

9 Malcolm X and Martin Luther King: Two African-American heroes

When people talk about the best-known leaders of the civil rights movement, two names are mentioned again and again. One is Martin Luther King, who, from 1955 until his death in 1968, fought for equal rights for African Americans. The other one is Malcolm X, who was born seven years before Martin Luther King, and who, like him, was murdered.

But what, apart from their violent deaths at the age of 39, did the two men have in common? And where did they differ?

First, both of them were sons of black activists, men of the church, who spoke out against the discrimination of black people. Malcolm X's father died under very strange circumstances when Malcolm was only six. Many people however believe that he was murdered by white racists who didn't like him speaking out for black rights.

With his father gone, life became very difficult for Malcolm's family. He dropped out of high school, and turned to crime, which landed him in prison when he was about twenty years old.

Martin Luther King was luckier. His father lived until he was 84, and King could attend college to get a good education and start working as a pastor. Malcolm X, however, chose to become a Muslim because while he was in prison, he was convinced that it was the "Nation of Islam", more than the Christian church, that really stood up for the rights of African Americans. It was at that time that he also changed his name from Malcolm Little to Malcolm X. To him, "Little" was a slave name, given to his African family by white slave owners.

Furthermore, he was not very optimistic that black and white people could ever live together in peace. Whereas Martin Luther King dreamed of an America where white and black would live side by side, Malcolm X did not trust any white people. He wanted two separate communities, one for the whites, one for the blacks. For this reason, Malcolm X refused to cooperate with white people.

Another difference between the two men was that Malcolm X was quite critical of Martin Luther King's strategy of non-violent resistance and peaceful protest. For some time, Malcolm X believed that black people had the right to defend themselves against white aggression and discrimination by also using violent means.

Despite their differences, both men "played on the same team" which means both of them fought successfully for black rights and are still remembered as great political leaders and activists.