A Dangerous Unselfishness

“Let us beset the just one, because he is obnoxious to us; he sets himself against our doings, reproaches us for transgressions of the law” (Wisdom 2:12). The Book of Wisdom was written about fifty years before the coming of Jesus Christ. Its author encouraged the faithful who had experienced suffering and oppression to remain faithful to God. In today’s Gospel, John tells us “Jesus moved about within Galilee; he did not wish to travel in Judea, because the Jews were trying to kill him” (7:1). Together, both readings demonstrate that those who wish to deny God and deny basic human rights will be with us in every generation. How are we to respond?

On the 3rd of April 1968, Dr Martin Luther King Jr. spoke out in support of Memphis sanitation workers who were on strike for better pay and working conditions. Dr King met with great resistance. His message, “We want to be free,” was meant to address the local situation in Memphis but it echoed around the nation and the world wherever basic civil and human rights were neglected. Dr King was not altogether unlike Moses who spoke to the Pharaoh of Egypt for better working conditions for the Hebrew people.

Dr King had an eerie sense that his prophetic voice would be silenced but the truth that God wrote in his heart compelled him to speak up for the oppressed. “Survival demands that we grapple with them… It is no longer a choice between violence and nonviolence in this world; it’s nonviolence or nonexistence.”

Nonviolent resistance can be powerful in changing hearts and minds. But it is a difficult struggle that often calls for great sacrifice as one turns the other cheek and tries to love one’s enemies. Dr King witnessed first-hand the mace, the beatings, the fire hoses, the attack by dogs, the lynching and the church burnings.

Dr King called for boycotts and asked for everyone to sacrifice in order to lighten the pain and suffering of those who were mistreated. “Be concerned about your brother. You may not be on strike. But either we go up together, or we go down together. Let us develop a kind of dangerous unselfishness.” Being unselfish and caring for the oppressed was indeed dangerous. Dr King was assassinated the next day.

At his last major address, Dr King closed his speech stating: “We’ve got some difficult days ahead…Like anybody, I would like to live a long life ... But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will…. I’m not worried about anything. I’m not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”

In April of 1989, I traveled to Memphis for a week. I saw the infamous balcony where Dr King was gunned down. I also saw a city that had made great strides due to the sacrifice of Dr. King and so many others in the civil rights movement.

Amidst the coronavirus, no one is plotting our downfall . . . and yet like Jesus we find ourselves limiting our movement in order to avoid the threat of death. Following the sound medical advice that is offered, we are wise to limit our freedom of movement. Like Dr King, we should also be concerned about doing God’s will. Let us be willing to make sacrifices for the good of others or to paraphrase Dr King:

“Be concerned about your brothers and sisters. You may not be stricken. But either we go up together, or we go down together. Let us develop a kind of dangerous unselfishness.”