

Second Sunday of Easter

Fifty years ago, Easter weekend of 1968, Kansas City was on edge because of riots. The funeral of Dr. Martin Luther King had taken place the previous Tuesday in Atlanta. Public schools in Kansas City, Kansas, closed in honor of the man, but the public schools in Kansas City, Missouri, did not. Hundreds of students protested at City Hall, down from here on 12th Street. Things got ugly. Tear gas, snipers, fires and destruction erupted in the city a few miles from my childhood home at 57th and Woodland. I was 15 years old, a freshman in the high school seminary, and every adult I knew was nervous. The teachers at school, our parents at home, the clergy at church - everyone seemed worried about our safety - and about their own. I remember that Easter because our pastor conducted the holy week services in the daylight hours to get everyone home by night. "Everyone" wasn't more than a handful of people anyway.

Dr. Martin Luther King preached messages of nonviolence, equality, and an end to poverty. Kansas City and other cities like ours still suffer from racial prejudice and a fascination with guns. Nationally, from Florida to California, from Trayvon Martin to Stephon Clark, the consequences of fear and anger have embittered our country's dialogue. All sides hold the same values so passionately extolled by Dr. King, but we struggle to put them into practice. Last week marked the death of Linda Brown, the Topeka child whose father took the Board of Education to court in 1954. Yet, due to real estate patterns, the desegregation of American schools remains partial, as does the desegregation of our hearts. Have we made progress in 50 years? Of course. Have we ended racism in America? No. But racism will die, and respect will rise.

Our parish bulletin today includes a letter from Bishop James Johnston to honor the contributions of Dr. King. Bishop Johnston says that the crucifixion has shown "that only love and mercy can break the vicious cycle of evil." The Catholic Church in Missouri is dealing with two dozen pieces of legislation related to violence: "racism, gun violence, domestic violence, capital punishment, sex trafficking, abortion and other attacks on family and faith." The bishop writes, "Just as Rev. King knew the violence he experienced was a sign of a much greater problem, we too must not be content with treating symptoms..... We can best honor his memory and preserve his legacy of peace by asking God to give us the grace to follow His will with courage in the cause of promoting justice."

This week former ambassador Andrew Young, a friend of Dr. King who was with him in the Lorraine Hotel at the killing, recalled an African proverb: "You ain't dead till the people stop calling your name." The bullet only released the spirit of Dr. King. His name and his message continue to resonate in the hearts of all.

Psalm 118, our responsorial today, has us sing, "This is the day the Lord has made." We Christians sing it as a prophecy for the resurrection, which released the spirit of Christ. We sang that refrain last week on Easter; we repeat it today as if Easter never quit. Some days we sing in joy; other days we sing in defiance. There are days that do not feel made by the Lord - days of tragedy, bitterness and sorrow. But our hope remains firm. A bullet could not silence Dr. King. The cross could not silence Jesus. We can stare down killings, riots and fear with our confidence that Christ is risen from the dead.

Sunday, April 8, 2018