

Daily Meditation 01-15-24

On Martin Luther King Jr., His Movement & His Mentors

Good morning, and blessings on us all, on this day of remembrance and celebration of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

In my meditation today, I point out how interesting it is that King practiced deep ecumenism back in the 50s, late 50s and 60s, because he drew on the wisdom of Mahatma Gandhi, who was, of course, a Hindu.

But he, in turn, was practicing deep ecumenism, because he was drawing on the wisdom of Jesus, and especially the Sermon on the Mount, converting it to a practice that overthrew an empire, the sort of practices beyond the personal act of love, to a political act.

So, in this very important study by Steven Oates, *Let the Trumpet Sound: The Life of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, he makes note of the moment when the King was in the seminary and came across the work of Gandhi.

He says he went to Philadelphia one Sunday to attend a lecture by the President of Howard University, Dr. Mordecai Johnson, who had just spent 50 days in India.

The lecture was a stirring presentation of the life and teachings of Gandhi. King sat rooted to his chair, as Johnson explained how Gandhi had forged the soul force, the power of love or truth, into a mighty vehicle for social change. Then Johnson proposed that the moral power of Gandhian nonviolence could improve race relations in America too

He says, King was spellbound. Quote:

I had heard of Gandhi, but Johnson's message was so profound and electrifying, that I left the meeting, and bought a half dozen books on Gandhi's life and works.

And so really steeped himself then, in learning more about Gandhi. "Nonviolent resistance," said Gandhi, "means non-cooperation with evil."

He got this idea from Thoreau, Thoreau's essay on Civil Disobedience, "which left a deep impression on me," he said. Thoreau himself had studied the Upanishads and Bhagavad Gita.

So here we have this back and forth between cultures and religions. And this had everything to do with King's commitment to nonviolence. King said,

Gandhi is one of the great men of our time, of all time. He's probably the first person in history to lift the love ethic of Jesus, above mere interaction between individuals, into a very powerful, effective social force, on a large scale.

Well, that's exactly what Father Bede Griffith was saying, in our meditation today.

King rejoiced that Christ had furnished him with the Spirit. Now Gandhi had shown him how it could work. "The chain of hatred must be cut," King said. "When it is broken, brotherhood can begin." Here was the basis of his teaching on beloved community.

So Gandhi was a profound mentor to King. And of course, Howard Thurman and his wife in the 1930s, visited Gandhi and many other teachers in India. And it was Thurman who said,

It is my belief that in the presence of God, there is neither male nor female, white nor black, Gentile, nor Jew, Protestant nor Catholic, Hindu, Buddhist, nor Muslim, but a human spirit, stripped to the literal substance of itself, before God.

So Howard Thurman, another very important mentor to King, was not only a source for Gandhi, but also a source for deep ecumenism. And so in this circle going on, between India, Gandhi, Thurman and his wife, and King:

Here was born the vision, the vision of a beloved community, the vision of nonviolence, the vision of non cooperation with evil, that became the womb for the birth of peace, based on justice, that the Civil Rights movement, with King's leadership, and many others', King especially, itself gave birth to.

Thank you. Happy holiday. See you next week.