

# Martin Luther King Jr.

Martin Luther King Jr. was a Baptist minister and the leader of the African-American civil rights movement. He spoke out against segregation laws which kept black and white people separate and led marches demanding fair laws for all people, no matter what the colour of their skin. Martin Luther King Jr. was determined to ensure that all Americans had the same rights, regardless of their race.



## Childhood

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. As a child, Martin Luther King Jr. befriended a local white boy whose father owned lands near his home. When they were six, the boys started school and King had to attend a different school to his friend because of his race. Soon after, King lost his friend as the boy's father didn't like his son playing with him because he was African-American. He was deeply upset and couldn't understand why the colour of his skin would make any difference.

## Segregation

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

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

## The Montgomery Bus Boycott

In 1955, Rosa Parks, an African-American woman, was arrested in Montgomery, Alabama after refusing to surrender her seat on a bus to a white man. In response to this, 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.

### 'I Have a Dream'

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."

The march was a turning point for civil rights. Not a single arrest occurred during it and the American President, John F. Kennedy, had watched King's speech and had been very impressed. Shortly after, the leaders of the march were invited to the White House to discuss civil rights.

Slowly but surely, rules in America began to change. In July 1964, The US government brought the Civil Rights Act into law to ensure equal rights for all US citizens and to give everybody the chance to vote.

### Legacy

In October 1964, King was recognised for the contributions he made towards equality for African-Americans and became the youngest person at the time to receive the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts to end racial prejudice in the United States.

Tragically, on 4<sup>th</sup> April 1968, King was assassinated outside his motel room. He was only 39 years old. 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