

Remembering Dr. King

COMMEMORATIONS SOMETIMES come too easily, but this is an especially good year to remember Martin Luther King. This year we saw the handiwork of a so-called charismatic leader in Guyana. And lately we hear from the Ayatollah in France delivering his hate-and-kill message across the continents. Dr. King would not have recognized such men as spiritual. His ideals of faith and leadership were plainer.

He would have been only 50 today. When the bus boycott in Montgomery began, he was only 26. It is hard to know how he got his courage. In retrospect it seems that even without Dr. King, America would eventually have come to its senses and ended formal racial segregation; but how do we know? At 26, Dr. King took hold of himself, his nation and history. Somewhere he had picked up the idea that a promise was a promise; and reading the Declaration of Inde-

pendence and the Emancipation Proclamation as promises, he vowed to collect.

He said so directly, in the speech by which he is best remembered: "I have a dream." On a hot day in August, 1963, he delivered that speech at the base of the Lincoln Memorial, and the country is still listening. Yet there was nothing super-clever in the speech and certainly nothing new. What gave the speech its power was the speaker. His voice had a clear, half-insistent, half-pleading force that made you want to speak along with it; to become the voice, as if by so doing one became the words, and even the man. For the voice was part of the power, and the man, the other part—the young man who took seriously such words as "equality" and "liberty," which much of the country regarded as quaint.

Dr. King had a way of using the pronoun "I" so that it sounded collective. The fact is, his "I" was collective. And his mourners miss him as part of themselves.