

Contemporary Reading: from *the Letter from Birmingham Jail* by Martin Luther King

I must confess that I am not afraid of the word "tension." I have earnestly worked and preached against violent tension, but there is a type of constructive nonviolent tension that is necessary for growth...

My friends, I must say to you that we have not made a single gain in civil rights without determined legal and nonviolent pressure. History is the long and tragic story of the fact that privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily... We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed...

For years now I have heard the word "wait." It rings... with a piercing familiarity. This "wait" has almost always meant "never."... We must come to see with the distinguished jurist of yesterday that "justice too long delayed is justice denied."...

(For there is) a tragic misconception of time. It is the strangely irrational notion that there is something in the very flow of time that will inevitably cure all ills. Actually, time is neutral. It can be used either destructively or constructively. I am coming to feel that the people of ill will have used time much more effectively than the people of good will. We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the vitriolic words and actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people. We must come to see that human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless efforts and persistent work of people willing to be co-workers with God, and without this hard work time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation...

There was a time when the church was very powerful. It was during that period that the early Christians rejoiced when they were deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was the thermostat that transformed the mores of society. Wherever the early Christians entered a town the power structure got disturbed and immediately sought to convict them for being "disturbers of the peace" and "outside agitators." But they went on with the conviction that they were "a colony of heaven" and had to obey God rather than man. They were small in number but big in commitment. They were too God-intoxicated to be "astronomically intimidated." They brought an end to such ancient evils as infanticide and gladiatorial contest. Things are different now. The contemporary church is so often a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. It is so often the arch supporter of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church's often vocal sanction of things as they are. But the judgment of God is upon the church as never before. If the church of today does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authentic ring, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning...

For words of truth and challenge

Thanks be to God

Gospel: A reading from the Gospel of Mark 6:14-29

Meanwhile Herod, the ruler of Judea, had heard about Jesus, whose reputation had become widespread. Some people were saying, "John the Baptizer has been raised from the dead, and that is why such miraculous powers are at work in him." Others said, "He is Elijah"; still others, "He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old." When Herod heard of Jesus, he exclaimed, "John, whom I beheaded, has risen from the dead!"

Now it was Herod who had ordered John arrested, chained and imprisoned on account of Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip, whom Herod had married. For John had told Herod, "It is against the Law for you to have your brother's wife." As for Herodias, she was furious with John and wanted to kill him but was unable to do so. Herod feared John, knowing him to be good and holy, and kept him in custody. When Herod heard John speak he was very much disturbed; yet he was moved by John's words.

Herodias had her chance one day when Herod on his birthday held a dinner for the court circle, military officers and leaders of Galilee. When the daughter of Herodias came in and danced, this delighted Herod and the guests so much that he told the young woman, "Ask me anything you like and I will give it to you." And Herod swore an oath, "I will give you anything you ask, even half of my entire realm!"

She went out and said to her mother, "What should I ask for?"

Herodias replied, "The head of John the Baptizer."

The woman hurried back to Herod and made her request: "I want you to give me the head of John the Baptizer on a platter."

Herod was deeply distressed by this request, but remembering the oath he swore before the guests, he was reluctant to break his oath to her. So Herod immediately sent one of the bodyguards with orders to bring John's head. The guard beheaded John in prison, then brought the head in on a platter and gave it to the young woman, who gave it to her mother.

When John's disciples heard about this, they came and took the body away and laid it in a tomb.

For sacred words of challenge and encouragement
thanks be to God.