

Julian of Norwich written by Sarah Ashton

May our feet walk in your way Lord, may our hands do your work Lord, may our minds think of you Lord, may our hearts be filled with your Love Lord and may my mouth speak your words Lord. Amen

I am often challenged when given the passages and title for a sermon and like to spend time thinking and praying. Julian of Norwich has required more thought, prayer and research than many of my previous efforts.

I am speaking about a woman born in 1342 in Norwich, which was England's second city after London at the time, with a population of about 13,000. The whole area was prosperous; it was a densely populated agricultural region and was an important centre for textile production. Wealthy merchants had trade networks across the area, south to London and then across to the Low Countries. It was a Diocesan Seat and a royal administrative centre, and was a vibrant social, commercial, religious and cultural hub.

The picture of life in Norwich sounds quite civilised but it was a turbulent time in history. The first wave of the Black Death affected Norwich when Julian was 6 and half the population of the city died. The figures say that one third of the English population, then around 2 million, died. If the statistics had been that bad with Covid there would have been 20 million people dying in the UK alone. Deaths would no doubt have included family members for Julian. The Hundred Years War with France raged throughout her lifetime and men would have gone to fight. There was also the Peasants Revolt in 1381, with more destruction and bloodshed. They are not easy times to live in.

We know more about Norwich at this time than we do about the woman we call Julian of Norwich. We do not have a record of her early life or her given name but we assume that she probably came from a comfortable family where she would have had an education until about the age of 10. She would not have learnt to read or write in Latin but in the Middle English that was the vernacular of the time and as written by her contemporary, Geoffrey Chaucer. From her writings, where illustrations of family and daily life inform her

thought process, it is assumed by scholars that she was married and had a child. It was common to marry at about the age of 12 or 13 in this period and to assume responsibility for running a house. In 1361 the plague returned to Norwich (Julian was then 19 years old) and it was named 'The Mortality of Children' and in her writings Julian referred to the death of a child.

Our real knowledge of Julian begins when she was 30 when she had an illness that wracked her body and she thought she was going to die. Her mother was at her bedside and a priest was sent for. He demanded that she look at his crucifix and when she focused on it, the pain left her body as she had the first of sixteen visions which occurred over the next 24 hours. Within a few days she was fully recovered. She decided to give her life to God and became an anchoress at St Julian's Church in Norwich.

An anchoress is a woman who lives in a cell that is a little less than 3m by 4m (9ft x 12ft). Julian would have been escorted to the door of the cell in the church wall and locked in. The cell had 3 squint windows. The first was into the church so that she could witness services, confess her sins and receive Holy Communion; the second was so that her maid could pass her clean clothes, writing materials and food; the third was onto the street with a stool outside so that the public could come and ask questions. Julian was to spend the next 44 years in this cell. We don't have the exact date of her death but it was after 1416.

Julian is known as the First woman of English letters as she wrote a short book on her revelations or shewings as she called them soon after her recovery. Some years later she wrote a much longer version that not only described her shewings but also her understanding of them and some of the questions and discourses that she had had with people who had visited her with questions. This is known as "Revelations of Divine Love" and is the first book recorded to be written in English by a woman.

I am not going to talk about all sixteen of her visions, all of which are described in graphic detail and are of the crucifixion. Some of them were as if she was there, some were recorded as 'ghostly' and as if she were watching from afar and some were even more 'ghostly' and were in her head. It took years of contemplation and prayer for her to fully understand these visions. She heard Christ speak to her in some of the visions without moving his lips.

Her first vision was of a bleeding Christ on the cross. It is in seeing Christ that she realises that she cannot rest until she is substantially one with Christ and that she has a growing awareness of the Trinity. A hazelnut appears in her hand and she questions how and why, to be told that it is all there is. She realises that a hazelnut is an ordinary, everyday item, a part of nature, a food and it could easily disintegrate into nothing, just like a cloud or a blade of grass or a person. It is a mystery of existence and in her mind she hears a voice say 'it lasts and ever shall be because God loves it'. To Julian, this leads to the teaching that all things have being because of the love of God. Christ is our protector because God loves us; He wants us to be substantially united to God in nature, which is our being. God is the ground of our being and He is the source of our being. Julian thought that earthly things take us away from God, so she detached herself from earthly things. She taught that you should focus less on yourself and more on others. This links with our Gospel reading today, 'My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no-one than this that he lay down his life for his friends' (Jn15v12). We should mirror God's love for us in our dealings with people.

In her second vision, Julian is watching Christ suffering on the cross and she realises that it is human blindness or ignorance that prevents us from seeing or experiencing God. God has chosen to reveal His divine presence to us and we can see God or experience Him in an event such as a wonder of nature, falling in love, or childbirth. These experiences represent God's love and we must continue to be in God's love as it is by seeking and searching for His love that we have moments of resting in God, such as in the Eucharist. God wants us to trust Him. A soul on earth can only seek, which is positive; trust, which is positive and suffer. Julian took on the suffering of those around her: that of her husband and child who probably both died; the suffering of other friends and family and those who came to her as an anchoress. We all have personal sufferings in life and earlier I spoke about the turbulent period of history that Julian lived in. Today, as then, there are people looking for work, those who are hungry, the wars that rage, ill health, political instability and so many other issues that cause suffering; but these are not something that God sends, these are part of the world that we have created.

Julian is adamant that there is no wrath in God. The Old Testament often talks about the wrath of God or God as vengeful. If God showed us a tiny amount of His wrath, He would wipe us from the face of the earth. People worry that God will be wrathful because of their sins but Julian sees God's wrath as an anthropomorphic metaphor - that is trying to describe God using human traits. In her shewings she did not see an angry God or Christ. Christ didn't die to punish us; He died because He loves us. Christ takes the wrath in His death. God's love doesn't desert us when we sin, in fact we are urged on to greater hope, faith and joy, as with the woman taken in adultery (Jn ch 8). Jesus said 'Go on your way and don't sin again'. Julian's image is of God as Love; He can't be anything but love; He doesn't see the sin, He sees the suffering child. It is us projecting our anger on to God that makes Him seem angry and it takes hours of meditation and prayer to realise that God's love for us is unconditional. The thought that God loves us no matter what we have done should be enough to humble, cleanse, purify and transform us more than any punishment, guilt or shame could. A Christian lives with two realities: that sin needs an earthly punishment with ramifications, but also that God takes on the sin and transforms it. We have to balance between saying 'I'm OK because I am saved' and 'woe is me, because I am a sinner'. We must neither be too complacent or too contrite to be effective in the showing and sharing of God's love with those around us.

Another really important teaching from Julian that I must mention is the Motherhood of God. This was ground breaking theology as everything was male centred in Julian's time. She is probably writing from her own experience as a mother. She believed that God is our mother as he is our father, saying 'As truly as God is our Father, so truly God is our Mother'. In Colossians (Ch 1 v16) it states that all things were created by God. The Old Testament even refers to God as a mother when it wants a tender image (Is 49v15; 66v13). The love of a mother is unconditional. Julian has an image of Christ giving birth to us on the cross and then physically suckling us with the Eucharist. Like a mother, He is there to love, care, encourage and chastise as needed. Blessing, healing, teaching, preaching and forgiving are Christ's work in and through the church. Julian said that Christ doesn't imitate the earthly mother; the earthly mother imitates Christ. Christ is the supreme mother. When we fall, no matter how bad

we feel, we never hurt in His love or have less value in His sight. Julian sees Christ as the Prodigal Mother who welcomes all who turn to her.

There is so much to say about the teachings of this woman about whom we know so little. You might be wondering where the one phrase that is popularly attributed to Julian and is familiar to many of us features: 'All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well'. Julian did not say this herself, but heard Christ say it to her.

Let us pray to be more open to God's boundless love and trust Him that our lives might reflect Him fully

*Quiet time*

'All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well'.

Amen