

18<sup>th</sup> August 2022

## Me

**"Who is it that can tell me who I am?"**

William Shakespeare, *King Lear*

Following the appalling attack on the life of the writer Salman Rushdie, one of my daughters brought to my attention a powerful piece of Rushdie's prose. It's from *Midnight's Children*, which he published in 1981.

Saleem Sinai, the narrator in *Midnight's Children*, opens the novel by explaining that he was born on midnight, August 15, 1947, at the exact moment India gained its independence from British rule. Now nearing his thirty-first birthday, Saleem believes that his body is beginning to crack and fall apart. Fearing that his death is imminent, he grows anxious to tell his life story. Padma, his loyal and loving companion, serves as his patient, and often sceptical, audience. Here's a piece of Saleem's self-analysis:

*I no longer want to be anything except what who I am. Who / what am I? My answer: I am the sum total of everything that went before me, of all I have seen done, of everything done-to-me. I am everyone / everything whose being-in-the-world affected / was affected by mine. I am anything that happens after I've gone which would not have happened if I had not come. Nor am I particularly exceptional in this matter; each 'I', every one of the now-six-hundred-million-plus of us, contains a similar multitude. I repeat for the last time: to understand me, you'll have to swallow a world.*

There is mystery in these words, and, as with all mysteries, if it is analysed too much it can easily be destroyed. Pull the petals from a flower to see how it's made, and you will have no flower at the end. But, wrapped in the mystery of Rushdie's words, there is the beauty of a sparkling truth, a truth which you can be encouraged to search for to your own benefit, as you ask the timeless question: "Who am I?"

In a scene set in the Duke of Albany's Palace, Shakespeare has King Lear in conversation with The Fool. The Fool has become the king's protector and advocate. He is loyal and honest and has the role of revealing important truths to his master. When Lear asks the Fool, "Who is it that can tell me who I am?", The Fool answers, "Lear's shadow." Rushdie's Saleem Sinai is no fool, for he can reveal something of an answer to our questioning from the shadows of mystery and wonder.

### A prayer for today

*"Just as I am ..."? Just as I can be. Just as I can become. Amen*