
King delivers “The Death of Evil Upon the Seashore” at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine before 12,000 people, 17 May 1956. Photo by Frank Mastro; courtesy of Bettman/CORBIS.
"When Peace Becomes Obnoxious"

[18 March 1956]
[Montgomery, Ala.]

King delivered this sermon from Dexter's pulpit the day before his trial for violating Alabama’s anti-boycott law. He begins this handwritten outline by recounting that, after Autherine Lucy's expulsion from the University of Alabama, many celebrated the relative quiet that followed days of rioting at the University. King condemns this calm as "the type of peace that stinks in the nostrils of the almighty God." He recounts a conversation with someone who suggested the bus boycott was destroying race relations and peace in the community, and responds "Yes, it is true that if the Negro accepts his place, accepts exploitation, and injustice, there will be peace. But it would be an obnoxious peace." Louisville Defender editor Frank L. Stanley, who was in Montgomery covering the trial, reproduced a version of this sermon outline in his newspaper on 29 March 1956.

Mt 10 34–36

1 A few weeks ago, a federal judge handed down an edict which stated in substance that the university of Alabama could no longer deny admission to persons because of their race. With the handing down of this decision, a brave young lady by the name of Autherine Lucy was accepted as the first Negro student to be admitted in the history of the university of Alabama. This was a great moment and a great decision. But with the announcement of this decision, the vanguards of the old order began to emerge. The forces of evil began to congeal. As soon as Autherine Lucy walked on the campus, a group of spoiled students lead by Leonard Wilson and a vicious group of outsiders began threatening her on every hand. Crosses were burned. Eggs and bricks were thrown at...
her The mob even jumped on top of the car in which she was riding. Finally the president and trustees of the university of Alabama asked Authenne to leave for her own safety and the safety of the university. The next day after Authenne was dismissed the paper came out with this headline “Things are quiet in Tuscaloosa today. There is peace on the campus of the university of Alabama.” Yes things were quiet in Tuscaloosa yes there was peace on the campus, but it was peace at a great price. It was peace that had been purchased at the exorbitant price of an inept trustee board succumbing to the whims and caprices of a vicious mob. It was peace that had been purchased at the price of allowing mobocracy to reign supreme over democracy. It was peace that had been purchased at the price of capitulating to the forces of darkness. This is the type of peace that all men of goodwill hate. It is the type of peace that is obnoxious. It is the type of peace that stinks in the nostrils of the almighty God.

II Now let me hasten to say that this is not a concession to or a justification for physical war. I can see no moral justification for war. I believe absolutely and positively that violence is self-defeating. War is devastating. And we know now that if we continue to use these weapons of destruction, our civilization will be plunged across the abyss of destruction.

III However, there is a type of war that every Christian is involved in. It is a spiritual war. It is a war of ideas. Every true Christian is a fighting pacifist. In a very profound passage, which has been often misunderstood, Jesus utters this. He says “Think not that I am come to bring peace. I come not to bring peace, but a sword.” (Mt 10:34–36) Certainly he is not saying that he comes not to bring peace in the higher sense. What he is saying is “I come not to bring this peace of escapism, this peace that fails to confront the real issues of life, the peace that makes for stagnant complacency.” Then he says, I come to bring a sword—not a physical sword. Whenever I come a conflict is precipitated between the old and the new, between justice and injustice, between the forces of light and the forces of darkness. “I come to declare war on evil. I come to declare war on injustice.”

IV This text is saying in substance Peace is not merely the absence of some negative force—war, tensions, confusion but it is the presence of some positive force—justice, goodwill, the power of the kingdom of God.

(a) I had a long talk the other day with a man about this bus situation. He discussed the peace being destroyed in the community, the destroying of good race relations. I agreed that it is more tension now. But peace is not merely to absence of this tension, but the presence of justice. And even if we didn’t have this tension, we still wouldn’t have positive peace. Yes it is true that if the Negro accepts his place, accepts exploitation, and injustice, there will be peace. But it would be an obnoxious peace. It would be a peace that boiled down to stagnant complacency, deadening passivity and
(b) If peace means this, I don’t want peace

1. If peace means accepting second class citizenship I don’t want it
2. If peace means keeping my mouth shut in the midst of injustice and evil, I don’t want it
3. If peace means being complacently adjusted to a deadening status quo, I don’t want peace
4. If peace means a willingness to be exploited economically, dominated politically, humiliated and segregated, I don’t want peace

In a passive, non-violent manner we must revolt against this peace Jesus says in substance. I will not be content until justice, goodwill, brotherhood, love yes, the kingdom of God are established upon the earth. This is real peace. Peace is the presence of positive good.

V Finally, never forget that there is an inner peace that comes as a result of doing God’s will.

Our Father God, who dost overarch our fleeting years with thine eternity and dost undergird our weakness with thy strength, in the midst of the pressures of another day, as we face its vast concerns.

Above all else save us from succumbing to the tragic temptation of becoming cynical.

AD CSKC Sermon file, folder 111, “When Peace Becomes Obnoxious”

“Fleeing from God”

[29 April 1956]
[Montgomery, Ala.]

After Montgomery officials pledged to enforce state and city segregation laws despite a recent Supreme Court decision declaring such measures unconstitutional, the MIA unanimously voted at its 26 April meeting to continue the bus boycott.1 The following Sunday, in a sermon based on these two handwritten documents, King considers the story of Jonah to reflect on the human urge to flee from responsibility and from God. According to a newspaper account of the sermon, King prayed that God would give Montgomery’s city commission the “wisdom to see the vision of goodness in the Cradle of the Confederacy.”2

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1 King, Address to MIA Mass Meeting at Day Street Baptist Church, 26 April 1956, in Papers 3 290–292
2 Art Carter, “Rev King Is ‘King’ in Mont’g’ry,” Baltimore Afro-American, 12 May 1956. The document is dated from this newspaper article.