

By CALVIN MORRIS

Martin Luther King, Jr., Exemplary Preacher

He lived the life he sang about in his song. Writings concerning the life and work of Martin Luther King, Jr. have focused primarily around an analysis and assessment of his activities as civil rights leader, political philosopher, social educator, and fighter for peace.¹ These studies essentially stress the what and how of Dr. King's life, but not the essential why undergirding that life. This paper will contend that the life Dr. King lived was based upon his understanding of the uniqueness of his calling in life. That uniqueness involved the summons to preach the gospel.

To preach is to declare, proclaim, and announce that something has happened so decisively in the world that man need never be the same.² It is to tell the hearers that because of that happening they and the substance of their lives can be made new if they only respond in faith. Preaching, then, becomes not only what men believe about God and themselves,³ but how that God meets and calls them in the totality of that existence in their own time.

The timeless message of God in Christ beckoned Martin Luther King, Jr. in mid-twentieth century America. He heard his name and he answered, "I will go". It was the call to proclaim the God who was, and is, and ever shall be. To preach is to declare the word for others and oneself in the time given us to live. Dr. Benjamin E. Mays in his Eulogy at Dr. King's funeral puts it best ". . . Every man is within his star, each in his time. Each man must respond to the call of God in his life time and not in somebody else's time."⁴

Martin Luther King, Jr.'s religious inheritance was rich and deep. His great-grandfather, grandfather, and father were preachers.⁵ Even so, according to one biographer, Dr. King struggled with the idea of becoming a preacher, but when the answer came he accepted it gladly.⁶ His father, Dr. Martin Luther King, Sr., responding to a question about his son said, "the boy was called to preach, he had to, he could do no other."⁷ And preach he did.

¹ See especially Hanes Walton, Jr., *The Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Westport, Connecticut, Greenwood Pub. Corp., 1971). David L. Lewis, *King, A Critical Biography*, (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970) C. Eric Lincoln, Ed., *Martin Luther King, Jr. - A Profile*, (New York: Hall and Wang, 1970).

² John Knox, *The Integrity of Preaching*, (New York: Abingdon Press) pp. 21-22.

³ George A. Buttrick, *Jesus Came Preaching*, (New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1931), p. 10.

⁴ Benjamin E. Mays, *Born to Rebel*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971), p. 359.

⁵ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can't Wait*, (New York: Signet Books, 1964), p. 91.

⁶ Lerone Bennett, Jr., *What Manner of Man*, (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Company, Inc., 1968), p. 27. This struggle according to Bennett centered around young Martin's problem with what he saw as the over-emotionalism and lack of intellectualism within the black church and its preachers.

⁷ Conversations with Dr. Martin Luther King, Sr. Ebenezer Baptist Church, Spring, 1975.

Martin Luther King, Jr. preached the word with all the tools he was given. He called upon the insights gained from his heritage of the faith, his vigorous intellectual training as well as his living encounter with God and man in the world. His preaching reflected this training and living experience. To listen to or read sermons by Dr. King is to be challenged at the center of our minds and hearts. It is the old-time word preached in the new day of our lives. The ancient event of God in Christ occurs again for us. When Dr. King preached one heard not only the learned scholar trained in the great universities, but one whose ear had also caught the rhythm, tone and cadence of southern black preachers heard in his youth. Speaking of Dr. King's preaching style one has written "... the rhetorical style as he learned it in the academies met the poetic style of his fathers as he experienced it in the South..."⁸

In one of his sermons challenging the church to remind men of their moral responsibility to be intelligent, Dr. King said. "... Only through the bringing together of head and heart — intelligence and goodness — shall man rise to a fulfillment of his true nature."⁹ As he lived and preached, neither gift was sacrificed, for he blended the two with the power and insight revealed to him as God's man in his time. Martin Luther King, Jr. is not an exemplary preacher because of intelligence alone, surely others were more brilliant, nor is he exemplary because of his oratorical skills, others were more gifted, he is exemplary because his words and his deeds were one. He called us to love, and he did, and within that love he called us to act for God's sake and the sake of His Kingdom — and he acted. Finally he called us to trust God all the days of our lives even unto death, as certainly he did. He became a living Witness in his times.¹⁰ He lived the life he sang about in his song.

To preach is to proclaim in the concrete, real, actual situations of life. Dr. King's message was given and received in crisis situations fraught with controversy, struggle, danger, injury and death. In the Preface of his book of sermons, published in 1963 entitled *Strength To Love*, Dr. King indicates that those sermons have "... the present crisis as their background; . . . they deal with the personal and collective problems that the crisis presents."¹¹ Three of the sermons included

⁸ Hortense J. Spillers, "Martin Luther King and the Style of the Black Sermon," *The Black Scholar*, Vol. 3 No. 1 (September, 1971), p. 16. See also Coretta Scott King, *My Life with Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1969), p. 6.

⁹ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Strength to Love* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1963), p. 32. All sermons mentioned in this paper, unless otherwise indicated will be taken from the above work, hereafter referred to as King, *Strength* . . .

¹⁰ The author is deeply indebted to Dr. Erans Crawford, Dean of Chapel, Howard University and Dr. Robert Luccock, Professor of Homiletics, Boston University for sharing their insights. The strengths of the paper are owed to them; the weakness, the author's alone.

¹¹ King, *Strength to Love*, p. ix.

in that volume were written while Dr. King was in various Georgia jails.¹²

Exemplary preaching will be found in life's arena where people and their needs are found. The preacher's declaration of the "news", his words of demand and help will fail to take on flesh and fail to convince those who listen if he is absent from the arenas of his times for people not only listen, but also look. Dr. King did not shrink from entering those arenas where hate and violence were the main attractions for it was there that he was to witness to God's saving activity in the lives of individuals as well as in the life of American society.

Exemplary preaching must call the hearers to action and convince them that such a response is ultimately meaningful. Dr. King called blacks and whites in America to rid themselves of false inferiority and false superiority not just because of the American creed, but because the God of history in His plan and purpose sought for His creations a community of justice and love. To walk together, to sing together, to go to jail together and if needs be, to die together was the glorious opportunity to participate in God's unfolding plan for history. Such preaching offers the hearers a new vision for their lives. A vision that they are a part of a larger purpose and plan that was before, is now, and yet shall be.

In his sermon, "The Death of Evil upon the Seashore", Dr. King testifies to the past, present and future saving activities of God in the world. God was at work with the Hebrews in their freedom struggle from Egypt, at work with Asia and Africa in their struggle against European colonialism, and yet with Black Americans in their struggle against centuries of slavery, segregation and discrimination in America.¹³ Exemplary preaching always points to God and man for it is in that relationship, properly ordered, that God's will and purpose for His world is achieved.

Exemplary preaching must proclaim the cross.¹⁴ It is at the heart of the Christian witness and faith for it is the embodiment of selfless love. It testifies to the depths of God's love and caring for man. Because of the cross, the gospel can be trusted for you and me. Jesus Christ suffered the shame of the cross so that we, through him, might be redeemed of God. Martin Luther King, Jr. saw the cross as the pivotal act in history. No wonder he often recited "not with swords loud clashing, nor roll of stirring drums, but with deeds of love and mercy the heavenly Kingdom comes". It was this understanding of the cross that summoned Dr. King to the belief that suffering love, even in twentieth century America could be redemptive. Such love might lead to early death, but oh how sweet it would be if through it, others might be saved.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., pp. 59-63.

¹⁴ James Earl Massey, *The Responsible Pulpit* (Anderson, Indiana Press 1974), p. 21. See also Buthink, *Jesus*, p. 197.

Exemplary preaching will also be "confessional" and "testimonial" in its witness.¹⁵ That is, the preacher will share the vicissitudes and struggles of the faith as he lives and participates in the world. He, too, must walk the lonesome valley as do his listeners. How can he affirm the brilliance of the coming dawn if he has not experienced the darkness and dread of midnight. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s life was full to the brim with the deepest love and the profoundest hate. The Movement he led was considered radical to the extreme, dangerous to the legal fabric of society, and subversive at its core. Because he symbolized the black challenge to the long held sacred mores of southern society, he was hated passionately and all the more so because by sitting down millions were finally standing up.

From time to time he shared with his people the stress and strains of this life, the wrestlings and strugglings that occurred within his crucible. Near the end of the sermon "Our God is Able", Dr. King recounts how the Montgomery bus boycott brought him face to face with life's "trials". As the fifty thousand blacks of that city walked, the letters and calls threatening his life and the well-being of his family began. Gradually he writes, "I felt myself faltering and growing in fear." One night his phone rang and the voice on the other end said "Listen, nigger, we've taken all we want from you. Before next week you'll be sorry you ever came to Montgomery". Dr. King was afraid and ready to give up. In that state he turned to God and prayed acknowledging his fear and doubt. The answer came as if through an inner voice, "Stand up for righteousness, stand up for truth. God will be at your side forever". This is faith testifying, faith confessing that in the midst of our deepest despair, God is present. In the face of life's failures and defeats God is there, but not only with us, but ". . . able to give us the interior resources to face the storms and problems of life."¹⁶ Surely that God is able!

Exemplary preaching must speak out of and to the faith of both speaker and hearers. Martin Luther King knew as did many before him that his forebears "winnowed hope out of despair" and knew that "God was not through with them".¹⁷ He realized that they never lost "infinite hope" however deep their despair. It is to that essential faith that the exemplary preacher must speak. When that happens preaching becomes truly dialogical. The preacher calls in faith, the hearers respond in faith. The call and response patterns of the black church is that shared element of faith. Both the preacher and hearer testify to and strengthen the other's faith. The power of Dr. King's preaching or exemplary preaching in any age is only partially understood when the speaker is said to inspire the hearer. Actually each inspires the other.

¹⁵ The terms confessional and testimonial belong to Drs. Luccock and Crawford respectively. See also Massey, *Responsible Pulpit*, p. 92, and Knox, *Integrity*, p. 83.

¹⁶ King, *Strength to Love*, pp. 106-107.

¹⁷ Howard Thurman, *The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1947), p. 56.

His wife, Mrs. Coretta Scott King, speaking about her husband's preaching style in southern churches writes, "He responded to their expectations by arousing oratory; and as they were moved, he would react to their excitement, their rising emotion exalting his own."¹⁸ The same could be said about many other meetings during the Movement when the people came to march, to pray, to picket and to go to jail together. They shared their strength, their resolve, and their hope. God does often come to man through man in the crucible of their common living and common encounter.¹⁹

Exemplary preaching must ". . . have an unmistakable cosmic note in it, a note of community."²⁰ The preacher must speak to the individual person and the individual nation, yet look beyond them to a universal community. This is our father's world "as the keeper of faith makes known. God is concerned about His total creation because "He's Got the Whole World in his hands." Dr. King in his sermon, "On Being a Good Neighbor" moves beyond the need for true neighborliness if integration is to be achieved in America to an urgent call for a "world-wide good neighbor policy."²¹ Nations can no longer afford to pass by on the other side if we are to save future generations from nuclear holocaust. God's love, according to Dr. King, knows no barriers of nationality, race or class. He wrote, ". . . if we are to have peace on earth, our loyalties must become ecumenical rather than sectional. Our loyalties must transcend our race, our tribe, our class, our nation, and this means we must develop a world perspective."²²

Man as the prophet Micah challenged is "to do justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with thy God"²³ wherever he finds himself. Dr. King's urgency about the war in Vietnam, his growing concern for the under-developed world, often the victims of colonialism, racism and war was based upon his understanding of God's purposeful commitment to all of His world. Who proclaiming in His name could be otherwise concerned? All Barriers are broken with God in Christ and we are made one in and through His love. We love others because God first loved us all.²⁴

Lastly, Exemplary preaching and the preacher must be one. The speaker becomes the model or the embodiment of what he says. Word and action, thought and deed are merged if the "good news" is to be believed. More than many would admit, preaching is the media by which most men and women receive the living Christ. It is most often through persons that God chooses to speak to other persons. One has

¹⁸ Coretta Scott King, *My Life with Martin Luther King, Jr.*, (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1969), p. 59.

¹⁹ Hubert H. Farmer, *The Servant of the World* (New York: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1942) p. 56.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

²¹ King, *Strength to Love*, p. 23.

²² Martin Luther King, Jr. *The Triumph of Conscience* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1967), p. 68.

²³ Micah 6:8., King James Version (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967).

written, "ultimately our only gift is the gift of ourselves."²⁵ Martin Luther King, Jr. gave us the gift of his life, and in so living and acting with us, became his own best sermon, the preached word revealed. He lived the Life he sang about in his song.

Dr. King could live such a life because he placed his life as did Jesus, "upon the dependability of God."²⁶ In Him did he place his trust. Because of that faith he took the often lonely and perilous journey from Montgomery to Memphis, accepting his loneliness, but feeling confident that he was never alone. In a sermon entitled, "Antidotes for Fear", Dr. King wrote "Death is not the ultimate end; the ultimate end is to be outside God's love."²⁷ Is there wonder then that he faced his end in Memphis without fear? That old prayer warrior, Mother Pollard, of whom Dr. King so often spoke and wrote was right when she told him years before "God's gonna take care of you."²⁸ Be not discouraged, what ever happens, does not God's love send fear fleeing?

Fear Knocked at the door
Faith answered
There was no one there

Because he was faithful, God used Martin Luther King, Jr. as His herald in our time. Such a man, such a preacher, such a God!

²⁵ George A. Buttnick, *Jesus Came Preaching* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1931), p. 10.

²⁶ James Earl Massey, *The Responsible Pulpit* (Anderson, Indiana: Wocuer Press 1974), p. 21. See also Buttnick, *Jesus Came Preaching*, p. 197.

²⁷ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Strength to Love* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1963), p. 32.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

