

I have a dream

Luke 6, 20-31

May the words of
my mouth and the
meditations of all
of our hearts be
acceptable to you
O Lord, our
strength and our
redeemer

Now this Sunday,
we celebrate the
great Christian
feast of All Saints
being the Sunday
closest to the 1st
of November. A
day when we take
time to remember
all of the saints
through history
who have shaped
our church and
our very
traditional reading
for today is, of
course that of the
Beatitudes. The
wonderful words
that Jesus uses in
the Sermon on the
Mount that
recount the 4
blessings and their
opposite 4 woes.

What I'd like to do
is to come back to
those so familiar
words from the
beatitudes and
challenge you, if I
can, to think of
them in a slightly
different way
because there is a
danger with
passages like this

that are so familiar to us, that we allow them to wash over us rather than to stop and ask what it is that Jesus is telling us and, more importantly, what it is that he is asking of us.

To do that, I'd first like to take a step back and think about another famous sermon that has been much in the news recently. A sermon given by a man who many would consider on this the feast of All Saints to be something of a modern day saint himself. Certainly like many of the saints he was a man who was not afraid to proclaim his faith loudly and proudly. Like them he had a vision of the afterlife and an unceasing desire to see God's purpose working out on earth and like many of them, he gave his life for his faith and his beliefs.

The reason he has been in the news recently was that August 28th was the 50th anniversary of this

famous speech which was given on that day in 1963 on the steps of the Lincoln memorial in Washington DC. I am referring, of course to Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech at the culmination of the March on Washington.

The background to this pivotal moment in American history is quite interesting. King had been high profile in the Civil Rights movement in America since the mid 50's and had seen that his message of equality, backed up by non violent protest, was really gaining traction. In fact in June of 1963, President John F Kennedy had tabled momentous new Civil Rights legislation to establish equality in law.

Kennedy was facing severe political opposition and so King and his colleagues decided that a huge public show of support was needed. They

organised a March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. The idea behind it was to dramatically demonstrate the huge groundswell of public support for change. Planning started in December of 1962 and involved organising people to converge on Washington from every corner of the United States by road, rail or air.

In the end about 250,000 people crammed into the area in front of the Lincoln memorial and stood throughout many speeches and songs before eventually Martin Luther King Junior took to the podium. His speech, which had been hastily written the night before was a pretty dry and serious affair – his natural oratorical talent constrained by the scale and importance of the gathering. The 'dream' section that makes up the second half of the speech was not planned or scripted.

It was, however, something that he had spoken about when he was in his more familiar environment, the pulpit, and it was Mahalia Jackson, the famous black American gospel singer who had earlier entertained the crowds and was now standing behind King who shouted out to him a couple of times; "Tell them about the dream Martin, tell them about the dream".

King paused, looked up from his notes, stopped giving his speech and started giving his sermon. Stanley Levinson who along with Clarence Jones had helped King write the speech sighed, turned to Jones and said, "Looks like we're about to go to church".

King launched in to that famous second half of his speech with the words, "I say to you today, my friends, even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It

is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up, live out the true meaning of its creed: ' We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal'"

He later moved on to perhaps the most memorable passage where he says, "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character." As he continued, his sermon became ever more rooted in faith and in the words of the gospel. " I have a dream today ...I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low. The rough places will be made plain and the crooked places will be made straight. And the glory of God shall be revealed and all flesh shall see

it together. This
is our hope"

The power of these words, 50 years later is still resonating. That speech is now recognised as the turning point in the struggle for Civil Rights in America. It gave Kennedy the impetus that he needed to push through the Civil Rights bill which passed into law in 1964. King's words have been repeated millions of times over the ensuing years and finally led to America electing its first black President in 2009.

I think that part of the reason that King's speech or sermon was so powerful was because of its ability to be aspirational, to paint a picture, in the form of a dream, of how the future may look that is so different to the present. People buy into the dream, they share it and they want to be part of it. They want it to happen and they want to start

doing things to
make it happen.

2000 years before King's great sermon at the foot of the Lincoln Memorial, we had Jesus' great sermon at the foot of the mountain. This was equally a stunning piece of oratory and it was equally visionary. Like King's famous speech, the Sermon on the Mount paints an alternative and better future and challenges us to share in a dream of a better world.

Jesus lists the 4 beatitudes or blessings and then the 4 woes, the opposites of the 4 blessings. I'm sure you could all list them from memory but have we stopped to 'dream' them, to share their aspirations?

Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied.

Blessed are you
who weep now,
for you will laugh.

Blessed are you
when men hate
you, when they
exclude you and
insult you and
reject your name
as evil because of
the Son of Man.

Rejoice in that day
and leap for joy,
because great is
your reward in
heaven.

These are big
dreams that Jesus
is challenging us
with; dreams of a
world quite
different from our
own. A world
where money and
wealth is pointless
and futile and a
route to disaster
and despair. A
world where our
desires for
material things, be
they food or
possessions
become
pointless. A
world where our
apparent sorrows
will be relieved
and replaced by
laughter. It's a
world that is so
different to our
own that Jesus
warns, standing
up and preaching
about it is likely to
get you into
trouble. People
are likely to insult

you, reject you
and call you evil
because you have
the temerity to
dream.

The dream of a Christian life that Jesus asks us to expound and to share is so at odds with the world around us that many would say it's just a pipe dream but in fact it's the opposite – it's a big dream, a huge dream. It's a dream so inspiring that we should have the courage to risk alienating ourselves by shouting about it.

50 years ago, Martin Luther King had the courage to shout about his dream. It made him very unpopular with a lot of people who made his life as tough as possible. It made him so unpopular that on April 4th 1968 he was killed for his beliefs. But his dream changed the world. If he hadn't had the courage to share his dream then nothing would have changed.

Jesus had the courage to share his dream – the dream revealed to us in the Beatitudes. That made him many enemies and few friends and led to his death on the cross in Calvary. His dream changed the world but needs all of us to stand up and proclaim it. Do we have the courage? Do we accept that we have a duty as Christians to proclaim God's word. Can we today go out from here on this All Saints Day and truly and honestly say, "I Have a Dream"

Tom Crotty