

## All will be well...

a sermon on the feast of Julian of Norwich on the second Sunday after Easter May 8<sup>th</sup> 2011.

Methwold and Feltwell

### Readings

Acts 2:14a,36-41

Luke 24:13-35

+*In Nomine*

It's not often that I get an opportunity to preach a Sunday sermon about one of my favourite saints – and on her feast day – let alone having the added bonus of her being local to Norfolk. I wonder if that clue gives away her identity? Well, in case this is still eluding you, I'm talking about Julian of Norwich, the 14<sup>th</sup> century mystic and spiritual writer whose marvellous reflection – the *Revelation of Divine Love* – was one the first books known to be written by a woman in English. However Julian wasn't an airy fairy visionary – writing up lurid feverish visions of the passion of Christ. She had a hugely practical streak which immediately appealed to me when I first 'met' her as a teenage devourer of romantic historical fiction back in the '70's. The depiction of Julian in Anya Seton's famous novel **Katharine** arrested my attention. As a 17 year old I had no patience with or respect for those ghastly formulaic depictions of saintly womanhood – plaster, pasty-faced-consumptive, too-good-to-be-true never-answering-back virgins with cast down eyes, meekly clutching lilies. Not my style! I had a youthful contempt for such unrealistic and unattainable sainthood. I still do! But a prayerful woman who was also highly practical and compassionate, shrewd and discerning, perhaps even feisty, concerned about both the spiritual and physical well being of ordinary people and who showed genuine care for everyone who came her way, regardless of social position or wealth appealed to my sense of what constituted a credible saint ...someone who might even just become a role model, for all she was depicted in the novel as being rotund and middle aged

- hey how is that prophetic??? Of course at 17, the thought of being either fat or middle aged is inconceivable isn't it!

Anyway I was sufficiently intrigued to find out more about the real Julian. But there is precious little about her recorded - not even her baptismal name. We do know that she was probably born in 1342 and though she claimed to be 'unlettered' was educated by Benedictine nuns. 'Unlettered' most likely referred to a lack of education in Latin rather than actual illiteracy. On 8<sup>th</sup> May 1373, Julian lay close to death with a severe fever. During this time she received a series of sixteen visions of the Passion of Christ which revealed not only His suffering but His steadfast and all embracing love for humankind. Following her recovery she decided to become an ' anchoress', a woman living alone devoted to prayer in a small room - a cell- attached to the 400 year old church of St Julian close to the centre of Norwich and she took her name in 'religion' from the patron saint of the church. For twenty years Julian meditated on the meaning of those visions, finally writing down the fruits of her reflections.

Julian's theology is centred on an all-loving, all compassionate God. She made sense of her own sufferings and those of her age - warfare, peasants' revolt, cattle pestilence and the black death - 'the common troubles of mankind' in the light of Jesus' sufferings. She saw God's love and care for all creation encapsulated in the round perfection and smallness of a hazelnut. Like St Augustine before her she knew God to be humankind's true resting place. A revolutionary insight contradicted by the prevailing theology was that there is no wrath or anger in God. Rather we project our own lack of forgiveness of ourselves and others on to God.

She says:

*God is our true peace. He watches over us when we can find no rest...and when through the power of mercy and grace we are made humble and gentle, we are wholly*

*safe. Then suddenly the soul is at one with God, when it is truly at peace with itself, for no anger is found in Him.*

Despite being an anchorite, supposedly shut off from the world, Julian had a surprisingly rich communal life, for all she lived and often prayed alone in a simple, one roomed cell attached to a very ordinary parish church. Her daily rhythm was a mix of the contemplative and the communal. In her cell, Julian had two windows opening onto two different but intertwined worlds. One window opened into the sanctuary. This enabled her participation in the worshipping life of that Christian community - to recognise and receive our Lord in the breaking of the bread. The other window enabled her to fulfil her calling as an apostle of Christ - the calling of all the Baptised people of God at the end of the Mass - the word Mass meaning of course our participation in Christ's mission - 'Go you are sent' - sent - like the disciples on the Emmaus Rd - to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom. Julian did just this, as she conversed, advised and prayed with the many people who stopped by that window to receive her counsel and to feel the love of Christ poured out on them through her. Indeed this was Julian's whole *raison d'être*: In the *Revelation of Divine Love*, she emphasises that *Love is His meaning*. She focused on the Christ who *loves the sin out of us*.

A very precious part of my spiritual life since coming to Norfolk is to join - when I can- the small group of lay people who gather to pray the Rosary each Monday morning in the Julian Shrine. Sadly, it's an increasingly rare 'treat' for me these days, as I juggle the day to day demands of the multi-parish benefice. The chapel, reconstructed following its bombing during the war, is a simple uncluttered modern space but somehow it is utterly redolent with the prayer of centuries. Curiously, the intentions offered as the Rosary is prayed each week are rarely for the 'big stuff' like affairs of state. Rather they are mostly prayers offered for very ordinary people in all manner of situations - prayers of thanksgiving, prayers for healing, prayers for neighbours, family, friends ...prayers for the blind man, the leper, the bleeding woman, the

sinner...the sort of everyday stuff of life that Julian herself offered in *her* daily prayers all those centuries ago for all who sought her counsel. In this way she followed in the footsteps of her Lord and her God who loved people and restored them to wholeness. To me, this is a holy place, a liminal place, a place of encounter with the living God, a place where I can take all those people and situations on my heart and place those needs, as Julian did, within the sacred embrace of our blessed Lord and to know indeed that *All will be well and all manner of things will be well...* especially as our world is every bit as chaotic and violent as Julian's 14<sup>th</sup> context. In Julian's cell I am refreshed and renewed through quiet, contemplative, communal prayer to continue to engage in Christ's mission to love and serve His people.

When her *Revelations of Divine Love* were first published in modern English translation some 100 years ago, few people had even heard of Julian. Today she is the most widely read and influential of the English mystics and her spiritual insights inspire conversion and offer encouragement and consolation for thousands of ordinary people throughout the world. Her calm assurance, sanity, realism and vision resonates with people searching for 'Heaven in ordinary' - a combination of mystical vision and prophetic action which is at the very heart of Christ's mission and ours.

Julian has been described as "not only a great lady of the past; but also a great woman in our future." I believe this is true. It's her very ordinariness that makes her extraordinary, her very homeliness, her real identification with and care for her 'even Christians' that makes her much more than a plaster saint with 'doolally' mystical tendencies. Her *Revelations of Divine Love* - so practical and so accessible - spring from a deeply rooted life of prayer - contemplative prayer and communal prayer grounded in Eucharist. She is indeed a contemporary role model and the depth and yet simplicity of her writing is timeless...*and she's a Norfolk lass...can't go better for a saint for our times than that!*

