

MLK had an enormous capacity for vision and to share his insight into God's kingdom with others. Trying to see the world through God's eyes gave him some extraordinary moments and inspiration at the same time as he struggled with the aggression and oppression around him.

"Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase."

Raising the eyes of all people, black and white, to see things not just as they were but as they could be, was one of the aims of MLK's ministry and mission.

"I just want to do God's will. And he's allowed me to go to the mountain. And I've looked over, and I've seen the promised land! I may not get there with you, but I want you to know tonight that we as a people will get to the promised land."

Where can I find out more?

There is a lot of information about MLK online, including a biography and further reading at www.nobelprize.org and a range of resources at www.thekingcenter.org.

A Gift of Love is an anthology of his sermons and *Martin Luther King Jr for Armchair Theologians* by Rufus Burrows Jr explores his Christian belief

The following Christ in the footsteps series is part of the commitment of the Diocese of Lichfield to exploring discipleship, evangelism and vocation today, learning from the traditions and followers of the past. In every generation faithful and thoughtful people have struggled with questions of faith and wondered what it means to be followers of Christ in that particular time and place. As we ask those questions today, there are great riches to be gained from the voices of the past who remain part of our life of faith and shared in our desire to see the Good News of Jesus transform lives and

ncourage
discipleship, vocation, evangelism

Following Christ in the footsteps of ...



Martin Luther King Jr

1929—1968



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What was going on in their world?

MLK was born in Alabama in the Southern USA at a time when segregation laws were in place separating black people and white people and ensuring that they did not have the same rights or opportunities. The churches were also segregated, and were a very important part of the social and political life of America.

MLK's father was a Baptist minister, as was his grandfather and Martin followed in their footsteps. MLK founded an organisation of Church Ministers who were opposed to segregation. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference became a very important body in the campaign for civil rights. SCLC advocated, and indeed trained people, for direct action such as boycotts, marches, and other forms of nonviolent protest.

Much of the civil rights campaign was focused on challenging segregation in particular institutions and towns and cities and establishing real voting rights for black people .

What questions were they asking?

King is very quotable, and no doubt you are familiar with his "I have a dream" speech. He raised a lot of challenging questions for Christians, whether or not they were experiencing the sort of acute situation he was in:

"Life's most persistent and urgent question, is 'what are you doing for others?'"

"The first question which the priest and the Levite asked was: 'If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?' But... the good Samaritan reversed the question: 'If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?'"

"If any earthly institution or custom conflicts with God's will, it is your Christian duty to oppose it. You must never allow the transitory, evanescent demands of man-made institutions to take precedence over the eternal demands of the Almighty God."

How did they share Good news with others?

King believed that *all* people are children of God and that it was wrong to be treated differently because of race. He helped people who had been told - both explicitly and implicitly by the system - that they didn't matter that they really did. That they were fully human and should claim the dignity that they had as children of God.

One of the things that separated MLK from other campaigners for black equality was his resistance to violence. MLK showed that things can change without perpetuating cycles of violence. He absorbed the violence and wrongs done to him and did not pass them on and he encouraged those he campaigned with to do the same. It probably didn't seem like it a lot of the time, but eventually that behaviour transformed the lives of millions of people.

What can we learn about being disciples today?

What it means to follow Christ has to be worked out. Some of the white Christians thought it was right to maintain white privilege. Some of the white leaders agreed things should change but gradually, without rocking the boat. Some of them campaigned alongside black people. Some black Christians also thought that God had made things as they were and it wasn't right to challenge it; it was the duty of the Christian to accept the situation you found yourself in. But MLK believed passionately that God had made all people to flourish and not to be bound by race or status.

Discipleship is costly. Fighting for what he believed in cost MLK his life . He was regarded as a trouble maker by other church leaders, and lived in a world which was extremely hostile to him. Knowing that he was called to continue to fight for this cause as a disciple of Jesus must have been very hard.