Remembering Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Thomas C. Fox  |  Jan. 19, 2009

The Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. was born into the closed society of segregated Georgia, a grandson of sharecroppers not far removed from America's original sin of slavery. This year, he is being honored a day before Barack Obama will place his hand on Abraham Lincoln's Bible and take the oath of office as the nation's first black president.

"The arc of history is long," King reminded us, "but it bends toward justice."

As we pause to remember King's historic legacy during this historic moment, we celebrate the great progress our nation has made, while renewing our commitment to dismantling those barriers to justice that still endure.

The racism, poverty and militarism that King faced with such courage in his era remain profound challenges today:

- Black Americans earn less, die earlier and are imprisoned at disproportionate rates than whites.
- Many urban public schools are failing another generation of black and Latino children.
- More than three times as many blacks live in prison than in college dorms.
- The income gap between rich and poor has reached Depression-era standards.
- Our government has spent, by one estimate, more than $1 trillion invading Iraq, even as our cities crumble and 46 million Americans lack health insurance in the wealthiest nation in the world.

It's tempting to sanitize King's radical call for economic justice or temper his unflinching words about the moral quagmire of war. We prefer King as an icon preserved safely behind history's glass case. When his words are quoted these days, we rarely hear the righteous anger of a preacher who described America as the "greatest purveyor of violence in the world."

We choose to forget his stinging critique of capitalism as a system that permits "necessities to be taken from the many to give luxuries to the few."

To be sure, King was not a single-issue prophet. He recognized that racism, poverty and militarism were not isolated social ills, but related systemic cancers. King knew that building the "beloved community" and serving the common good require us to confront the American infatuation with individualism because our futures are tied to a "single garment of destiny."

His vision was rooted in his Christian faith's demands to serve the poor, fight injustice, and find hope in the redemptive power of love and forgiveness. King's challenge is often hard to hear, but an honest reckoning with his words and deeds can help us build on those inspiring movements for social change that continue today.
President-elect Obama will stand on the shoulder of giants when he places his hand on Lincoln's Bible, none greater than a preacher from Georgia who challenged America to live up to the true meaning of its creed.

Marie Dennis is the director of the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns and is a co-president of Pax Christi International. She is a contributing editor for Sojourners magazine.