

**Sermon on Gal. 3,26-28 / Martin Luther King Day**  
**Petrikirche Hannover , Jan. 17<sup>th</sup>, 2010**

May the grace of our Lord and brother Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,  
tomorrow, on the third Monday in January, the Martin Luther King National Holiday will be celebrated in the USA. This date was chosen as Martin Luther King was born on the 15<sup>th</sup> of January.

King is remembered as a prophet of ecumenical Christianity not only in the USA, but all over the world. He is one of the ten men and women honoured with statues on the West front of Westminster Abbey in London as “Christian martyrs of the twentieth century”. There are hundreds of church centres, schools and places named after him. A Lutheran minister of a small village near Leipzig wrote to me on the memorable day of Nov. 9<sup>th</sup>, 1989: “Now, at last, the Berlin Wall is useless. One of my sons regularly participated in the Monday prayers (in the Nikolaikirche of Leipzig). I think, Martin Luther King has accompanied many as role model.”

Martin Luther King was a prophet who was deeply rooted in the Christian tradition and its message of human dignity and equality. One of the biblical passages he often referred to was the passage which we have heard as the first reading.

In his letter to the Galatians Paul wrote: “In Christ you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female: for you all are one in Christ Jesus.”

This passage shows, that even in the beginning of Christianity, about twenty years after Jesus’ death, Christians didn’t live up to their creed that “all are one in Christ Jesus”, that all are children of God. As Paul has reported in his letters, Christians of Jewish background were suspicious of Christians of Greek background. Slaves who had become Christians were discriminated by free Christians. Women did not count as much as men.

As we all know, the history of Christianity and of mankind is full of similar divisions up to now. But as Christians we need not surrender to this reality, as the life and work of Martin Luther King shows.

In a sermon, in which Martin Luther King referred to our text from Paul’s letter to the Galatians, he said:

“Man is a child of God, and therefore must be respected as such. Until men see this everywhere, until nations see this everywhere, we will be fighting wars. One day somebody should remind us, even though there may be political and ideological differences between us, (...) the Russians are our brothers, the Chinese are our brothers; and one day we’ve got to sit down at the table of brotherhood. (...) In Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile. In Christ there is neither male nor female. (...) In Christ, somehow, there is neither bound nor free. We are all one in Christ Jesus. And when we truly believe in the sacredness of human personality, we won’t exploit people, we won’t trample over people with the iron feet of oppression, we won’t kill anybody.”

In his last Christmas sermon, given a few months before his death, Martin Luther King reminds us:

“If we are to have peace on earth, our loyalties must become ecumenical rather than sectional. Our loyalties must transcend our race, our tribe, our class and our nation; and this means we must develop a world perspective. (...)

It really boils down to this: that all life is interrelated. We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied to a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. We are made to live together because of the interrelated structure of reality.

Did you ever stop to think that you can’t leave for your job in the morning without being dependent on most of the world? You can get up in the morning and go to the bathroom and reach over for the sponge, and that’s handed over to you by a Pacific Islander. You reach out for a bar of soap, and that’s given to you at the hands of a Frenchman. And then you go into the kitchen to drink your coffee for the morning, and that’s poured into your cup by a South American. And maybe you want tea: that’s poured into your cup by a Chinese. Or maybe you’re desirous of having cocoa for breakfast, and that’s poured into your cup by a West African. And then you reach out for your toast, and that’s given to you at the hands of an English-speaking farmer, not to mention the baker. And before you finish breakfast in the morning, you’ve depended on more than half of the world. (...) We aren’t going to have peace on earth until we recognize this basic fact of the interrelated structure of all reality.”

We are “all one in Christ Jesus”. We are sons and daughters of God. That’s why as Christians we cannot remain neutral, when individuals or groups suffer from men-made dividing-lines, from discrimination and injustice.

As Martin Luther King said so impressively in his famous speech against the Vietnam War at the Riverside Church in New York:

“Because I believe that the Father is deeply concerned especially for his suffering and helpless and outcast children, I come (...) to speak for them. We are called to speak for the weak, for the voiceless, for victims of our nation and

those it calls enemy, for no document from human hands can make these humans any less than our (sisters and) brothers.”

Who are the voiceless today? Who are the voiceless we are called to speak for? They may be different groups in different countries. Concerning my own country Germany, I think of unemployed men and women, lacking self-respect and the respect of others. I think of the growing number of “working poor”. I think of uprooted victims of an economic globalization, that is not accompanied by a globalization of ethical values and standards. I think of the victims of the militarization of German politics.

“To speak for the voiceless“, “to be the voice of the voiceless“ – King believed this to be the most important mission for Christians and churches. In many sermons he emphasized: “It has always been the responsibility of the church to broaden horizons and to challenge the status quo. The church must move out into the arena of social action.” King criticized that often Christians “are thermometers that record or register the temperature of majority opinion, not thermostats that transform and regulate the temperature of society.” “Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the Church’s silent – and often even vocal – sanction of things as they are.” What happens if a representative of a Christian church dares to challenge the status quo is shown by aggressive or malicious reactions to Bishop Käßmann’s remarks on the war in Afghanistan.

Martin Luther King was courageous enough to “speak truth to power”. When he spoke out against the “interrelated evils of poverty, racism and war” and advocated massive actions of civil disobedience he became “persona non grata” not only to those in power, but also to the majority of his contemporaries. He was willing to accept the price for his “creative non-conformism”. At the end of his life he was no longer one of the ten “most admired” persons in the USA – according to the Gallup poll.

Remembering Martin Luther King who – like Jesus – spoke for the voiceless still poses a challenge to us. The challenge not to accept men-made dividing-lines and to live up to the message of Paul’s letter to the Galatians.

So let me conclude with the final lines of Martin Luther King’s “Message for Race Relations Sunday”: “If we will only accept the challenge we will be able to emerge from the bleak and desolate midnight of man’s inhumanity to man to the bright and glittering daybreak of freedom and justice for all men. This will be the day when men everywhere will recognize that ‘we are all one in Christ Jesus.’ “

Amen.

