

Sermon 16.5.21

Acts 1.15–17,21–26; Psalm 1; John 17.6–19

‘They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word.’

One of the most important religious thinkers to come from Vienna was a man named Martin Buber, who was born here in the 1870s. He is a difficult thinker to characterise, a man interested in everything from folk tales, to political philosophy, to translating the Bible. But at the core of his work is an overriding interest in what humans are and how they relate to each other.

Buber’s philosophy is, on the face of it, quite simple, composed of just three words: ‘I’, ‘you’ and ‘it’. For Buber, the whole world of relationship – not only between humans, but between humans and animals and plants, between humans and God himself can be described with these words.

In fact, it is even simpler. There are really just two relationships: I-it and I-you. An I-it relationship is one where objects, people and animals are determined by me, my needs or my desires. Maybe they are useful, interesting, informative to me, I can eat them, use them, learn about them, enjoy them. Most of the time, Buber argues, we are surrounded by ‘Its’.

But I-you is totally different. In I-you, the relationship is direct, a true meeting of person and person, it cannot be useful, interesting, helpful, it cannot be made out of desire or need or knowledge, it cannot fulfil a purpose. It is an encounter with the fullness of another person, beyond their skills or knowledge. Emotions and ideas and needs, even time and space itself, become secondary to the ‘You’.

Buber warned that we are constantly tempted to treat others like ‘Its’, like objects, like things, to make them useful or informative, a part of the regular, stable, everyday world that exists for our needs and wants. But we are called to discover in them a ‘You’ and to remember this, to respect them not as a sum of their parts but as a glimpse of God, the ‘Eternal You’, himself.

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Martin Buber’s philosophy was first published in the middle of the 1920s. It was prescient. Soon millions of men and women and children across Europe would be treated as ‘its’, as no more than material goods, with nothing sacred about them. Buber was Jewish and would be forced to flee for Jerusalem.

In the years after the war, his philosophy would come to influence a generation of theologians, philosophers and politicians, Jewish, Christian and atheist. There are two insights of his that have deeply affected my own thoughts and prayers.

One is Buber’s sense of what it is to be a human, his realisation that our own humanity begins in the presence of another. To treat another as an ‘It’ is not to become an ‘I’. Those who murdered the Jews and other minority groups and political opponents in Nazi Germany lost their own humanity as they did so.

The second is Buber’s spirituality, his realisation that what it is to recognise another is to see something beyond their appearance, thoughts, work, personality, that their lives have something sacred about them, something that is always slipping away from view. Rowan Williams writes that when we stand before another person, we stand on holy ground.

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Buber was deeply influenced by St John's Gospel and in the reading we heard this morning, we hear, I think, what he tried to capture in his idea of the I-You relationship. Jesus, as he bids farewell to his disciples, turns to something like a poem, a song, to describe the relationship between the disciples, himself and God the Father.

I'm going to read the first part of it again now, and I'm going to suggest that you do not try to understand it, just to hear how the words, 'I', 'you', 'them', 'me', 'mine' flow together:

They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. I am asking on their behalf [...] because they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine.

This is our spiritual reality as Christians, the way we are possessed by God, fully human in God, realised as vastly more than our parts – each of us rendered fully ourselves only by being part of Christ. We are not our wealth, our jobs, our appearances; nor do we understand others to be simply a collection of thoughts, ideas, achievements, skills. No – for us, the Christ in another person calls forth the Christ in us.

Our model for this, as the reading from John suggests, is the Trinity itself, the way God is himself in himself. One of the classic ways to explain the Trinity – and it is problematic but beautiful in its own right – is that Jesus is God's idea of himself and the Spirit is God rejoicing in himself. We are called to participate in this joyful self-knowledge – perhaps you know the famous Icon by Andrei Rublev that shows the Trinity as three angels with space left for a fourth.

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For Martin Buber, 'You' was not merely an ethical principle to be applied to other humans, it was deeper than that, a metaphysical truth that brought together ethics, politics, history and economics. For Buber, the spiritual reality that is being in the presence of another has to form and to form how we organise everything else.

We can hear his rule in the way we treat the environment. The 'You' of Buber is not only for people but for plants and animals too, you can discover the full reality of presence in a tree or a cat. In our church, when the CreationKeepers team asks us how we can be better stewards of creation, they are asking us to remember that animals and plants are not merely instruments or objects of charity but full presences themselves.

We can hear Buber's rule in our relationships and our friendships. Here in church and in our homes, we can force ourselves to notice when we use another person out of desire or need or interest, when we forget their holiness.

We can hear Buber's rule too when we make decisions about how to use our money. As we are called upon to review what we give to our local church, we remember that our money is a way for us to honour our humanity and that of others. We work to be responsible and generous, acknowledging that our resources must be put in service of each other and of God.

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Our religion is one built on relationship – of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, of the Son and the apostles, of the Son and us, each of us with one another. This is not simply advice about

good living or good mental health, nor is it a moral rule, an instruction about what to do, rather it is a way of describing the real presence of God in and among us, the fabric of a created universe.

When Jesus says, 'All mine are yours, and yours are mine', he is telling us about the life that we are to have with him and in him as well as the reality that we are called to make present in our lives and gifts.

I will end then with the same affirmation that I began with: 'They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word.'

Amen.