

# SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

*Fifth Avenue · New York City*

**Sunday, January 19, 2025**

The Second Sunday After The Epiphany In the  
Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

**Festal Eucharist and Commemoration of Martin**

**Luther King, Jr.**

11:00 am

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Prisca Lee-Pae

on

Matthew 11:2-6

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## Let the Freedom Ring

I am honored to preach on this Sunday dedicated to the memory of Martin Luther King Jr.

I was born and raised in Korea and came to the United States in my thirties. All my education and early work experience were in Korea, a country that takes pride in its ethnic homogeneity. While Korea has become a little more diverse in recent years, when I was growing up, it was very rare to encounter people with different skin colors even in Seoul.

As a young adult representative of the Anglican Church of Korea, I participated in many international conferences, where I had the privilege of meeting people from diverse races, nationalities, and cultures. This exposure was a tremendous blessing. A particularly significant moment for me was the two weeks I spent at Canterbury Cathedral in 2006. During that time, I joined friends from around the world for worship, lectures, and fellowships. That experience of Canterbury Scholar program became a turning point in my life. Among the diverse clergy and seminarians gathered there, I felt an unexpected sense of comfort and belonging as though I was exactly where I was meant to be. Even though I was not a clergy or seminarian at that time.

The program was emblematic of the Anglican Communion, accurately reflecting its worldwide population distribution, with participants of various races from different continents. Among the forty or so attendees, most were Black individuals from Africa and white participants from the US and the UK, with only a small number from South America and Asia. There was, however, an invisible yet palpable wall between these two main groups.

At that time, an African priest whom I met and became friends with during this program shared his honest feelings about how he as an African relate to white people. He tried to explain the weight of his inner fear, but how could I fully understand it? It was even more shocking because he was a confident person who actively asked questions and participated in discussions more than anyone else.

None of us can draw a line and say, “It’s your problem,” because we are all creatures of one God, children of one God, and members of the body of Christ. God did not create his children—made in his image—as superior or inferior to one another. A structure where one person dominates another is far from the kingdom of God, which operates according to God’s will.

In today's Gospel, Jesus' response to John's disciples who asked if he was truly the Messiah seems clear. But is the Messiah's concern limited to these marginalized people? The blind, the lame, the lepers, the deaf, the dead, and the poor? His mother Mary's song is even more direct. It proclaims that God has scattered the proud, brought down the powerful from their thrones and sends the rich away empty, while exalting the lowly and filling the hungry with good things. Does this mean that God only cares for and loves them? This is not because God favors one group over another but because God's justice overturns human hierarchies.

The desire to seek power and rise above others is an instinct shaped by biological evolution. Yet, as beings made in God's image, we are called to transcend these instincts. From birth to death, Jesus was completely free from it—whether voluntarily or involuntarily. Born to poor parents in a humble stable, He lived as a carpenter and died on the cross—a brutal instrument of Roman execution. We must reflect on the fact that Jesus, who had nowhere to lay his head—though foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests—is our Savior, Messiah, and Son of God. Jesus had no home, no wealth, and no power in worldly terms. His life shows us the God we worship—the God who humbles the proud, lifts the lowly, and fills the hungry with good things. Pride distances us from God, power makes us forget who we are, and wealth, often rooted in greed, undermines true sharing and community.

The freedom that Martin Luther King Jr. proclaimed in Washington 62 years ago in his iconic “I Have a Dream” speech is not a freedom meant only for Black people, the underprivileged, or the disinherited. The path to freedom for the humble is also the path to freedom for the proud. The liberation of the lowly is also the liberation of the powerful. The way for the hungry to be free is also the way for the rich to be free. As MLK said, we must learn to live together as sisters and brothers or perish together as fools.

In today's Epistle from Ephesians, Paul reminds us that “our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh but against the rulers, authorities, and cosmic powers of this present darkness against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” The real enemy of the privileged is not the underprivileged but the obsession, greed and delusion that their privilege defines them. Likewise, the enemy of the underprivileged is not the privileged but, it is fear, hatred and deception they have harbored within themselves as a means of survival as Howard Thurman—who greatly influenced Martin Luther King Jr.—observed.

To fight this battle and prevail, we must put on the full armor of God. Stand firm by girding our loins with truth, arming our chest with righteousness, fitting our feet with the gospel of peace, taking up the shield of faith in our hands, and equipping ourselves with the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit. At that time, while in prison, the chains that bound Paul's body could not bind his soul. He clearly understood his mission, and his soul never gave up the freedom to proclaim the gospel. The reason the church exists, and the gospel continues to be proclaimed even in this age is because numerous martyrs were physically bound, but their souls were free from evil. The freedom that Martin Luther King Jr. called for is freedom of this very dimension—a freedom that all people should enjoy, regardless of skin color, social status, education, or income.

As I conclude, I want to highlight someone we, as members of the Episcopal Church, should know: Pauli Murray. She was a trailblazing human rights activist, lawyer, professor, poet, author and last but not least the first African American woman ordained as an Episcopal priest. Her words encapsulate the victory gained through God's armor:

“I have been cast aside, but I sparkle in the darkness.  
I have been slain, but live on in the rivers of history.  
I seek no conquest, no wealth, no power, no revenge;  
I seek only discovery of the illimitable heights and depths of my own being.”

How will your life reveal this victory? How will our community embody this victory?

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