

In 1955 Rosa Parks, at right, refused to move, simply because she was black, to the back of a bus in Montgomery, Ala. She followed her conscience, and the modern civil rights era was born.



The light that sparks change

By Dolores Leckey
NC News Service

During the course of history men and women of good will, individually and in groups, believed that:

- The divine will was conveyed in a special way through the royal lineage.

- Slavery was approved by God.
- Women were not entitled to vote.

- Certain races were superior to others.

Those beliefs are rejected by most societies and most religious bodies today. What accounts for the change?

For one thing, individual men and women influenced the consciences of others by the stance they took when touched profoundly by the human, spiritual and moral needs around them. There were the Quakers hanged in the Boston Common for their stand against human slavery. And there were suffragettes who braved jail for their convictions regarding the rights of women.

I can imagine how much these people hoped that their own faithfulness to conscience would:

- become a light enabling others to see a need within society;

- and spark courage in others to act according to the light of conscience.

Eventually, the light might spread and the public conscience might expand. Not all at once, and not without sacrifice. Consider the impact of Rosa Parks who refused to move to the back of the bus simply because she was black.

There is a sixth sense among members of the human family that when a person is faithful to conscience it will make a difference — a difference to that person and a difference to others.

Sometimes the difference it makes may be barely discernible at first and others may not always

agree on the difference. Consider the case of Enten Eller.

A member of the Church of the Brethren, Eller was indicted in 1982 for failing to register for the draft. At the time he was a student at Bridgewater College in Virginia.

Eller's reason was simply stated: "I have not registered in order to be faithful to God, my conscience and my church."

At the time of his indictment he faced up to five years in prison and a \$10,000 fine. As a member of a peace church, he would not have had any trouble securing a conscientious objector's status. But, for this young man, that was not enough. He said his action was for the sake of others.

People who knew Eller were quick to note that he is not a

religious fanatic and does not presume to judge others who register for the draft. In fact, Eller himself said that many registrants he knows are committed Christians, just as committed as he is: "God calls us to different places."

Not everyone in the Church of the Brethren agreed with Eller's reasons, his parents for instance. His father said: "I personally could register. I would not be happy about it but I could... We fully support Enten, even though it's not what we would do."

Eller was sentenced to community service. Throughout the judicial maze which preceded his sentencing, he made it clear that his life is to follow God wherever that takes him. "That's what I've got to

work with," he said.

Has Eller's conscience influenced others? Has it moved the cause of peace? Surely he hopes so.

I think of the many teachers and pastors and parents who tend to place great hope in the long reach of conscience. They hope that if they live in a loving way and according to their values it will make a difference not just to themselves, but to others in their lives.

Who knows how much one person's faithfulness to conscience might contribute to the world's integrity?

(Mrs. Leckey is director of the U.S. bishops' Secretariat for the Laity.)

Isaiah and the wild grapes

By Father John Castelot
NC News Service

The prophet Isaiah once delighted his audience with a charming song typical of those sung at harvest time. It was about a man who planted a vineyard on a fertile hillside.

"He spaded it, cleared it of stones, and planted the choicest vines" (5:2). There was nothing the man failed to do to ensure a first-rate harvest.

But all of a sudden the song took a sad turn.

"Then he looked for the crop of grapes, but what it yielded was wild grapes."

At this point the audience is asked to get involved, to form its opinion:

"What more was there to do for my vineyard that I had not

done? Why, when I looked for the crop of grapes, did it bring forth wild grapes?"

The disappointed farmer then announced that he would make a shambles of his vineyard, rendering it totally useless for the future.

All the while those listening have been following the song with complete sympathy for the unfortunate farmer. They can empathize with his frustration.

But now Isaiah identifies the people themselves as the vineyard and the Lord as the vinegrower, and they are cut to the quick.

If Isaiah had simply and abruptly berated the Hebrews for their faithlessness, they would probably have reacted with anger and turned their backs on him. But by cleverly using the song to enlist their sympathy for the vinegrower

he led them to appreciate in a very personal way just how reprehensible their conduct was.

Conscience enables a person to distinguish right from wrong. Often it operates almost instinctively.

But, like memory, conscience can lose its sharpness through lack of use, through not caring about the moral quality of our actions. In certain instances, it can be dulled by ignorance or passion.

It is not always easy to tell what the proper course of action is in any given situation. Conscience has to be formed; it has to be informed.

Isaiah's approach was effective because of the manner in which he subtly led his listeners to share his view of the matter, to form their moral convictions.

Jesus, especially by his use of