

Monuments to Prophets

MLK Prayer Breakfast

By Bob Vincent

sermonaudio.com

Bible Text: Matthew 23:29-31; 5:43-45

Preached on: Monday, January 16, 2012

Robert Benn Vincent

80 Hickory Hill Drive

Boyce, LA 71409

Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/rbvincent

I want to give glory to God and thank you for the privilege of speaking to you this morning.

I want to speak as a Christian, very mindful of the contribution of other traditions and faiths in the Civil Rights Movement. Some of Dr. King's greatest supporters were from the Jewish community. Dr. King's message was focused in a particular way to people like me, white people from the Christian tradition, so I want to speak as a white Christian male, a white Christian southern male, in regards to Dr. King and the impact of his message.

Now, when I think about Dr. King, I think about a speech that he gave exactly one year to the day before he was assassinated. In that speech, he quoted from a poet named James Russell Lowell who wrote a poem in 1845 protesting America's war with Mexico. Let me read you the words of that hymn.

"Once to ev'ry man and nation
Comes the moment to decide,
In the strife of truth and falsehood,
For the good or evil side."

The second stanza of the hymn, which Dr. King did not quote but seems so profoundly to fit Martin Luther King day in modern America, goes like this,

"Then to side with truth is noble,
When we share her wretched crust,
Ere her cause bring fame and profit,
And 'tis prosperous to be just;
Then it is the brave man chooses
While the coward stands aside.
Till the multitude make virtue
Of the faith they had denied."

I find it a strange irony as a white Christian southern male that America celebrates Dr. King. The world I grew up in in the forties and fifties in South Carolina, did not celebrate

Dr. Martin Luther King. In fact, in my entire world that I grew up in whether it was church or the public school system or my home and my extended family, Dr. King was despised. He was hated. He was a hated man. I grew up with that and I cannot recall until almost becoming an adult ever meeting anybody who liked Dr. King.

I think of James Russell Lowell's poem again,

"Then to side with truth is noble,
When we share her wretched crust,
Ere her cause bring fame and profit,
And 'tis prosperous to be just;
Then it is the brave man chooses
While the coward stands aside.
Till the multitude make virtue
Of the faith they had denied."

I remember my father who was a health officer working for the state of South Carolina, my father without knowing who he was referring to, Plessy v. Ferguson, a famous case that said separate but equal, dealing with New Orleans railroads, I remember traveling with my daddy and he had to inspect public schools and he came out of inspecting a black school and I'm sitting in the car and I'm a little boy at that time, and he said, and excuse my language, he said, "Separate but equal? There's not a damn thing equal about their schools." Then he went on and he said, "They've got used textbooks. The buildings are worn out." In other words, there was systematic, systemic discrimination against the black community by the white power establishment.

Now, that's the world I grew up in and I remember daddy was an officer in our church, the first Presbyterian church. We've got all these Presbyterians in my biography here. But I am descended from five Baptist preachers, four Methodists, and one Presbyterian. But I remember daddy came back from a meeting of the officers of the church and he told my mama, he said, "Janet, we voted tonight to do the right thing." "Well, what was that, Willie?" "Well, we decided that if any black folks came to the door of our church, we were going to ask them, 'Why have you come?' And if they said, 'Well, we've come to worship.' We're going to tell them, 'You go to your own church to worship.'"

Now, that's the world I grew up in. I remember when Dr. King won the Nobel Prize for Peace and I remember Walter Cronkite on the national news sneering about it. Wow. That's the world I grew up in.

It's unimaginable, I think it would have been unimaginable for Dr. King to think that the nearest Monday after his birthday would be celebrated as a national holiday. He knew he had a message that was a tough sell and I think again of James Russell Lowell's hymn and I think about these words of Jesus of Nazareth in Matthew 23. He said,

29 ... ye build the tombs of the prophets, and garnish the sepulchres of the
righteous, 30 And say, If we had been in the days of our fathers, we would

not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets. 31
Wherefore ye be witnesses unto yourselves, that ye are the children of
them which killed the prophets.

Sisters and brothers, I'm a child of those who killed the prophets. Make no mistake about it. I happen to agree with Coretta Scott King and all four of the King children, that a two-bit criminal named James Earl Ray could not have pulled off that assassination.

What got Dr. King killed? You know, I look at all of his legacy. He took the teachings of Jesus and applied the technique of Gandhi and he confronted Christian America's soiled conscience.

I read the autobiography of Malcolm X which was not written by Malcolm X, but in there I felt great compassion for this man who had been ground up in the American criminal justice system which still is heavily weighted in terms of percentages against African-American males. But I have to say this when I think of Malcolm X and I think of Martin Luther King, if the leader of the Civil Rights Movement in the fifties and the sixties had been Malcolm X, we would not be here today. Malcolm X by any means necessary would have resulted in a backlash that would have annihilated the protesters. Make no mistake about it. But when Dr. King confrontative people like Bull Connor and when Bull Connor sicced the police dogs on children and turned fire hoses on them and it got caught on the national news, the conscience of Christian America was awakened.

It was Dr. King's message which really is the message of Jesus applied with the techniques of Gandhi that brought about the great changes that have occurred in America. Dr. King profoundly believed what Jesus taught in Matthew 5:43 and following.

43 Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour,
and hate thine enemy. 44 But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless
them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them
which despitefully use you, and persecute you; 45 That ye may be the
children of your Father which is in heaven.

Dr. King believed that. He believed it down in the core of his being. You have to love people who hate you. That's what he believed.

And Dr. King was a hated man but he responded to hatred, to being spat in the face, to being hit with bats, fire hoses turned on his people, he responded by what? By doing good to those who hated him. By praying for those who despitefully used him. I'm here to say that the message of Dr. King, which is really the message of Jesus of Nazareth, about trusting God and doing what's right and doing what's right means when somebody cusses you out, to bless them. It's when somebody lies about you, not to lie in return. When somebody abuses you, to turn the other cheek. Dr. King believed it. Dr. King practiced it and I'm telling you it's the only thing that could have overcome the systemic, violent oppression of African-Americans going back to that slave ship in Jamestown.

Now, as a result of Dr. King's nonviolent witness, his deliberate confrontation with power, but following Jesus by literally turning the other cheek, you know literally, literally. "Let them do it again. Let them do it again." And when that is captured on television, the conscience of a nation awoke and so we have the 1964 Civil Rights Act and we have the 1965 Voting Rights Act, and you know, if Dr. King had stopped there, he would be alive probably today. He could have been offered some great place of honor. But Dr. King didn't stop there because he realized there was enormous economic injustice in America and he continued to campaign.

And Dr. King did something else and I want to read to you now from his remarks made one year to the day before he was assassinated. Dr. King was first and foremost a preacher and he couldn't keep his mouth shut and when he saw injustice, he had fire in his bones and so he said this at Riverside Church in New York City, April 4, 1967. Quoting Dr. King.

"Some of us who have already begun to break the silence of the night have found that the calling to speak is often a vocation of agony, but we must speak. We must speak with all the humility that is appropriate to our limited vision, but we must speak.

Over the past two years, as I have moved to break the betrayal of my own silences and to speak from the burnings of my own heart, as I have called for radical departures from the destruction of Vietnam, many persons have questioned me about the wisdom of my path. At the heart of their concerns, this query has often loomed large and loud: 'Why are you speaking about the war, Dr. King? Why are you joining the voices of dissent?' 'Peace and civil rights don't mix,' they say. 'Aren't you hurting the cause of your people?' they ask. And when I hear them, though I often understand the source of their concern, I am nevertheless greatly saddened, for such questions mean that the inquirers have not really known me, my commitment, or my calling. Indeed, their questions suggest that they do not know the world in which they live. In the light of such tragic misunderstanding, I deem it of signal importance to state clearly, and I trust concisely, why I believe that the path from Dexter Avenue Baptist Church—the church in Montgomery, Alabama, where I began my pastorate—leads clearly to this sanctuary tonight.

Since I am a preacher by calling, I suppose it is not surprising that I have seven major reasons for bringing Vietnam into the field of my moral vision. There is at the outset a very obvious and almost facile connection between the war in Vietnam and the struggle I and others have been waging in America. A few years ago there was a shining moment in that struggle. It seemed as if there was a real promise of hope for the poor, both black and white, through the poverty program. There were experiments, hopes, new beginnings. Then came the buildup in Vietnam, and I watched this program broken and eviscerated as if it were some idle

political plaything on a society gone mad on war. And I knew that America would never invest the necessary funds or energies in rehabilitation of its poor so long as adventures like Vietnam continued to draw men and skills and money like some demonic, destructive suction tube. So I was increasingly compelled to see the war as an enemy of the poor and to attack it as such."

Dr. King left preaching and went to meddling. He spoke out for peace. He carried the teachings of Jesus about turning the other cheek and blessing those who curse you, something that seems an ideal but something that Dr. King put into practice literally and saw a great and radical change in America.

He applied it to the war in Vietnam. The Vietnam war cost the lives of over 58,000 American people for what? In the end, Dr. King knew what was going to happen. We're going to lose that war just like we've lost the war in Iraq. And make no mistake about it, we have. And now with gunboat diplomacy, we're about to get involved in Syria and Iran and I wonder where Dr. King would be? I wonder where Dr. King would be with a nation that still has a situation where the poor are getting poorer and the rich are getting richer, and where the great way to make money is war? War always penalizes the poor the most and it enriches certain rich folks beyond all measure.

Dr. King spoke out against a war that the whole country eventually came to see would not be won. My brother was an Air Force Academy graduate, B52 pilot during that war, and he told me at a point, "We're gonna lose that war." We lost it and I think there's something to be said: all those who take up the sword, who live by the sword, will die by the sword.

So I come to you today, leaving preaching and going to meddling. How is it that we have a Democratic administration taking the helm of the ship of state in January of 2009 and keeping the same Secretary of War, I mean we call it Defense, George Orwell; the same Secretary of War for two years that George W. Bush appointed? Why is that? I think Dr. King would ask, "Why is that?" How can a Republican Secretary of Defense continue to operate for two years under a new hopeful Democratic administration? I don't know but I think Dr. King would ask the question why, and I think he would say, "It's always good to talk to your enemies. You can sit down with anybody and talk to them. You can pray with them. Give peace a chance."

So I close these remarks speaking within my tradition, with no desire to impose my tradition on others. The world I grew up in was a world that hated Martin Luther King so why did I go to his funeral? There were three other friends of mine that went to his funeral and when we got back, the college where I was, we were mocked and laughed at and ridiculed. Those white boys hated us. Why did I choose to go to a funeral? Big deal. It really cost me nothing. It's because I realized that though I was raised in the church and baptized and said all the right words and took communion, I did not have a personal relationship with Jesus, and when I came to have that personal relationship with Jesus, my heart was changed. Immediately I remember asking mama, "Mama, how come we

don't have any black folks in our church?" And my mother's answer really stunned me because it showed me that she was a victim of the brainwashing, the same brainwashing that had been passed on to me. "Oh, Robert," she said, because she was raised in Alabama, "Oh, Robert, I just couldn't stand it." May I say what she said? "Oh, Robert, I just couldn't stand it if a big black negro man came and sat next to me in church. I'd be scared!" I'd be scared. Fear. Fear.

I want to say that the message of Jesus and the message of Dr. King says to face your fear and trust in God and reach out the hand of brotherhood and take the risk and get to know people and to forgive them and to love them. That's Dr. King's message. It's a message for peace. Peace in your own home. Peace in your own community. And peace in our nation. And peace in our world. God Almighty grant that a nation that spends more on war material than all the nations of the world combined, spend a little bit of that money to help poor folks. God help us.

My Reflections on Racism

I want to share some thoughts on race and racism, on why I think that America is still a racist nation and why I think that racism is so insidious and pervasive.

My political science professor, an Episcopalian teaching at Presbyterian College, told us, “I can accept a black on equal terms in an impersonal relationship, or I can accept a black in a personal relationship as long as he is not my equal, but I cannot accept a black on equal terms in a personal relationship.”

In so many ways I find that remark still characterizes human relations in America today. I grew up in a strangely contradictory society. I had regular contact with African-Americans, but never in an equal relationship. My black nursemaid took good care of me, and I loved Amy. Later we moved to Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, and Mattie entered my life. These were kind and loving women who were gentle and knew how to raise children.

As I recall, my aunts and uncles had black servants who were treated as part of the family, but never with equality. When I visited my father’s sister on her ninetieth birthday, I noticed her servant James. His eyes looked funny, the way that they do when people need surgery, so I said to my aunt: “Inez, James’ eyes look like he may have cataracts.”

“I don’t know, Robert, I was always taught never to look a Niggrah in the eyes,” she responded.

Her response startled me. I had known James all my life. He had gone to work for my aunt’s husband as a little boy, and he was now around seventy, having worked for her most of his life. Even though most of that time it was part time, not a day went by that he didn’t check on her. He even telephoned my aunt when he was away visiting relatives in New York. He obviously loved her and she obviously loved him, but she had never looked him in the eye.

She was always “Miss Inez,” while he was always simply James. Her husband, my father’s brother-in-law, was born a little over five years after the end of Reconstruction, and he held to the values of the old South. He was a kind and paternalistic man. He did not hate African-Americans. Their

presence did not make him uncomfortable. When a black friend needed something, “Mr. Harrall” would take care of it. It was his duty, and he never begrudged this expense.

Before daylight, their black cook would arrive. How I remember those wonderful breakfasts: hot hominy grits, eggs, sausage and Viola’s homemade biscuits, served with real butter. Her midday dinners were even better: fried chicken, butter beans, rice and gravy, macaroni and cheese, and more biscuits. Nobody could cook as well as Viola. I still savor the memory of her meals.

This was the world into which I was born. These were the African-Americans that I knew. They all seemed happy and kind. I was “Mr. Robert” when I went back into the kitchen to chat with Viola or James. She never seemed to mind the intrusion of a curious little boy watching her cook on the old, black iron stove. I was always treated as an honored guest.

Over the years, whenever I would go to South Carolina and visit my aunt, I would always visit with James. Sometimes that meant that I would travel down to where he lived and visit him in his home on the way out of town, but I always went to see him—he was part of my family. Viola died many years ago, but I last saw James in the late summer of 1998. I was in South Carolina and took my family to see my aunt. It was just short of her 102nd birthday. After visiting with her for a while, I went out in the yard, where James was working. He still called me “Mr. Robert.” But we hugged each other and spoke affectionately. He had a stroke less than a month later and died shortly thereafter.

That was one side of race relations in the South in which I was born—it was warm and personal but terribly unequal and demanded a measure of deceit from the African-Americans who successfully navigated the intricacies of that paternalistic world. But I did not understand that for years.

When I was a junior in high school, I worked as a desk clerk in a small hotel; the bellhop was a middle-aged black man. He was introduced to me by his first name, Charles. He educated me more than anyone else about the black experience. “Do you think I like acting like a fool—smiling and laughing at white folks making fun of me? I got to feed my kids, and the more I act like a fool, the more food I can put on the table.”

Charles got me to think. He was the first black who was really honest with me. It had never dawned on me that the kindly African-Americans of my childhood had had to keep us in the dark about their true feelings. Their very survival depended on it. Under Charles' tutelage the contradictions of my upbringing began to register.

I had only known adult African-Americans; I had never met their children. Many of the white children that I grew up with did not have any kind of personal relationship with African-Americans. I had gone to all white schools, and African-Americans were oftentimes the objects of scorn and twisted humor. Older boys bragged to me about riding through "N. i. g. g. e. r. town" and shooting African-Americans with twenty-twos. They had replaced the lead with wax. This other side of my life, the public side, was completely devoid of African-Americans.

My first job was pumping gas at Chapins' Shell Service in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina; I was thirteen, and Daddy believed that I needed to learn how to work for other people. We had three restrooms: "Men," "Women" and "Colored." When our only black employee quit, the "Colored" restroom was never cleaned again. It had no light bulb and was nasty.

My father was a health officer; once I was with him when he inspected a black school. "Separate but equal," he said, as he got in the car, "there's not a damned thing equal about their schools . . . used books, worn-out equipment, buildings needing repair." Daddy believed in being fair: "N. i. g. g. e. r. s. love me, because I treat them just like white people." To the best of my knowledge my father never mistreated a black person. He was a kind and decent man, a good father and an active churchman. But my Daddy was a racist, and he taught me to be a racist, too.

In so many ways my mother exemplified the contradictions of my society. Mama would drink coffee with our maid in the kitchen. She cried with her and went to the funeral when Mattie's father died. After I became a Christian, I asked Mama about African-Americans coming to our church, she responded, "Oh, Robert, I couldn't stand it if a Niggrah man sat down next to me!" How well I remember Daddy coming home from a session meeting and proudly telling us that the elders had passed a resolution on how to handle these agitators: "We agreed to meet them at the door and ask why they had come. If they tell us that they are here to worship, we'll tell them

they have their own churches to worship in and send them away.” Mama was relieved.

This action on the part of the officers of my church was not isolated. Back in the sixties, my wife and I worked at Thornwell Orphanage; it was under the oversight of the Synods of South Carolina, Georgia and Florida of the Presbyterian Church U.S. black children weren’t allowed there. My alma mater, Presbyterian College, finally admitted a couple of African-Americans my senior year. I remember a chapel sermon preached by Bob Jones, Jr., back when I had attended his university. “Blacks have never had a successful civilization.” “They are only happy when they are in the role of a servant.” It was in flight from that world that I went to the funeral of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., back in 1968.

During the four years that I was in seminary—three in Philadelphia, one in Pittsburgh—I became acquainted with Northern people. Since I was married and had to work at least part time, I discovered that there was at least as much bigotry up North as there was in the South; it’s simply that the non-Christian Northern folk with whom I worked were less honest about their prejudices than the non-Christians in the South. Once again, to quote my political science professor: “I can accept a black on equal terms in an impersonal relationship, or I can accept a black in a personal relationship as long as he is not my equal, but I cannot accept a black on equal terms in a personal relationship.”

In many ways the South is becoming more like the North; it has become more hypocritical, and relationships between African-Americans and European-Americans have become much less personal. By and large, racism on the surface is gone; there are lots of changes that have come. The nineteen sixty-four Civil Rights Act has guaranteed many things, but underneath, in so many ways, little has changed.

Illiteracy among African-Americans is far greater now than it was fifty years ago. There is still great disparity in everything from jobs to housing. Streets are poorer; streetlights are left burned out more often; mailboxes are harder to come by. And black folk, especially males, are far more likely to be stopped by the police.

I know the response that is usually given by white conservatives to these things, but I wonder about corporate responsibility. My ancestors on both

my mother and father's sides owned slaves. In many places in the old South, it was illegal for a black to be able to read or write. A marriage between African-Americans was not accorded the same legal status as that between European-Americans. Families were broken up: fathers and mothers were sold and separated, sometimes by hundreds of miles.

I don't feel guilt for the past—Adam's, my ancestors or my own—because the Lord Jesus died in my place as my substitute and became a curse for me. (Galatians 3:13) But I do accept responsibility to work for change. I will not respond like Cain; I acknowledge that I am responsible. A society that has systematically, overtly and legally discriminated against African-Americans for several hundred years is responsible, too.

I believe that most Americans are racists, at least at some level, but hopefully most are not hateful, malevolent racists. That's true for African-Americans as well as European-Americans. Until we recognize it in ourselves, we cannot deal with it. Racist thinking is a bit like self-pity, pride or lust, it sometimes knocks on the door of the conscious mind, but the Christian person must learn to reject it by the authority of the name of Jesus.

Does 2 Samuel 21:1-14 have anything to say to us in America today, other than, "Thank God, I'm under the New Covenant!"? (I have placed the relevant verses at the end of this page.) As I come to the chilling implications of 2 Samuel 21:14 ("After that, God answered prayer in behalf of the land."), I understand that I am affected by what my ancestors and my federal representatives did long before my time. It makes me wonder if systemic racism isn't a curse on American society just like abortion and public sodomy.

Like Daniel and others, it makes me confess my sins and those of my fathers. It causes me to see that the burden is on me for improved race relations. It is my obligation to take the first step, to go the second mile, to be the first to open my home for a meal. And it is my task to work together for a better world, coming not as a superior to teach, but as a brother to share and learn.

Over the past decades, I have prayed together with black pastors on a weekly basis; some of us have swapped pulpits. I have learned much more than I have taught. It is a bright spot of encouragement in a world that is becoming increasingly racially polarized.

I long to see the day when my professor's words are no longer true: where African-Americans and European-Americans enjoy both equal and personal relationships.

Bob Vincent

2 Samuel 21:1-14:

1 During the reign of David, there was a famine for three successive years; so David sought the face of the LORD. The LORD said, "It is on account of Saul and his blood-stained house; it is because he put the Gibeonites to death."

3 David asked the Gibeonites, "What shall I do for you? How shall I make amends so that you will bless the LORD's inheritance?"

4 The Gibeonites answered him, "We have no right to demand silver or gold from Saul or his family, nor do we have the right to put anyone in Israel to death." "What do you want me to do for you?" David asked.

5 They answered the king, ". . . let seven of his male descendants be given to us to be killed and exposed before the LORD at Gibeah of Saul—the Lord's chosen one." So the king said, "I will give them to you."

8 But the king took Armoni and Mephibosheth, the two sons of Aiah's daughter Rizpah, whom she had borne to Saul, together with the five sons of Saul's daughter Merab, whom she had borne to Adriel son of Barzillai the Meholathite.

9 He handed them over to the Gibeonites, who killed and exposed them on a hill before the LORD. All seven of them fell together; they were put to death during the first days of the harvest, just as the barley harvest was beginning.

13 David brought the bones of Saul and his son Jonathan from there, and the bones of those who had been killed and exposed were gathered up.

14 They buried the bones of Saul and his son Jonathan in the tomb of Saul's father Kish, at Zela in Benjamin, and did everything the king commanded. After that, God answered prayer in behalf of the land.

In effect, the sins of one man profoundly affected those who lived after him, even to the point of God's refusing to answer prayer until the matter was put right and those who had been wronged spoke blessing.