘dreams’ and ‘visions’ are used almost interchangeably in some sections of the Bible. However, we often confer negative attributes on a ‘dreamer’, while giving positive ones to a ‘visionary’. Who decides whether someone is labelled a dreamer or a visionary? How far is it influenced by their own views? Do we ever agree on whether someone is or has been a visionary?

Points to consider

Invite the congregation to reflect on the following questions and discuss them all together or in small groups.

Dr King has shown us that his dream will only become a reality in our lifetime if we commit ourselves to the ideals he held dear. What would a ‘Beloved Community’ look like in 2013? What would it mean for us globally, nationally and locally?

Present the reading for all ages

Dr King’s speech can be watched on the US National Archives channel on YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IcoZuBSh5OI>. The ‘dream’ part starts at 02:52. Watch or listen to it together. Afterwards, you could ask these questions:

- What part(s) made the strongest impression on you?
- What would it have been like to be there that day?
- What might you have done as a result of hearing it?

Listen to or watch the ‘Song of the King’ (seven fat cows) and ‘Pharaoh’s dream explained’ from *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat*. There are versions on YouTube in The Really Useful Group channel - <http://www.youtube.com/user/OfficialRUG>

Explore the Word with all ages

- On a basic level the verses from Genesis 37 (Joseph's dream), 40 (the Cup Bearer's and the Baker's dreams) and 41 (Pharaoh's dreams) tell us that dreams can take time to become reality. They also tell us that we sometimes have to work – physically, spiritually and emotionally – to make them come true.
- Dr King's dreams of a 'Beloved Community', like Joseph's, were rooted in the word of God, and he called on all Americans to take action: to march, boycott, petition, picket and vote to make his dream a reality.
- Some have argued that the election of Barack Obama as America's first Black president is the fulfilment of Dr King's dream, and the beginning of a 'post-racial' society. Many have pointed to the poignancy of Barack Obama's second term inauguration in this historic year, and the current President has not been slow in drawing parallels with both President Lincoln and Dr King.
- However, the reality is that in 2013 the world remains a very unequal place, and while the re-election of a Black man to the White House is hugely symbolic, it has done relatively little to bring in Dr King's 'Beloved Community'. Our own society is marked by its inequality and partiality, and is characterised by:
 - Young Black British males being more likely to go to prison than university
 - So-called 'White flight' from ethnically-mixed areas to more familiar mono-cultural ones seen as acceptable
 - Female Black and South Asian workers disproportionately affected by Government cuts in the Public Sector
 - British politicians pandering to the worst instincts of the populace over the possibilities of 'mass immigration' and 'swamping' from EU Bulgarians and Romanians in 2014
 - Roma and Gypsy and Traveller communities experiencing the worst health outcomes of all communities in the UK
 - Chinese-British students out performing all others academically, yet earning on average 25% less than their White counterparts after they graduate.



Song

Such as *Bind us together Lord*, or *One bread, one body, one Lord of all*

Prayers

A prayer of confession

Merciful Lord,
we consider your wonderful world
and its beautiful people created in your image,
and we ask for forgiveness for behaviours and attitudes
that devalue or demean those who are different.

Forgive us for our tacit acceptance of a society where privilege, partiality and advantage are often the passports to success and wealth. Have mercy on us for ignoring the reality of racism and bigotry, which deny or curtail the rights and opportunities of those of different ethnicities and cultures.

Give us the courage, determination and honesty to fight for a society governed by justice, equity and compassion, and underpinned by the belief that each person has an inherent worth, and has been afforded the dignity and respect they deserve.

Enable us to value diversity, as you do, and encourage it in all forms. This we ask in your precious name.

Amen.

A prayer of thanksgiving

O Lord,
we consider your wonderful world
and its beautiful people created in your image.
We thank you for the splendour of its diversity,
and the fact that our country is now a microcosm of the world
with people from all places, with different faces, sharing the same spaces.

Lord Jesus, we ponder your life, where you showed compassion to all,
especially those forced to exist on the margins of society through no fault of their own.
You show us how we ought to respond to difference,
through love and compassion rather than fear and ignorance.

We praise you that all dreams of a united, equitable world will come true,
because you have revealed them in scriptures that are always fulfilled.

By your Spirit, inspire us to work for a time when all your people
will be able to take advantage of the world you created.

In Jesus' name.

Amen.

A prayer activity

Ask everyone to stand up and turn to face another person. One person keeps their arms by their side and tries to move them up to a horizontal position – like the way a bird flaps its wings.

Their partner tries to hold down their arms by gripping them gently around the wrist or lower arm. After a short while the partner releases their grip, allowing them to lift their arms freely.

Those who have had their arms held down will feel an immediate sense of release and lightness as they lift them. This should be symbolic of the 'freedom' experienced by someone no longer in bondage.
Swap roles and allow the other person to experience the sense of freedom.

Close with this prayer:

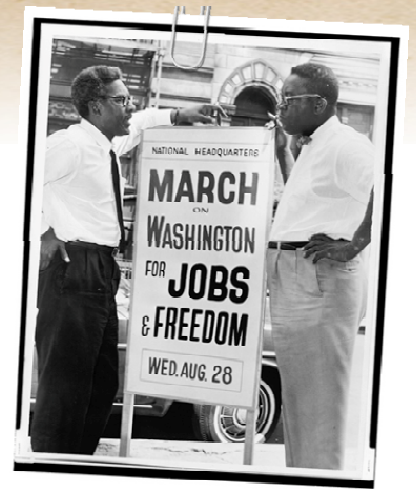
Loving Lord,
we thank you for breaking the bonds of sin,
and releasing us to be the people you want us to be.

May we never take the freedom we enjoy for granted,
but be inspired by your call to set the captives free,
to help those whose lives are characterised
by oppression rather than freedom,
injustice rather than equality,
and bigotry rather than fairness.

We pray for a time when all will be set free from the bonds
of partiality, poverty and pride to experience true freedom.

This we ask in your name,

Amen.



Response

Select from these ideas to suit your congregation and context. The three activities *Make a placard*, *Design a flag*, and *Ring out...* can be combined together in *March for freedom, equality and justice* at the end of the service.

A Christian response

An opportunity for individual reflection

Dr King believed that Christians should be involved in civic engagement to create a more just society. He encouraged those who did not vote to register, and cajoled others to join social reform organisations. He believed that action should take place locally, as well as regionally and nationally.

Consider contemporary ways to fulfil Dr King's mandate, for example, through:

- Joining national Christian and secular campaigning organisations for economic equality and racial justice, for example:

SPEAK

A network connecting together young adults and students to campaign and pray about issues of global injustice. Through bringing change to situations of injustice, their aim is to share our faith in our all-loving, all-powerful creator: God.

<http://www.speak.org.uk/>

Common Wealth

Christians for Economic and Social Justice

<http://commonwealthnetwork2010.blogspot.co.uk/>

Church Action on Poverty

A national ecumenical Christian social justice charity, committed to tackling poverty in the UK. <http://www.church-poverty.org.uk>

CITIZENS UK

A powerful alliance of local community organising groups in London.

<http://www.citizensuk.org/>

Pax Christi

‘Peace of Christ’ is a gospel-based lay-inspired, peace-making movement.

<http://www.paxchristi.org.uk/>

The Fellowship of Reconciliation

An international, spiritually-based movement of people who, from the basis of a belief in the power of love and truth to create justice and restore community, commit themselves to active nonviolence as a way of life and as a means of personal, social, economic and political transformation.

<http://www.for.org.uk/>

- Forming community-related groups committed to making a difference locally through language acquisition classes such as ESOL (English for speakers of other languages) for those needing assistance with English, or by assisting those who may have been victims of hate crimes to report them to the police/authorities. This might involve getting alongside a person to give encouragement, or to help them complete a hate crime victims form; or accompanying them to a police station. It can even involve making them aware that hate crimes are an offence and that the ‘victims’ need not suffer in silence.

Invite individuals to spend time in prayer and reflection on what they can do, and to talk to others to put forward specific proposals.

An inclusive church?

A discussion activity

The Christian community has a responsibility to demonstrate the values of their faith, and has a role to play at the cutting edge of transforming society. Invite the congregation to discuss how inclusive they really are. Is there real ethnic representation throughout the church structure? Are prominent roles within the church open to those who are usually called upon to ‘help out’ at the proverbial ‘African Caribbean or Asian cultural evenings’, or be part of the ‘Gospel’ choir? How can the church show a clear commitment to inclusion?

Call to action

Discuss, plan and act

What specific action, however simple, can your church take to help transform society? You could consider:

- Becoming safe spaces for those facing racist violence and abuse
- Providing suitable training and up-skilling to ensure those who believe they have a calling to lead can do so
- Having church materials and even Bibles in other languages as a way of welcoming those of different languages and cultures
- Allowing Christians the freedom to pray or read in Mother Tongue languages
- Displaying the national flags of those who attend the church.

Discuss and agree on something you can do together. Write up a plan with roles, responsibilities and a timetable. Display it on a noticeboard, and put it into action.

Make a pledge

An individual commitment, suitable for all ages

In the first section of his speech, Dr King spoke about a 'promissory note', arguing that the American Constitution and the Declaration of Independence was a note that promised all men (and women) the guaranteed unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. He described the failure to give people of colour these rights as akin to a rich person giving his poorer peer a cheque that will bounce, or a bank note of little value.

Much like a cheque, most bank notes come with a written pledge or promise to the bearer. Dr King was urging Americans to rededicate themselves to that initial promise or pledge:

‘...we must make the pledge that we shall always march ahead... Go back to Mississippi, go back to Alabama, go back to South Carolina, go back to Georgia, go back to Louisiana, go back to the slums and ghettos of our northern cities, knowing that somehow this situation can and will be changed.’

Beforehand, prepare pieces of paper about the size of a £20 note with ‘I promise to...’ written or printed at the top. Give everyone a piece of paper and a pen or felt tip. Ask them to make a commitment to something connected with freedom, peace and justice, and to write or draw it on their paper. The pledge could be as simple as looking out for someone who is picked on at school, or bullied at work; or promising to support an organisation working to end forms of modern day slavery, such as people trafficking or debt bondage. It may involve pledging to do some voluntary work, for example, with disadvantaged communities, or for justice as a magistrate, or with children as a school governor.

Invite everyone to hold up their pledges as this prayer is said:

Gracious God

We lift up these pieces of paper as symbols of our commitment to making your world a better place.

We thank you that over the centuries, you have raised up men and women of faith who have fought courageously for freedom, truth and justice.

We ask that we may be inspired by their example, and seek to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with our God.

Amen.

Prepare for a march

Make a placard about freedom, justice and equality

Give everyone three sticky notes or pieces of paper and a pen or felt tip. Ask them to think about what ‘freedom’, ‘justice’ and ‘equality’ are, and to draw or write something about them. Then invite them to stick the paper onto the placards paraded at the start of the service, see *Gathering activity* above.

Design a flag

A craft activity for all ages to make a flag for the Kingdom of God

From the early 1960s, Dr King would holiday in Jamaica (often in January), and he used this break as an opportunity to both recharge his batteries and formulate ideas for his work. He was particularly impressed with Jamaica's coat of arms – 'out of many, one people' – which was a symbol of the unity of the different cultural minorities living in that country, and something similar to Dr King's vision of the 'Beloved Community'.

You will need: large sheets of paper if working together, or A4 if in small groups; felt tips, crayons; craft materials suitable for collage, glue.

Working together, or in small groups, design a coat of arms or a flag which reflects the diversity of God's Kingdom, rather than any 'earthly' country or nation. Draw and make symbols to represent the Kingdom values of justice, equality and peace.

Ring out...

Make a joyful sound together

Towards the end of the 'I have a dream' speech Dr King talks about letting 'freedom ring from the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire...from the mighty mountains of New York...from the heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania!' The term 'ring out' from a church or Christian perspective usually involves a bell or cymbal, and denotes some form of declaration.

Distribute percussion instruments such as shakers, bells and cymbals. It's simple to make them beforehand, or extend the activity by making them together with plastic bottles and food containers and beans or pasta. You could invite the congregation to bring things in they can use to make a joyful noise.

Divide the congregation into two or three groups. Ask the first group to make a noise to let freedom, justice, equality or peace 'ring out' from the worship space. Let them do this for about 30 seconds. Then ask the second group to join in, then the third, gradually making more and more noise to create a great crescendo.

If you have a music group, ask them to prepare to lead one of the famous civil rights anthems such as *We shall overcome* or *Oh Freedom!* and invite everyone to help accompany them with their shakers and other 'instruments'.

March for freedom, equality and justice

Bring everyone together with the flags, placards and instruments from the three activities above in a march around the worship space.

Dr King delivered the 'I have a dream' speech during the March on Washington (for jobs and freedom). Marching (for freedom, justice and equality) was always a key activity of the civil rights movement, and those marches linked to Dr King were always integrated, featuring Black and White, Protestant and Catholic, male and female: a subset of society. For Dr King, marching was an action that brought people together and was a tangible display of unity and solidarity. Moreover, a part of Dr King's 'dream' involved a time when 'little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.'



Organise a march around the worship space (or on the spot if there isn't enough room). Use the placards made in *Prepare for a march*, the flags from *Design a flag* and the shakers and instruments from *Ring out*. Sing a suitable song such as *We shall overcome*, and make a noise for freedom, justice and equality.

This activity could be filmed and uploaded onto YouTube or your church website.

See, judge and act

An activity for schools

Using the Young Christian Students Movement methodology of 'See, Judge and Act', encourage young people to:

See Identify what they would like to change in their school to enhance equality.

Judge In the light of Revelation 7.9-10 what is Jesus calling them to articulate within their student milieu?

Act What steps should they take to bring about the change they envisage?

Read Martin Luther King's speech and pick out themes for 'Thought for the Day' that could be put on the student noticeboard over a period of three to four weeks.

Song

Such as *We shall overcome*, or *We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord*

Sending out

The US Civil Rights campaigner and politician, Revd Jesse Jackson, who was a contemporary of Dr King and was with him on the night he died, used a famous sporting metaphor as a prescription for equality. He said, 'When the rules are known by all, the start is equal, and the playing field is level, we will have all the ingredients for real equality.'

Prayer

Heavenly father,
we thank you for those brave men and women who,
armed only with a faith in a God of truth and justice,
stood up for equality and human rights.

By the power of your Holy Spirit
help us to become change makers
who courageously work to transform your world
into one where all are afforded the dignity, respect and worth
deserving of those made in your image.

Amen.