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“All of the people were hanging on his words” (Luke 19:48).

Rev 10:8-11; Luke 19: 45-48

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s brief career as civil rights leader began in 1955 and ended with his murder in 1968. His rise in prominence began primarily as a religious and legal call for justice based on his Christian faith and his espousal of the nonviolent principles of Gandhi. His 1963 “I have a dream” speech at the march in Washington followed by a Nobel Peace prize in 1964 increased his moral stature despite attempts to subvert him personally by the FBI.

It was when King refocused the Civil Rights Movement on linkage between the war in Vietnam, racism and poverty that opposition turned deadly. He was assassinated while supporting striking sanitation workers in Memphis. Moral leadership was one thing, but criticism of the military, social policy and money struck a nerve at the heart of the political and economic systems that could not be ignored.

In today’s short Gospel, Luke describes Jesus’ disruption of the market activity in the temple, calling it a “den of thieves.” For this, the chief priests, scribes and official leaders met to plot his death. Jesus had finally gone too far by exposing the complicity of religion and money in running the temple. They would have acted swiftly to arrest and execute him but for Jesus’ growing popularity. He was teaching daily in the temple and “all of the people were hanging on his words.” His enemies decided to move covertly until the time was right.

The arc of Jesus' rise to "success" went from astonishing miracles, compelling preaching and huge crowds to stiff resistance and every effort to undermine his reputation and message as he entered Jerusalem. Like the prophet in today's reading from Revelations, the "scroll" he received when Jesus began his ministry was sweet to the taste but turned to gall in his stomach as he reached the final conflict. The same crowd that hailed his arrival in the holy city and who hung on his every word in the temple would see him hanging on a cross as a heretic and a criminal when the campaign to bring him down was complete. Even his closest allies would abandon him.

Wherever there is power, it is said, "follow the money" to discover its sources and who benefits. Jesus is betrayed for a handful of silver that, with tragic irony, is thrown into the temple before Judas hangs himself. Where money is the measure of success, it has the power to corrupt even religion, to justify necessary evil to achieve certain ends. In Jesus' case, it was "better for one man to die for the people than for the whole nation to perish" (John 11:50). The stage is set for Sunday's Solemnity of Christ the King.

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