

Joining Hands



by Ian Woodley

I'm not one for listening to famous speeches, but there is one particular public address that I am always all ears for. Delivered in 1963, Martin Luther King's speech, 'I have a dream', is electrifying. King called for the end to racism in America, together with better justice and economic rights for all.

One section, near the end, really speaks to my heart: 'I have a dream that...one day right here in Alabama little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers'. This causes me to reflect. For some 13 years after this speech, a little white boy and a little black boy played together during the long, hot, summer holidays. The little white boy was me. Anthony was the little black boy.

I can't boast. It wasn't until years later I discovered that, in our innocence, we were breaking boundaries. It didn't last; we drifted apart. My parents moved house and Anthony and I went to different schools. About 10 years later, we would spot each other at the

swimming pool. Anthony played water polo, which followed after my course in life saving. But we felt no need to renew our friendship.

How is it that Anthony and I played together peacefully when so many communities in the world are divided by racism? I believe the ingredient that creates this division is fear. I am so grateful that no-one had filled either of our hearts with mistrust before we met. Why such fear exists is the result of complex factors. Once fear of the other takes hold, racism is the result and a false notion enters our hearts. By removing equal rights from our fellow human beings, we somehow believe we are protecting ourselves.

But why is it that we should treat one another equally?

In 1963 King hoped the USA would live out the fullness of one particular phrase from the United States Declaration of Independence: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal'. King's speech was delivered before the recent advances in genetics, so he took his stance based upon the religious idea that all humanity is the offspring of one particular couple.

Being a Christian preacher, he would have used their biblical names, Adam and Eve. Black or white, King believed a shared parentage ruled out any bias based on the colour of one's skin. But was King right? Are we all equal?

The Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History website states: 'The genetic difference between individual humans today is miniscule—about 0.1% on average'. This makes me breathe a sigh of relief. For yes, Anthony and I are exactly the same, except for some tiny differences which are only 'skin deep'. We are equal. Martin Luther King's speech is still there to spur me on. 'Let freedom ring!' was his great rallying cry. Wouldn't it be wonderful if the world was truly free of racism? That humanity was free from the fears that underlie all such mistrust? That everyone felt free to extend equality to all other human beings?

Of course, we need not just wait for this to happen; we can begin to build this today. I dream that one day, all the world will cry out the final words of King's speech: 'Free at last, free at last, Great God almighty, we are free at last'.