

Julian of Norwich - The Chaplain's Reflection for Sunday 10th May 2020

On 8th May 1373, a woman was so ill that she was being given the last rites. She had a series of visions, which, when she recovered, she wrote down with short reflections on their meaning. Over the next twenty years, she meditated on her visions and wrote a remarkable work of theology and spirituality. We know her as Julian of Norwich, and her writing as 'The Revelation of Divine Love'.

She was, for much of her life, an anchorite living socially distanced and isolated in a small cell attached to St Julian's Church in Norwich. In fact, Julian might not even be her name; she could simply have been called by the name of the church. During the 14th Century, when she lived, quite a number of churches had a small cell built onto the side for a woman to live a life of seclusion and prayer. There would be a window into the church to hear the service and receive communion, but set in such a way that the anchoress would not be seen. There would also be a window to the outside, so that visitors could talk to the anchoress for spiritual advice and prayer. She would, after a religious ceremony including the words from the funeral service, never leave the cell. If she was fortunate, there would be a small garden for her use. She would have a maidservant to bring in food and to do other necessary tasks. We have some knowledge of this religious life through examples of rules of life for anchoresses that have survived. We do not know at what point in her life Julian entered her cell, or why she chose this extreme life of prayer. We do know from accounts that have survived that she was well known as a holy woman, and that her advice was sought and valued.

What is most remarkable about her is that her writings have survived. This book was kept and handed down by a small number of female religious orders and published as 'The Revelation of Divine Love'. This incredible book is the earliest surviving text written in English by a woman.

Julian's theology is remarkable for her time. She eschews the idea of a wrathful God sending people to hell, and instead explores a God who is all love and a hell that is empty, because how could heaven exist if people were suffering? The revelations focus particularly on the suffering of Christ, which she understands as motivated by love and leading to the joyous possibility of being one with God through the Passion of Christ. She plays around with ideas of gender, sometimes talking about God as our mother, and also suggesting that Jesus is our mother, birthing us through his suffering and nurturing us with love and care as we find our way into new life.

'Our Saviour is our true Mother in whom we are endlessly born and out of whom we shall never come.'

Her vision of God is steeped in forgiveness and mercy. Yes, humans are sinful and often get things wrong, but Jesus longs to pick us up when we fall, to forgive us and restore us.

'...we need to fall, and we need to be aware of it; for if we did not fall, we should not know how weak and wretched we are of ourselves, nor should we know our Maker's marvellous love so fully...'

She does not suggest that a life trusting in God's love will be easy.

'He said not 'Thou shalt not be tempested, thou shalt not be travailed, thou shalt not be diseased'; but he said, 'Thou shalt not be overcome.'"

Above all, she tells us that the meaning of God, and the purpose of all that is, is Love. Love is his meaning.

The reading that follows echoes some of our earlier reading from Colossians. There we are told to clothe ourselves with compassion and kindness, clothe ourselves in love, and to find in this peace. Julian tells us to let God do that clothing, to wrap and embrace us in love. She then shares her vision of a tiny thing like a hazelnut, which helps her to reflect on the care God has for detail. We are meant to take comfort from her words to trust that God will love, sustain and keep us through the turmoil of life.

A few years ago, I was on a retreat looking at a number of historical women theologians, and I wrote this poem about Julian.

Julian of Norwich

*Dame Julian, you contained yourself
voluntarily incarcerated in a simple cell,
removed from social niceties
and the requirements of a conventional life.
And from your restricted space
your mind was freed to explore,
travelling the heights and depths of revelation
weaving a theology both traditional and yet radically your own.
Here sin and pain call forth the compassionate gaze of the Creator
and find in our Mother Jesus a redemption rich and generous,
through which we shall be oned with the one who made us,
so that all shall be well
not a pious platitude but a triumphant assertion
of the overwhelming capacity of God's redeeming love.*

On the Chapel page I will put some links to her writings.

May we find in our restricted lives space for our minds, hearts, and faith to explore. Amen.

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