

Justice and compassion are a two-way street

Thought for the Day

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40 years ago today, a preacher from Montgomery Alabama dreamt a dream on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington. Since then, like all good phrases, Martin Luther King's famous words have developed a life of their own, so that today we remember the words more easily than their message.

Perhaps we remember that this was a defining moment for the civil rights movement in America, and perhaps we rejoice that not just the USA, but many other countries have come so far towards that goal. Or perhaps we see a cup half empty, and despair of those who have not dreamt the dream, whether in the Balkans, Rwanda, the Middle East, the Congo, or even those amongst ourselves who cannot, or will not, see the beam in their own eye.

So what then are we to make of a new cry for liberty in Martin Luther King's city of Montgomery Alabama, where the Chief Justice has had a statue depicting the Ten Commandments forcibly removed from his own court?

In the rainbow society that King dreamt of, we must be on our guard against all forces that seek to subjugate one group to another. Sadly, that is a charge to which most religions must plead guilty. It matters not that they claim to be saving my soul, if they thereby destroy my life.

But un-religion can be just as viciously coercive. Separation of church and state, so to speak, blocks a two-way street: just as faith should not dictate to the state, neither should the state dictate to faith. How irrational that Chief Justice Roy Moore can have the Declaration of Arbroath on his wall, but not the Ten Commandments.

For justice requires not only compassion, but also the acknowledgement of a duty that goes beyond the case before you. The Talmud teaches that the losing party should not leave the court humiliated - in Martin Luther King's words: "Let us not satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred."