

It all began by accident

THERE should be no blame for the United States in the death of Martin Luther King, only compassion. This is an event more terrible than the violent death of a private man. It is a symbolic killing and it symbolised unreason. In horror it comes near to ranking with the death of President Kennedy. It has about it the same quality of irresponsibility, of meaninglessness and—in retrospect—of inevitability.

He did not at first sight seem of the stuff of leaders or martyrs. He was a plump and portly man who was at home in dark blue silk suits and in the back of huge and shiny cars. He was a man of frozen and expressionless calm. He had a massive face, strong-boned under the flesh, wide and slant-eyed. He had a sort of Assyrian dignity. He fitted none of the Negro clichés except in his eloquence which was repetitive and heavy with the cadence of the Bible. He trailed an authority as some ecclesiastics trail robes. He was an extraordinary man, and though his death is a tragedy it released him at least from the mounting tragedy of rejection by his own people.

He was the unchallenged leader of those Negroes in the US who believed in a peace between the races to be achieved by reason and searching love. He came to be the most admired of blacks among whites everywhere and for this he earned the Nobel Peace Prize and occasionally the deadly title of 'Uncle Tom.'

He was a Southern Baptist preacher, the son of a preacher, educated richly for a Southern black. His church, near the Capitol in Montgomery, Alabama, was the most fashionable in that gracious and status-conscious little city. The most fashionable for blacks, that is.

The religion he taught was a community faith. It taught a paradise to come and offered pleasurable emotion on earth rather than any quiet struggle with evil or self-doubt. It really was the opium of the blacks and yet in the end it turned him and his people into rebels.

It all began by accident. In 1955 a Negro seamstress called Rosa

by **PATRICK O'DONOVAN**

Parks, whose feet were killing her, refused to surrender her seat near the front of a bus in Montgomery to a white man as the law then demanded. The bus driver arrested her and handed her over to the police. A group of Negro clergymen met in a chapel to discuss her defence.

They led a strike that lasted a year. Negroes represented more than 75 per cent of the bus users. They were harassed by being arrested for loitering when they walked, by being given traffic



King: Freedom call

tickets when they offered lifts. The Rev. Martin Luther King was their leader and he was arrested under an unconstitutional anti-strike law.

One night he spoke in his church. He spoke with a repetitive eloquence, heavy with the cadence of the English Bible. The church steamed with people on the inside edge of hysteria. He spoke with an almost *flamenco* shake to his voice and they chanted back at him after almost every sentence. There were rows of old men on the platform with tears running down their wrinkles. When he came in, someone cried out: 'Here comes the man who today was nailed to the cross for you and me.'

He spoke of the perpetual tension between good and evil. He mentioned Plato and Zoroaster and Hegel and Christ. He said, 'And God said to Israel, "Don't

play with me, my people"; and they shouted "No!" "Don't play with me, my people." "No!" "Don't play with me, my people, or I'll break the backbone of your evil power inside and out, at home and abroad." He asked them to stay with him, to suffer with him, to go down with him. And the chapel, crowded like the hold of a slave ship, emptied into the hot night with the people singing, 'Nobody knows the trouble I've seen.'

But that was long ago. Then it was the white organisations that were in the news, the sullen, sick, bully boys who lightly bombed his pleasant, middle-class home that stood on a well-clipped lawn.

He was not really a compromiser or an Uncle Tom. But the movement he started began to move ahead of him. Still he had his great moments.

In Washington he stood in front of the Lincoln Memorial, which is the high altar of democracy, and called for freedom to a vast crowd that filled that open space between the statue of the murdered President and Congress. He marched from Selma. He braved death again and again. Almost as a sovereign power, he signed a treaty with the Mayor of Chicago that promised, though did not give, fair and unsegregated housing to his people.

But his move to the North was a diminishment. He got almost all that he could ask on to the statute books of America. The laws did not change men's hearts. Bitter, scarred young men competed for the leadership.

He tried to keep pace. He saw everyone and talked and talked, outwardly impassive, soft-spoken, preaching non-violence while anger released rose around him like a flood. He could no longer control his own. In Memphis his own procession had turned into a riot in which violence was an end in itself. His murder was an act that was as mad as the murder of Kennedy and more dangerous for the future. The act cleared his name among his people and it gave them a gentle martyr to use like a sword. If the blood of martyrs is the seed of the Church, God knows what crop this will grow. He was 39.