



Image of the day - Martin Luther King Jr

Martin Luther King Jr remains relevant, Pope Francis

Archbishop José H Gomez, President, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops issued the following statement on Martin Luther King Jr Day.

For much of the past year, America has been reckoning with the legacy of slavery and the persistence of racial injustice in our country. Sadly, it is still true that the "colour of our skin" often matters more in our society than the "content of our character," as Rev Martin Luther King, Jr, said a half-century ago.

This year as we commemorate the legacy of this great American, we remember especially Rev King's belief in nonviolence and the power of love.

As we witnessed in the violence in our cities last summer and in the violence that broke out again last week at the Capitol in Washington, DC, our country has become too angry, too bitter, and too divided.

And as we confront our deep divisions, we face the same choices that Rev King and the civil rights movement faced. For us, too, the question is how will we struggle against the injustices in our society, what means will we use?

In 1958, Rev King wrote: "Along the way of life, someone must have the sense enough and the morality enough to cut off the chain of hate. This can only be done by projecting the ethics of love to the center of our lives." This is the

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challenge for every one of us who believes in the promise of America and seeks to renew the soul of this great nation.

In the spirit of Rev King, we must meet the forces of hate and ignorance with the power of love. We must learn again the wisdom of the Gospel and love our enemies and bless those who oppose us. In this moment, Rev King would counsel everyone in public life to seek reconciliation and reject the easy temptation to reprisals and recrimination.



We do not love those who oppose us because they are loveable, or even likeable, Rev King once said. We love them because God loves them. And by our love, we seek their conversion and friendship, not their humiliation. This is our Christian duty in this moment - to be healers and peacemakers, to overcome evil and lies, not by more of the same, but with words of truth and works of love.

Pope Francis sent a message to participants at a commemorative service honouring the life and achievements of Dr Martin Luther King Jr, in which he recalled Dr King's peaceful activism for harmony and equality for all people. The 'Beloved Community

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Commemorative Service' on 18 January was the culminating event of a weeklong celebration of Dr Martin Luther King Jr's life and legacy.

Greeting all those taking part, the Pope wrote: "In today's world, which increasingly faces the challenges of social injustice, division and conflict that hinder the realization of the common good, Dr King's dream of harmony and equality for all people, attained through nonviolent and peaceful means, remains ever timely."

Pope Francis went on to quote from his encyclical, *Fratelli tutti*, saying: "Each one of us is called to be an artisan of peace, by uniting and not dividing, by extinguishing hatred and not holding on to it, by opening paths of dialogue."

"In this way, we will be able to see ourselves, not as 'others' - but as neighbours, in the truth of our shared dignity as children of Almighty God. Only by striving daily to put this vision into practice can we work together to create a community built upon justice and fraternal love," he said.

Pope Francis concluded by invoking the divine blessings of wisdom and peace upon all present at the Commemorative Service.

The best of times, the worst of times, a Belfast rector reflects

The rector of St Finnian's, Canon Jono Pierce, reflects on the last year in the life of his Belfast parish.

‘It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.’ This is the opening line of Charles Dickens’s Famous novel, A Tale of Two Cities.

It sums up in many ways how I look back on 2020 in terms of the life of our parish here in St.Finnian’s, Cregagh.

Back in March we set up a system where every parishioner in the vulnerable category was paired with someone else who undertook to phone them regularly to check in and see if they were okay. There has been a really positive response to this and many parishioners comment on getting phone calls from someone they never knew before but who has now become a great friend and support to them.

A very key moment came when we had to shelve our plans to do a major accessibility project within the church building.

When the pandemic struck the Select Vestry undertook a different kind of accessibility project. They invested a significant sum of money in audio visual equipment which enables services to be live-streamed even through lockdown.

We have been very encouraged to hear people are accessing services from all over the globe and while the investment was significant it has proved to be a real lifeline to many who are shielding or unable to attend in-person worship when restrictions allow.

The unsung heroes of the pandemic in our parish, and I would imagine in most parishes, have been the technology



teams who operate the equipment and record and stream services and who help to keep the parish informed through the website and the Facebook page.

One of the surprising developments for me has been the start of a blog on our website called The Church Without Walls. I've loved writing it and it has been a weekly focus in a time of great uncertainty and quite a number of people seem to be engaging with it. It has been a good way to share devotional thoughts or theological reflection on many of the things we are all bewildered by and trying to figure out as we go along.

I've been really inspired by the willingness of our Sunday school teachers to teach our children over Zoom, and the way in which our Messy Church team went online and made really accessible and fabulous events available to parents and grandparents and children throughout the year.

Our Mothers' Union, Ladies Friendship Group, Bowling Club, Men's Society and Boys Brigade leaders have all endeavoured to stay in touch with their members and keep them informed as we make our way through. The choir have

operated at a socially distanced level when we are permitted to do so and the technology team have extracted the recordings so that services have an authentic St Finnian's feel to them.

There is a real sense of unity and team as people have been working well together to do these things.

I've also been tremendously encouraged by the way churches have been helping each other

During the first lockdown I participated in my first online Alpha course run by a small independent Belfast church called Foundation Church. I received a very warm welcome and their pastor helped me to set up our first online Alpha in the Autumn. We have just begun our second online Alpha and its great to see people emerging as leaders and helping others to discover and explore faith.

I've also been extremely inspired by the work of our volunteers who steward and sanitise and clean the church between services. They do so with a real servant heart and a smile and a willingness to work under constantly changing guidelines and restrictions.

It has without doubt also been the worst of times with so many families in our church being bereaved and unable to have the funeral services they would want for their loved ones. As a pastor it seems so cold to be unable to shake hands or give people a hug at the worst moments in their lives or even to go and see people in hospitals and nursing homes as their earthly journey draws to a close. There are also people struggling with the uncertainties of furlough and

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continuing in business whenever the pandemic ends and all the financial stresses and worries that accompany this.

One final thing that has proved very significant in our parish's journey is the development of a weekly prayer meeting over Zoom. I am very aware and very grateful of just how many people in the parish are praying for me and for my family.

There has been a blessing in being a church family going through all these things together and we look forward as the vaccine is rolled out to emerging together out of the darkness and into the light.

Scots Churches awarded grants from green recovery fund

Church of Scotland congregations and associated groups have been awarded around £180,000 in funding from the Scottish Government to support environmentally friendly projects.

The Community Climate Asset Fund, which was set up last year to support a green recovery from the coronavirus pandemic, selected 13 church initiatives to receive grants.

A total of 279 groups across Scotland successfully applied for the grant, which is administered by Keep Scotland Beautiful.



Mary Sweetland, who is the eco-convener at Lomond Parish Church and successfully applied for funding for double glazing, said:

"Lomond Parish Church is a Gold Award holder with Eco-Congregation Scotland and had a Resource Efficient Scotland energy efficiency assessment to hand.

"The timescales for the applications for funding were tight, but we knew what further work we had to do to further reduce our Carbon Footprint.

"We got two quotations, permission from Kirk Session, Presbytery, Planning Advice within a three-week time frame and completed the application to replace single glazing with double glazing in the vestibule and hall corridor at the church.

"The work has all to be completed by Easter.

"Reducing our energy use has the greatest impact on CO2 emissions, and if the Church of Scotland is to become a Net Zero organisation in the next 10 years, all congregations and presbyteries will need to tackle energy efficiency."

The church grant recipients are listed at -

[[] <https://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/news-and-events/news/2021/churches-awarded-grants-from-green-recovery-fund>]

Victims of notorious IRA killings at Tynan Abbey to be remembered

A series of memorial events will mark the 40th anniversary of the murders of the former Stormont Speaker Sir Norman Stronge and his son James.

Sir Norman (86) and his son (48) were shot dead at their home, Tynan Abbey, in Co Armagh, on January 21, 1981.

The pair were killed by an IRA gang who then firebombed the isolated mansion, located a few miles from Caledon, and the resulting blaze left the historic building in ruins.

Both men were leading figures in the Royal Black Institution, which is planning events in 2021 to mark the anniversary.

The Institution's current Sovereign Grand Master, Rev William Anderson, said: "The heinous murders of the highly-respected Sir Norman Stronge, an elderly man at the time, and his son, were wicked, despicable and cowardly.

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“The killing of two defenceless men in their own home was, sadly, yet another example of the depravity and blood-lust of the republican killing machine which wreaked havoc and brought misery to countless families throughout the Troubles.

“The emotional wounds from the double murder are still keenly felt by members of our Institution, and it is our intention to remember both men with pride and affection in the New Year.”

Sir Norman was a member of RBP 264 Breaghey and was Sovereign Grand Master of the Royal Black Institution from 1948 to 1971. He was also a senior Ulster Unionist Party politician.

He had previously served as a junior officer in the Army during the First World War. He fought in the Battle of the Somme in 1916 and was awarded the Military Cross. His



positions after the war included a 23-year term as Stormont Speaker.

Sir Norman's son James Stronge was also a member of RBP 264 Breaghey.

In 1967, he was appointed High Sheriff of Armagh. He served as Ulster Unionist MP for Mid Armagh for three years until the prorogation of Stormont in 1972 and as a member of the Northern Ireland Assembly from 1973 to 1974. He was also an officer in the Grenadier Guards.

Having withdrawn from political and military life, his main interests were confined to merchant banking and his service as an RUC Reserve Constable.

Details of the Royal Black Institution's memorial events for Sir Norman Stronge and his son will form part of the Royal Black Institution's "Time to Remember" season.

Rev Anderson added: "The Institution's Stronge Memorial Project will provide a basis around which we can explore and celebrate our country's rich history.

"The Stronges embodied two principles which have proven to be integral to our country's character: service and sacrifice."

Government papers released in 2012 outlined events leading up to the murders.

They detailed how an armed gang of 10 men crossed the border, hijacked two vehicles and went to the Abbey, where they murdered Sir Norman and his son, before setting the

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Abbey on fire. The IRA said it was a reprisal for recent attacks by loyalists on republicans.

The last surviving child of Sir Norman, Evelyn Elizabeth Olivier (nee Stronge), known as Evie, passed away in 2018 aged 93.

Report courtesy The News Letter

NI couples wait seven years longer to tie knot

According to the old song love and marriage go together like a horse and carriage. But, it seems, there may be a third more pecuniary element at play nowadays.

A survey by the NI Statistics and Research Agency reveals that on average couples are waiting an extra seven years to tie the knot compared to 30 years ago.

The 2019 Registrar General's annual report shows that the number of marriages taking place here annually has fallen from over 10,000 in 1989 to 7,255 last year.

The average age for brides and grooms has increased to 33.4 and 35.4 years respectively.

That is compared to 25.8 years for brides and 27.9 for grooms back in 1989. The report also shows that August was the most popular month to get married in 2019 — with 105 couples marrying on Saturday, August 24.

One explanation to the new delay, which certainly makes sense, is that women are now determined to be more financially independent before saying they do. That means concentrating further on their careers and ties in with the fact that many women are also waiting longer to have their first child.

Of course grooms also want to make sure they have sufficient funds to begin married life and, compared to 1989, it now takes a much bigger sum of money to even get a deposit for the new marital home together.

The statistics also show that marriage is losing some of its lustre with 7,255 wedding taking place last year compared to 10,000 in 1989, even though the population has risen significantly in the intervening three decades.

A religious marriage ceremony however remains popular with 3,528 weddings taking place in religious buildings compared to 1,473 in registry offices. Catholics were most likely to opt to get married in church.

The changes in the law in Northern Ireland which permitted gay couples to enter into civil partnership is reflected in the figures which show a total of 103 last year, 46 of them male partnerships and 57 female. Not surprisingly the average ages of those entering civil partnerships were higher than traditional couples at 37.9 for females and 37 for males. That is a reflection of the long fight gay couples have been involved in in gaining the right to enter into such partnerships.

The figures are an interesting snapshot of modern life in Northern Ireland and how values have changed in the relatively short period of three decades.

Couples may well take a more practical view of marriage today than 30 years ago when, by comparison, they were quite young when entering matrimony.

Whether it is quite as cold and calculating as one expert suggests, calling marriage more of a contractual financial agreement than about love and romance, is open to debate but having grown up in times when divorce has become more common couples may well take the view that marriage is not necessarily forever no matter what the vows they have taken may say.

Yet overall marriage is still a popular option. Some traditions die hard.

Church in Wales to consider blessing same-sex marriages and civil partnerships

The Church in Wales is planning to allow services to bless same-sex couples after they are married, saying it believes the Church will also have to consider its teaching on marriage.

The Church in Wales' Governing Body has proposed a new bill which would change the Book of Common Prayer and allow clergy to bless a same-sex couple who have already

made a legal commitment elsewhere, whether through marriage or a civil partnership.

In a note explaining their desire to introduce the service, the Bench of Bishops say: "Scriptures condemn 'porneia', unbridled lust, in which sexual activity is divorced from faithful and mutual commitment. It is true that in Scripture such faithful commitment is always portrayed as between a man and woman in covenanted union (marriage), and all other sexual activity, including references to same-sex activity, is portrayed as an expression of porneia. However, with new social, scientific and psychological understandings of sexuality in the last one and a half centuries, we believe that same-sex relationships can be understood in a radically different way, and that the teaching of Scripture should therefore be re-interrogated."

They add: "Approval of this rite would be stating that the Church in Wales accepts that the loving and faithful commitment of two persons of the same sex, aspiring to life-long fidelity and mutual comfort, and who have made a commitment in civil partnership or marriage, is worthy of acceptance by the Church by asking God's blessing upon their commitment.

"The Bench believes that, in the fullness of time, the Governing Body will have to consider whether it wishes to consider a change in the Church's teaching concerning marriage."

They bishops say they want blessings to be provided as soon as convenient as the Church's Governing Body had already made an informal commitment in 2018 to provide

something for gay and lesbian couples, believing it was "pastorally unsustainable" not to.

The use of this blessing would be 'experimental' and 'temporary', lasting five years from October 2021, presumably to fill the gap before the Church in Wales hopes to bring in same-sex marriage fully.

No clergy member would be forced to do the blessing against their conscience.

One of the Liturgy options for the blessing reads:

"Beloved in Christ, we come together in the presence of God to celebrate the union of N and N and to ask his blessing on their future together.

"Jesus said, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment' (Matthew 22:37-38)."

Former archbishop of Uganda in extramarital affair

The current Anglican archbishop of Uganda, Stephen Kaziimba, has informed his flock that his predecessor, Stanley Ntagali has admitted to an extramarital affair. Ntagali supported the harsh anti-homosexuality law in Uganda.

The chairman (there being no prospect of a woman holding the post) of Gafcon and the Archbishop of ACNA, Foley Beach, has also issued a statement.

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From Abp Kazimba's statement -

It is with a very heavy heart that I inform you that my predecessor, retired Archbishop Stanley Ntagali, has been involved in an extra-marital affair with a married woman, which he has acknowledged.

...



I have informed retired Archbishop Ntagali (Photo above) that he is not permitted to function sacramentally, preach, or represent the Church of Uganda in any way until further notice.

...Finally, I want to make it very clear that the Church of Uganda continues to uphold marriage as a lifelong, exclusive union between one man and one woman. Adultery is as immoral as homosexuality and we will not shy away from our commitment to this moral standard.

From Foley's statement to Gafcon

As many of you have heard, the Church of Uganda has just shared that their recently retired archbishop, Stanley Ntagali, has admitted to having an affair. Stanley is a brother in Christ with whom I have appreciated working beside in years past, and it grieves me profoundly to hear of this moral failure. It is my prayer before the Lord that he will continue down the path of repentance and that the Lord will comfort all those impacted by this sin.

News briefs

Archbishop of Canterbury receives Covid-19 vaccine -

The Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby received his first dose of the Covid-19 vaccine on Saturday (16 January) He was eligible to receive the vaccine as a healthcare chaplaincy volunteer at the central London St Thomas' Hospital, opposite his Lambeth palace official residence. He has been volunteering at the hospital during the pandemic, offering spiritual care and support to patients, staff and visitors as part of the National Health Service (NHS) chaplaincy team.

Bishop of Swaziland and global environment advocate Ellinah Wamukoya dies from Covid - The Bishop of

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Swaziland, Ellinah Wamukoya, died on Tuesday morning after contracting Covid-19.



Her death was announced by Archbishop Thabo Makgoba of Cape Town, Primate of the Anglican Church of Southern Africa. Bishop Ellinah, known around the world for her advocacy on environmental issues, was admitted to hospital late last week and put on Oxygen therapy after contracting Covid-19. She was 69.

WHOLE - new PCI digital resource unveiled - With the pandemic disrupting so many aspects of life, including church life, over the last 10 months the Presbyterian Church in Ireland (PCI) has continued to produce resources to support, develop and refocus congregational life and witness in these challenging times, especially when congregations can't meet in person. 'WHOLE' is its latest instalment and is free to download from this website -

Pointers for prayer

In this week of prayer for Christian Unity with its theme of “abiding in Christ” we’re more aware than ever of the importance of working together to serve the world. We pray for God to unite us together in his love.

In this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, we pray all Christians may come together in prayer and action against all injustice and oppression so we may bring hope and healing to our world

We pray today for God’s help as we unite across denominations to bring hope and practical care to those in need, and ask that any differences and misunderstandings will be overcome through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Today we pray for Uganda. Last week, elections were held after dozens of people were killed in the run up to voting day, and violence has been at an unprecedented level. We pray for stability in Uganda and safety for those taking part in democratic processes

Today we pray for those facing food insecurity globally. Coronavirus, conflict and cuts to UN funding are increasing the risks of food insecurity and malnutrition in 2021, in particular in South Sudan.

An increase in domestic abuse has been an unwanted consequence of the global pandemic. We pray for all who

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have suffered that they will have help to rebuild their confidence in their self-worth and practical ways to move forward in life.

Prolonged restrictions and times of isolation can lead to a loss of confidence in venturing out and interacting with others. We pray for all who are experiencing this and ask God to help us gently reach out with encouragement and understanding.

We pray for those who have lost jobs in the last months and are now seeking new employment. May their confidence in their abilities stay strong and may unexpected doors open for them to new opportunities for work.

Today we pray for the USA. We pray for stable democracy and an end to divisions in the USA as a new president is inaugurated this week

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Speaking to the Soul

Then they said, "Come, let's build a great city for ourselves with a tower that reaches into the sky. This will make us famous and keep us from being scattered all over the world."

Genesis 11:4 NLT

God hates arrogance because it is a complete rejection of him. Here the story of the Tower of Babel could be described as an ultimate example of arrogance. The people came together to build a tower which would reach to the heavens. This would be the final proof that humankind was

in control. God acted decisively. He scattered the people and, as a result, people no longer spoke one language but many. Division was the inevitable result of men and women putting themselves in the place that is rightfully God's.

These early chapters of Genesis are amazing because although they describe an ancient world they offer a powerful commentary on life today. As humankind grows in self-confidence and believes that it is in total control, division is the inevitable result. Having largely forced God out of the equation the world is in a state of constant brokenness and despair. It is only when we acknowledge God as Lord of all that we see ourselves and our world in a true perspective.

The constant challenge for us is to centre our thinking on God. In Acts chapter 2 we read about the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on The Day of Pentecost, a day which saw the reversal of the Tower of Babel. The arrogant self-confidence of the tower builders led to the scattering of people and a confusion of languages, but when the Holy Spirit was poured out suddenly everyone was able to understand one another. Unity was restored. There was one common language of worship. Even today we will be given a choice as to whether to build our own arrogant towers or open ourselves to God's Spirit. Let's learn the lesson of the Tower of Babel.

QUESTION

What can you do today to open yourself to God's unity?

PRAYER

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Thank you Lord that you meet us in our divided world and show us, in the power of your Spirit, how to find unity. Amen.

