

Homily for Sunday
January 25, 2009

Introduction

On Monday of this past remarkable week, the day before the Inauguration, Mt. Zion Baptist Church, the Unitarian Universalist community and Our Lady Queen of Peace Parish celebrated our annual ecumenical service in honor of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. It was a great moment for each of our congregations as we celebrated the Afro-American prophet, Dr. King, and the Afro-American president, Barack Obama.

I

However, there was one jarring note, at least from my perspective. Near the end of the service the entire assembly stood to sing "We Shall Overcome" and at a certain point we were invited to intone the verse "God is on our side..." I immediately recalled the question put to President Abraham Lincoln during the American Civil War: is God on our side. And you doubtless know his answer: the real question has to be are we on God's side. So, last Monday I felt it pretentious and even presumptuous for a large group of middle class people, in the heart of what is still the wealthiest country on earth to be claiming God is on our side. Those who struggled for decades on behalf of their civil rights could make that claim; but I felt that we should not. We should rather ask if we are on God's side.

II

The question is crucial at any point in history, is it not; and no less crucial today as we focus on the enormity of the task facing our country and the efforts of a new and clearly capable, intelligent president to meet that task.

III

But how does one know if we are on God's side? I've thought about this all week since our M.L. King Day celebration. My thoughts have gone several times to Jesus' parable about Lazarus and the rich man who wants God to send Lazarus back to his five brothers at home and warn them not to make the same mistake as he in not taking any notice of the beggar Lazarus at his gate. God's answer gives us a segue into our question about whose side we are on: "They [your brothers] have Moses and the prophets. Let them listen to them".

IV

We also have Moses and the prophets. In today's first reading the Prophet Jonah calls a whole country to fasting and penance for turning away from God. (Just as an aside, you may know that scores of people in our country fasted on liquids only for ten days before last week's Inauguration, asking God's pardon for our nation's sins, especially our use of torture.) We have Moses in the Book of Deuteronomy speaking in God's name: "I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Choose life that you and your descendents may be long-lived on the earth" - an attitude which places us on God's side. We have Isaiah telling the Chosen People - and all people of faith - "seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the

widow..." Actions which place us on God's side. And again Isaiah: "they shall beat their swords into plowshares" [or as Joseph Lowrey said it so cleverly in his Inauguration prayer "they shall beat their tanks into tractors"] "nations shall not prepare for war again." An initiative which places us on God's side. We have our modern prophets as well, don't we. Dr. King in mid-20th Century America spoke truth to power in striking ways. Just short of a year before his assassination, in a May 1967 speech, King said these prophetic words: "The whole structure of American life must change". Referring to the discrepancy between our country's rhetoric and our actions he continued: "We are a hypocritical nation - we must get our house in order".

Conclusion

Let me conclude this reflection with the story of a man who died suddenly last Friday of an asthma attack. William Thomas had spent the last 28 years in vigil across the street from the White House. Together with a Spanish woman, whose name is Conception, William was there day and night, summer and winter, in the heat and in the cold witnessing to the need for our country to turn away from our militaristic stance - especially with regard to nuclear weapons. A modern prophet calling this nation to get on God's side. We have our prophets and the challenge to hear them.