

## **Context Matters**

Martin Luther King Jr. Day, 2022, Message by Bishop Kevin Nichols

I was all ready to offer a poignant prayer Attributed to the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. - one that spoke powerfully of our current moment... as they say “that’ll preach.”

I asked a colleague, an African American scholar, for insights into the context of the prayer. She too had heard the prayer many times before as well, but also could not find attribution and wondered if it was a compilation of a number of Dr. King’s writings or prayers. As a Racial Justice “Ally”, I felt a strong need to Search for another prayer - one that had a clearer context - one that I might need to learn more about because as we know from our study of scripture, Context always matters... and THIS DAY is about MY need to learn... it’s not MY day to preach.

So I offer the following. Listen to the raw emotion and the call for Justice...This prayer, affords me a glimpse into the soul of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

### Father Forgive Them

*“We are still inflicted with economic injustice—Father forgive them. Simply because we want to be free there are those who will threaten our lives, cripple us with economic reprisals, and bomb our homes and churches—but Father forgive them. There are still those hooded perpetrators of violence, who will stop us out on some wayside road, and beat us, leaving us half dead—but Father forgive them. Right here in Montgomery, in spite of all our efforts, thousands of us are refused the right to become registered voters—but Father forgive them. Our children, merely desiring education, are spat upon, cursed and kicked hither and yonder—but Father forgive them.” Amen*

On April 6, 1958, in Montgomery, Alabama, King offered these words as a prayer at the prayer pilgrimage protesting the electrocution of Jeremiah Reeves, a drummer boy in a black band, who had been arrested at age sixteen for allegedly raping a white woman. It was widely believed by King and others in the black community that Reeves was innocent. This prayer is one that Dr. King recited in times of great trial. The NAACP provided funds to pay for Jeremiah Reeves

defense in an effort to protect the youth. Protests had arisen about his sentence, and followed his execution. Days after his execution, on Easter morning leaders of the national protest, including Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., led a prayer pilgrimage to the grounds of the Alabama state capitol in Montgomery.

On that occasion, King said, I quote,

*"It was the severity of Jeremiah Reeves's penalty that aroused the Negro community, not the question of his guilt or innocence. But not only are we here to repent for the sin committed against Jeremiah Reeves, but we are also here to repent for the constant miscarriage of justice that we confront every day in our courts. The death of Jeremiah Reeves is only the precipitating factor for our protest, not the causal factor. The causal factor lies deep down in the dark and dreary past of our oppression. The death of Jeremiah Reeves is but one incident, yes, a tragic incident, in the long and desolate night of our court injustice.*

*Let us go away devoid of bitterness, and with the conviction that unearned suffering is redemptive. I hope that in recognizing the necessity for struggle and suffering, we will make of it a virtue. If only to save ourselves from bitterness, we need vision to see the ordeals of this generation as the opportunity to transfigure ourselves and American society. Truth may be crucified and justice buried, but one day they will rise again. We must live and face death if necessary with that hope".*

Friends, I am a privileged white man and I am a latecomer...

This is not my day - it's THE day for folk who have been and continue to be marginalized, oppressed, discriminated against, beaten, killed and denied Justice. It is an unfulfilled day - one that EB Dubois speaks to in his famous prayer.

*DuBois: Thou too art white*

*"Bewildered we are, and passion – tossed, made with the madness of a mobbed and mocked and murdered people; straining at the armposts of Thy Throne,...*

*"...we raise our shackled hands and charge Thee, God, by the bones of our stolen fathers, by the tears of our dead mothers, by the very blood of Thy crucified Christ: what meaneth this? Tell us the plan; give us the sign! Keep not thou silent, O God! Sit no longer blind, Lord God, deaf to our prayer and dumb to our dumb*

*suffering. Surely Thou, too, art not white, O Lord, a pale, bloodless, heartless thing!*

How does one, like me, speak to this moment?

Our own Soul-work is needed. For white Allies - allies who have power and authority - we must go deeper, bolder. On this day, I dare say:

One can't be an ally if they parse the lies that led to an insurrection - Or worse, speak boldly in outrage at first and then walk 'it back for self-interest sake.

One can't be an ally and talk about a stolen election, or condone the actions of our former president.

One can't be an ally and talk about critical race theory and pretend that you know what Dr. King would say about it.

One can't be an ally and deny a history of white supremacy, focusing instead on the fragility of white children.

One can't be an ally and enact voting rights laws directed at people of color... or redistricting efforts that favor one over another...

One can't be an ally and not be outraged at the killing of black youth in 1958 and in 2022. To be an ally demands a deeper acknowledgement of our own reality, our own context, our own white privilege and a commitment to listen and learn.

Just this day - we might need to Hush our voice.

What I am learning is that Building the Beloved Community is bold and unceasing work. It is about creating a place where love wins out - where all are equal.

A place where all voices are valued, embraced and all have the opportunity to lead. Where all feel beloved. It is what I dream for in the churches of the Diocese of Bethlehem. We must continue the deep and personal soul-work of educating ourselves and listening and learning about the plight of those like Martin Luther King. Our sibling's hero, who must become our own as well. Let us seek to become Racial Justice Allies.

This moment, God's Justice demands it.

Know of my love.

Bishop Kevin Nichols