



SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



Talk for Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, 2003

Brother Michael Brunner, O.S.B.

Today is the 73rd anniversary of the Birth of Martin Luther King Jr., minister of the Baptist Church, holder of a PhD in Systematic Theology, Recipient of the 1964 Nobel Prize for Peace.

Skimming thru the newspaper last week I noticed an obituary on the back page...

For Mamie Till Mobley, who died at age 81.

Mrs. Mobley became a civil rights activist after the events of 1955.

Mamie was born in Mississippi & moved to Chicago in the 1930's. She worked there as an office clerk to help support her family after her husband died in 1944. Her son Emmett was born in 1941.

If I may ask, would all of you who are 14 years old, please stand. Take a good look at these young men, all the hope and potential they embody. Thank you.

In August 1955, Emmett's great uncle Moses Wright invited 14 year old Emmett, along with his 17 year old cousin, to visit him and his great Aunt in the small town of Money, Mississippi. Moses and his wife lived in a cabin about six miles outside of this town in the Mississippi delta. You might understand that this was a very different sort of environment for a city boy from Chicago. His mother warned him that "If you have to get down on your knees and bow when a white person goes past, do it willingly."

A few days after he arrived Emmett and his cousin went into town to go to the general store. Outside the store he met local African American boys his own age. Being from the north and the big city, he became a center of attention, as he told them about his life there. Certainly relations with white people were much more relaxed in the north. Emmett showed the local boys a picture of a white girl who was a friend of his, his "sweetheart." Who knows; it could have been one of those pictures of movie stars that came along with a new wallet when you bought it.

The boys were disbelieving, and they dared him to go back into the general store and say something to the young white woman who worked there, Carolyn Bryant. Emmett was not one to refuse a dare, so he sheepishly went back into the store and bought some candy. On leaving the store, Emmett spoke to Mrs. Bryant. Some say he said "Bye, Baby." Others claim he said "Thank you", but unfortunately Emmett did have a speech impediment, so his TH sound would come out like a whistle,.... sssank you.

Six days later, at 2:30 AM in the morning Carolyn Bryant's husband Roy and his



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half brother JW Milam came to the remote cabin of Emmett's uncle Moses, who was a minister. They pounded on the door and forced their way in, demanding the "boy from Chicago" (although that was not the word they used) "who did all the talking." They grabbed Emmett from his bed and when his aunt tried to intervene, they hit her on the side of the head with the butt of their shotgun. They drove off into the night with Emmett.

Six days later a fisherman found Emmett's body in the Tallahatchie River, identifiable only from the ring he wore, which had been left to him by his father.

Hung around his neck on a noose of barbed wire was a 75 lb piece of a cotton gin.

Shocking as this is, it was life as usual for African Americans in the Deep South. Lynchings were common. Why the year before Emmett's murder a Black gas station attendant was shot dead in broad daylight in the same town, Money, Miss., for giving incorrect change to a white customer.

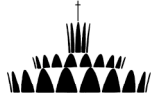
Based on information provided by a white reporter, the cotton gin part tied to Emmett's neck was traced to JW Milam's barn. Roy Bryant & JW Milam were arrested and tried for murder in Sumner, Miss. in a segregated courtroom. The only black allowed in the building was Emmett's brave uncle Moses who identified the two as the men who abducted Emmett. An all-white jury found Roy and JW Milam not guilty after deliberating one hour.

Two months later, Roy and JW gave an interview to Look Magazine and confessed in excruciating detail to the crime. That interview was published in January 1956.

Roy Bryant and JW Milam had driven back to JW's barn with Emmett. There they stripped him naked, tied him up with barbed wire, beat him bloody, breaking the bones of his face til he was unrecognizable, gouged out his right eye and ultimately shot him in the head. Then they dumped his body in the river.

Mamie Till Mobley came to national attention when she decided to have an open casket at Emmett's wake and funeral. She wanted the world to see, and they saw it all. Newspapers and magazines around the world showed pictures of Emmett's elegantly dressed, beaten corpse; those newspapers followed the subsequent trial. American racism was exposed for the hateful thing it was.

Emmett's brutal murder captured world attention, and moved people to action. On December 1 1955, Rosa Parks was arrested in Montgomery Al. For refusing to give up her seat to a white man, and Martin Luther King Jr.. Pastor of the Dexter Ave. Baptist Church, organized a bus boycott that began the final phase of the American Revolution.



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Emmett was immortalized in a song by Bob Dylan. Mamie Till Mobley became a special education teacher, earning a Master's Degree from Loyola University of Chicago. Besides working in the Civil Rights Movement, she forgave her son's murderers and was active in the organization Murder Victim Families for Reconciliation, campaigning to end the death penalty. She embodied the values of Dr. King's nonviolent Christian movement for justice, peace and reconciliation.

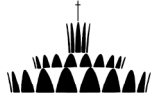
Well, I can hear you saying "That's a great story, Br Michael, but what does that have to do with today? We live in a different world from 1955."

Do we? Ethnic cleansing in Bosnia...tribal genocide in Rwanda...racial genocide by western inaction as AIDS more than decimates Southern African nations and economies, Muslims attack Christians in Sudan and Pakistan, Hindus attack Muslims in Gujarat and Christians in Bihar, states in India; Mexicans persecute Indians in Chiapas, Hindus and Buddhists war in Sri Lanka, the Chinese commit genocide in Buddhist Tibet and persecute the Muslim Uigurs. Greeks and Turks kill each other in Cyprus. Israelis and Palestinians kill each other, with Israelis killing 25 Palestinians for each Israeli.

But you say Br Michael, that's all far away, the other side of the world.

Closer to home...we live in a racist, bigoted society. Fear of diversity pervades our nation and legal sanctions are unequally imposed...the death penalty for killing a white person and prison for killing a black person. A crack cocaine dealer in the inner city gets three times the prison time of a powdered cocaine dealer in the suburbs, by Federal Law. There are scores of Aryan Nations and white supremacist groups and militias. A white man drives thru Illinois shooting Asians, Hispanics and Blacks. Matthew Sheppard is crucified on a fence in Wyoming for being gay. There is racial and ethnic profiling by police. Even Canada has had to advise its citizens of middle eastern backgrounds to avoid travelling to the US. Hundreds of Arabs and Iranians are swept up in raids in California, Mosques are attacked, Asians in general are harrassed and insulted. The situation here is not unlike that in Germany in the early and mid 1930's. We should be very concerned.

But, I am a racist & you are racists. We prejudge people, put them in boxes and don't let them out. We assume they are all the same and don't let them be individual persons. We belittle them and tell anti group jokes, ethnic jokes. It got pointed out to you in the school newspaper, and you didn't like to hear it. There is a little of Roy Bryant & JW Milam in each of us. Unfortunately racism seems to be an inescapable effect of original sin, closely knit to our defective human souls. It is profoundly unChristian unJewish unMuslim unHindu unBuddhist. Jesus Christ came among us and died to deliver us from it, and so did Dr. Martin Luther King. As you enjoy the Holiday you will have on Monday in honor of Dr. King, honor



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him by looking into your own heart and seeing what prejudices you need to be rid of. It takes conscious effort to overcome it. But as we sang in the civil rights movement, "We shall overcome someday."