

22nd January 2021

Thou

“Through the Thou a person becomes I.”

Martin Buber, I and Thou (1932)

I have no idea whether the Austrian-born religious philosopher, Martin Buber, studied the Sanskrit of ancient Hindu treatises before he wrote his ground-breaking *I and Thou* in 1932, but his work came to mind when I recently came across this from the *Chāndogya Upanishad* of 800 BC:

*This invisible and subtle essence is the Spirit of the whole universe.
That is Reality. That is Truth. THOU ART THAT.*

I've always been struck by the power of Buber's argument that in our search for the nature of God we cannot be on equal terms. So the use of the conventional "I" from our side, and the somewhat archaic-sounding "Thou" for God, puts us in a proper relationship. It isn't "I" and "You". It is "I" and "Thou". Therein is the important distinction. And Buber argues that you have to understand that distinction, and the "Thou" of the divine, before we can fully understand the "I" in all its fullness.

This might sound like complicated theology. But it works for me. So let me explain. The Incarnation, our engagement with the human Christ at the heart of what we celebrated at Christmas, brings God close, right into the centre our humanity. And yet God remains a mystery, an "otherness", above and beyond our understanding, to be approached with "awesome wonder". This is the dichotomy in which our faith is rooted. So it shouldn't be an "I/You" relationship. It's an "I/Thou", all that is human intersecting with all that is divine, right here and right now.

At the heart of our worship is the concept of "not knowing" which I've touched on several times recently. But alongside that is "always believing", as we come close to the mystery that is God. The ancient Hindu Sanskrit writings had it right: "This invisible and subtle essence is the Spirit of the whole universe. That is Reality. That is Truth. THOU ART THAT."

I need to hold onto the "Thou" of my God, for it makes the "I" all the more amazing and complete.

A prayer for today

Thou art ... my essence, my reality, my truth, my mystery. Awesome indeed! Amen

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