

On my shelves I have a book of the collected sermons of Dr Martin Luther King – the great American civil rights leader. And occasionally, when I'm looking for inspiration for a sermon, I dip into it to see whether the great man had anything to say about the readings that I'm struggling with. And indeed, it turned out that Dr King did once preach a sermon on this morning's reading from Matthew 10 about the sending out of the apostles.

In his sermon, Martin Luther-King makes the point that these 12 apostles, who are named one by one for the first time in Matthew 10, are nobodies from nowhere; they have little faith and in fact two of them will betray Jesus in different ways. However, it is this rabble whom Jesus has called to bear witness to the good news that the kingdom of heaven has come near. And it is from this beginning that a line of witnesses down the centuries have lived out the commission of Jesus. And from that, we can take hope. Because if the first apostles were good enough, then so are we.

In his sermon, Dr King reflects on the hardship, humiliation and sacrifice that the first apostles must have undergone – and of the faith and courage that they must have needed in order to witness to Jesus. Then he issues his listeners with the following challenge: 'If you were arrested for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?' I think that's worth saying twice as food for thought – If you were arrested for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?

Dr King then tells the story of how, as a young man training for ministry, he was sent out into the countryside to evangelise. One day he spotted a man working in a field and boldly walking up to him, Bible in hand, asked, 'Excuse me brother, are you a Christian?' After a few moments of thought, the man asked if he could please borrow Dr King's notebook and pen. Dr King handed it over and the man wrote a short list in it and handed it back saying, 'Here are the names of a few people in town who know me pretty well – you'd best ask them that question.'

The point that Dr King is making is that the first apostles were called to go out and *bear witness* to God's kingdom in ways that made sense in those early times. And all of these centuries later, our calling is still to bear witness to the gospel in ways that make sense in our times - not by reciting doctrine but through the quality of our

lives as Christians and the impact that our lives have on our neighbours.

At Martin Luther King's funeral, the Reverend Otis Moss preached a brief sermon about 'the little dash in between'. He said that there would be a marker on Dr King's grave with his name and a couple of dates – when he was born (1929) and when he died (1968) – and a little dash in between. He said that the most important thing was not the dates but that little dash in between and the life lived in the service of God's holy calling that it represented. Revd Moss then told his listeners that each 'little dash in between' is a sacred gift from God and the question for us is, what will we do with that gift?

The first apostles weren't impressive people and maybe we aren't either but you don't need greatness to show people the Good News. Quentin Crisp once said, 'If at first you don't succeed then maybe failure is just your style.' And I quite like that because as Christians, we aren't called to display greatness in worldly terms, we are called to offer a glimpse of something different – more humble, more stumbling, more loving.

Not many of us will ever be able to serve the Gospel in the epoch defining way that Martin Luther King did but every small act of witness is precious to God.

A person who did end up with the opportunity to witness to the gospel in a dramatic and unexpected way is school secretary Antoinette Tuff. You're unlikely to have heard her incredible story as it wasn't much covered in our media but I often tell it as part of my training when I'm doing talks in schools.

Antoinette is a receptionist at an elementary school in Georgia USA, and one day about 2 years ago a gunman armed with an AK47 assault rifle and 500 rounds of ammunition strode into the reception area of the school and started firing. As Antoinette dialled 911, the gunman, Michael Hill, who has a history of mental health problems, stood in front of her with his rifle pointed in front of him. He announced that he didn't care what he did and he had no reason to live because nobody loved him.

Antoinette recalled the discussion from her recent church Bible class during which her pastor had talked about how we can anchor ourselves in our faith and she silently began to pray. In the drama

that unfolded, Antoinette calmly talked to Michael Hill about the troubles that she had endured in life and how her faith gave her enduring hope. She listened with respect to Michael and told him that his life could and would change for the better. All of this can be heard in the recording of the 911 call, which you can listen to on the internet.

After some time, Antoinette persuaded Michael to put down his gun without shooting anybody and lie down on the ground to give himself up to the police. And as the police storm the building, you can clearly hear Antoinette say to Michael in the recording, 'I love you and I'm proud of you.'

When interviewed on television a few days later about the terrifying events at her school, Antoinette Tuff was asked, 'Don't you think what you did makes you a hero?'

'Not really,' Antoinette replied, 'I just think God was able to work within me to reach out to someone in need.'

I think if Antoinette was arrested for being a Christian, there would certainly be enough evidence to convict her. For myself, I hope that I'm never called upon to witness to the kingdom of God in such a dramatic way or to undergo the hardships that those apostles who Jesus first called underwent. But as I review my very meagre tally sheet of Christian crimes, I think all Jesus wants me to do is simply ask myself, 'In what small ways can I show others that the kingdom of heaven has come near?' Amen