

# Martin Luther King Jr.

Martin Luther King Jr. was the leader of the African- American civil rights movement. He spoke out against laws which kept black and white people separate and led marches demanding fair laws for all people. Martin Luther King Jr. was determined to ensure that all Americans had the same rights, regardless of their race.



He was born on January 15<sup>th</sup> 1929 in Atlanta, Georgia, USA. His father was a pastor and his mother had been a teacher. Martin Luther King Jr. loved to play with his friends but, as his friends got older, two of them stopped playing with him. The father of one of the boys didn't like his son playing with him because he was African-American. Martin Luther King Jr. was deeply hurt and upset and couldn't understand why the colour of his skin would make any difference.

For African-Americans living in the USA, life was challenging. There were separate areas for African-Americans and white people on public transport, in parks, restaurants and even in public toilets. This was called segregation. Up until the 1960s, African-Americans in some states of the US could not vote in elections.

In some states, African-American children had to go to separate schools from their white peers. These schools were often poorly funded and equipped.

## The 1955 Bus Boycott

In 1955, Rosa Parks, an African-American woman, was arrested after refusing to give up her seat on a bus to a white man in the city where Martin Luther King Jr. preached. Martin Luther King Jr. called on African- Americans to protest by not travelling on buses in that area. The boycott lasted for 385 days and the situation became so tense that Martin Luther King Jr.'s house was bombed. Other people were furious and wanted to retaliate with violence but Martin Luther King Jr. said that things needed to be solved peacefully and talked about the importance of white and black people working together. The boycott ended with a United States court ruling that ended racial segregation on all Montgomery public buses.



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Martin Luther King Jr. went on to organise other non-violent demonstrations against the unfair treatment of African-Americans. In 1963, he led an enormous march on Washington DC, the US capital. The march on Washington involved 250,000 people travelling to the Lincoln Memorial (Abraham Lincoln was the president who abolished slavery in America). Here, in front of the enormous crowd, King made his famous 'I Have a Dream' speech. Here are some short extracts:



"I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character."

"I have a dream that one day .... little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers."

### Did You Know...?

In 1964, King became the youngest person at the time to receive the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts to end racial prejudice in the United States.

Due to the actions of King and others like him, rules in America began to change. The US government brought in laws to ensure equal rights for all US citizens and to give everybody the chance to vote.

Tragically, on 4<sup>th</sup> April 1968, King was shot and killed outside his motel room. His funeral was attended by 300,000 mourners.

In 1983, US President Ronald Reagan declared that the third Monday in January each year would be a holiday to remember King's achievements and the ideas of living in a world which was fair for everyone, no matter what the colour of their skin.

**"The time is always right to do what is right."**

- Martin Luther King Jr., 1965