

Martin Luther King, Jr.

Develop a Prophetic Vision: A case study

On 28th August, 1963, Martin Luther King delivered one of the most famous and powerful speeches in history. Speaking to over a quarter of a million civil rights activists in Washington DC, his 'I have a dream' speech still evokes incredible emotion and motivation for those who watch it today. In the speech he skilfully contrasted the current experience of black Americans with his dream of racial equality across the divided country. While incubated in the reality of the injustices of the time, the speech painted a vision of a different and inclusive future reality as an obtainable destiny which would irrevocably change the experience of all Americans. However, Martin Luther King was not simply a master communicator, but a man who immersed himself in his vision to bring equal rights to all Americans.



Grab a Towel proposed four steps to cultivating a prophetic vision (see pages 58-64). King's journey as a Christ-centred servant leader serves as a great example of how prophetic vision emerges through these four steps.

Firstly, King's vision was **God-given**. His faith fuelled his vision. Although King no doubt had several encounters with God that fuelled his vision, he often recounted one particular event that was foundational to his vision. Upon returning home after his first ever night in jail, and feeling the full weight of the implication of the path he had chosen, particularly given the death threats he had recently received, 'King sat staring at an untouched cup of coffee and tried to think of a way out, a way to quietly surrender leadership and resume the serene life of scholarship he had planned for. In the next room lay his wife Coretta, already asleep, along with their new-born daughter Yolanda. Here is how King remembers it in a sermon he preached:

'And I sat at that table thinking about that little girl and thinking about the fact that she could be taken away from me any minute. And I started thinking about a dedicated, devoted and loyal wife, who was over there asleep... And I got to the point that I couldn't take it anymore. I was weak...

'And I discovered then that religion had to become real to me, and I had to know God for myself. And I bowed down over that cup of coffee. I will never forget it... I prayed a prayer, and I prayed out loud that night. I said, 'Lord, I'm down here trying to do what's right. I think I'm right. I think the cause that we represent is right. But Lord, I must confess that I'm weak now. I'm faltering. I'm losing my courage.'

'...And it seemed at that moment that I could hear an inner voice saying to me, 'Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And lo I will be with you, even until the end of the world.'... I heard the voice of Jesus saying still to fight on. He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone. No never alone. No never alone. He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone.'

Philip Yanceyⁱ, who recounts this story, concludes that this experience '...for him became the bedrock of personal faith, an anointing from God for a particular task'.

Secondly, King's vision was **specific**. His goal was to bring freedom to black Americans in order that they could equally share with their white counterparts in the American dream. His specific vision saw

that non-violent protest would be the medium through which his dream became a reality – and through which an entire nation could be changed.

Thirdly, he had to **count the cost** of the vision. King himself said: 'Christianity... has always insisted that the cross we bear precedes the crown we wear. To be a Christian one must take up his cross, with all its difficulties and agonising and tension-packed content, and carry it until that very cross leaves its mark upon us and redeems us to that more excellent way which comes only through suffering.' In counting the cost, he was also committed to following Christ through pursuing non-violent means of transforming society. This led him to being persecuted more brutally by his enemies and misunderstood by his allies. But he insisted that 'moral change is not accomplished through immoral means'.

Ultimately, counting the cost for Martin Luther King meant that his own life was lost for the sake of his vision as he was assassinated on April 4th, 1968. Yet, even that cost has contributed to the fulfilment of his vision as, just days after his assassination, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1968... known as the Fair Housing Act. This legislation was seen as a tribute to King's struggle in his final years to combat residential discrimination in the U.S.

Finally, King was courageously able to **communicate** his vision – in spite of tremendous opposition, persecution and threats to his life. King didn't shy away from utilising his public platform in order to challenge the *status quo*. He communicated his vision so effectively that he was able to influence a huge proportion of the population to take up non-violent resistance which ultimately led to unjust laws being amended and social barriers being broken down – thereby opening up a new world of opportunity for future generations of black Americans. As Philip Yancey wrote, 'King offered a vision of the world held in the hands of a just God'.

Personally, I never get tired of listening to Martin Luther King's 'I have a dream' speech. [Click here](#) for an excerpt of some of the most outstanding moments.

Not all of us will be able to communicate with the giftedness of Martin Luther King or have the enduring impact that he had. However, all Christ-centred servant leaders will desire to serve their family, community, church organisation and generation by seeking God for a vision that will lead them to bring the tangible reality of the kingdom of God within their community.

ⁱ Excerpts in this article are taken from Philip Yancey, *Soul Survivor*, 2001.