

Julian of Norwich- A saint for our times.

Friday 8th May.

‘If I look singularly to myself, I am as nothing; but in general I am united in charity with all my fellow Christians, and in this oneness of charity stands the life of all mankind who shall be saved. For God is all that is good, and has made all that is made, and loves all that he has made.’

Revelations of Divine Love, VI

Julian of Norwich is the name by which she goes, but we do not know her real name.

In the late Middle Ages, Europe was wracked with plague and life was incredibly unsettling with civil unrest, war and raging inequalities. It seemed that neither the formal channels of church nor state could navigate these choppy waters and people began to try and make their own sense of the world around them quite apart from the more proscribed and conventional means of religious and political discourse.

Into this context we come across a woman in her thirties, who on this day in the year 1373, was overwhelmed by a sudden and severe illness. She was so sick the priest was called to her home and the last rites were said over her failing body; a cross was placed before her eyes as a focus for prayer.

In this state of utter peril and vulnerability, facing her own mortality, she had a series of visions revealing aspects of the love of God. She journeyed through these visions and her illness, and emerged as an anchoress, a solitary, a walled-up person, living a vowed life in a lockdown of her own choosing. Within that confinement she devoted her whole life to pondering the expansive divine mysteries into which she had been initiated.

She attached herself to the Church of St Julian in Norwich, and so took upon herself that name. She wrote down what was shown to her, in what was to be the first book written by a woman in the English language, *The Revelations of Divine Love*.

Her visions are not for the fainthearted or for those with a closed mind. Her vision is of God as both Father and Mother. Her vision of God is messily incarnate, even gory. God was made flesh in all of its reality. There was blood, and pain and sweat and tears but from this singular suffering and showing, Julian developed an understanding of God which was social and communal and political. Through her own body she came to understand what it meant to be part of the body of Christ.

Even though she never left the house, her understanding of God was not confined to the kitchen, we might say. Though developed in her cell with only four walls (and a cat) for company, her visions were expansive, and in the absence of a grand building to inspire her, her supposedly enclosed faith built a temple to the Kingdom of God which was ambitious, architectural and all encompassing.

She thought of her visions as not only for herself but for all people. She acknowledged that she was only able to find her own identity by looking to others in love and charity.

This is perhaps why Julian of Norwich is a Saint for our times. She is a saint for all of us who feel isolated and debilitated. She is a Saint for all of us, who, from a situation of isolation want to see community and society



strengthened. She seemed to understand that to be human was to be social and indeed political. To be human was to care and have concern for all people, for all things. It is a divine paradox that a solitary, isolated woman would offer this vision of unity to the world.

From her cell she was able to speak into the world about the importance of community and her ministry and her witness was acknowledged to have an important social function. Her visions helped people place their lives in a bigger context and she was keen to stress that the context of all human life was set before a loving God in whom *all would be well, and all manner of things would be well.*

It was in this frame that she was able to reflect on suffering and the notion of evil, and the wonder of creation. She said that it was love that determined our existence and not sin. Love could overcome anything and everything.

If we needed evidence that this is true, we need only look around. We do see love shaping the world today and calling the world out of a situation of calamity and chaos. We see selfless acts of love between families and friends and among strangers who have broken out of the patterns of serving self, to care for all.

Ironically, it has taken a situation of lockdown and personal isolation to help us all realise that we do not exist as islands. We are all bound together in this bundle of life and we are dependent upon one another immeasurably. Our old hierarchies are being smashed to pieces as we realise that, for example, the people who we pay least, we need most and the people whom we have tended to value most, by their position or wealth or celebrity, have been found lacking in judgement, wisdom and mercy. We can no longer justify our blind spots as we are suddenly given a view of the world as it really is. When we put love first, it does tend to turn everything upside down.

Julian's vision challenges us in our situations of isolation to work towards a world where compassion and our love for all people undergirds the society we build next. Powerful rhetoric won't be enough to rebuild this new society, only the simple act of love reaching into every corner of our systems and structures, will be able to carve out the future we all long for. This politics of compassion will always put love first and remind the world that we were made by love and for love.

What a world it might yet be, if we could build it on the foundation of love. What a world it might yet be, if love really was our meaning.

From a single cell, over six hundred years ago, in the midst of turmoil and tribulation, a young woman asked the same question...

I learned that love was our Lord's meaning. And I saw for certain, both here and elsewhere, that before ever he made us, God loved us; and that his love has never slackened, nor ever shall. In this love all his works have been done. And in this love he has made everything serve us; and in this love our life is everlasting. Our beginning was when we were made, but the love in which he made us never had a beginning. All this we shall see in God for ever. May Jesus grant this.

Julian of Norwich, 1342 –c1416