

Julian of Norwich

She is remembered in the C of E on 8th May.

Julian of Norwich is known to us almost only through her book *The Revelations of Divine Love* which is widely acknowledged as one of the great classics of the spiritual life. Introducing her book an early scribe describes it as 'a sublime and wonderful revelation of the unutterable love of God'. It is written, he tells us, 'for God's faithful lovers' echoing Julian's own words that she is writing 'for men and women who, for God's love, hate sin and turn themselves to do God's will'. Julian wrote throughout for the encouragement of her 'even-Christians', people like ourselves who long to know God better but who in our weakness fall frequently and need to be rescued by his all-compassionate love. 'He is our clothing' says Julian, 'In his love he wraps and holds us. He enfolds us for love and will never let us go'.

Julian's book comes to us in two versions, the first written shortly after sixteen revelations given to her on May 8th 1373, the second twenty years later greatly expanded to include her meditations on what she had been shown. Julian tells us that she was then thirty and a half years old: she was thus born in 1342. A scribe editor to her first book speaks of her as a 'devout woman, who is a recluse at Norwich and still alive, AD 1413.' There is further witness through a will that she was living in 1416 but apart from that we know virtually nothing. It is thought that she lived until about 1420 when she would have been almost 80, a ripe old age in those days. There is no trace of her grave, nor do we even know her baptismal name for almost certainly she took the name Julian from the church to which her anchorhold was attached.

Julian does however give a short glimpse of herself at the time of her revelations. She had been lying desperately ill for about a week, nursed by her mother and friends. On the fourth night a priest had given her the last rites. After she had lingered for two days the priest returned with a serving boy to be present at her death. Holding a cross before her he bade her look upon the likeness of her 'Maker and Saviour' and draw comfort from it. All appeared dark as night except that a ray of light illuminated the figure on the cross. After relapsing to the point of death her pains suddenly left her and she was as well as she had ever been. The revelations followed.

Julian's cell, off Rouen Road in Norwich, now enlarged and furnished as a chapel, is visited by pilgrims from all over the world. Here for more than forty years she lived and prayed, meditated on her book and wrote its pages, ate her simple meals brought by a faithful servant, worked at some task such as embroidery, and counselled many from a little window looking on to the street. Opposite was another window looking into the church where she would have heard mass and received communion.

Julian's message was one of hope and trust in a God whose compassionate love is always directed towards us. No fall from grace could ever affect the constancy of that love. If we were to fall, she said, we were to get up quickly for the worst pain a soul could have was to allow sin to take it away from God. Why, God had even forgiven us before we repented (even before we sinned!) and our need was simply to reach out to him and thankfully to take that forgiveness into ourselves.

In this all gracious God there is and can be no element of wrath. The wrath ('all that is contrary to peace and love') is in us and not in God and his saving work is to quench our wrath in the power of his all compassionate love. We never then have to fear the exposure of our dark side to God for only pity and compassion are there to meet it.

Julian warns us that we could spoil everything by persistent self-blame and is severe in pointing out that this is a fruit of pride and not an indication of humility as we may often imagine it to be. On the contrary we must forgive ourselves even as God has forgiven us (anything else would be to deny the generosity of God's love) and so give up our senseless worrying and faithless fear.

It is true that 'our enemy' will try to depress us by proposing false fears. Our need always, she insists, is to hold fast to the goodness of God for this is both pleasing to him and strengthening to ourselves. We are God's joy and delight and on our part we are to enjoy him and firmly trust him, and all shall be well. 'Tossed and laboured we may well be but we shall not be overcome.' 'All' indeed 'shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.'

Fr Robert Llewelyn

Prayer fastens the soul to God making it one with his will through the deep inward working of the Holy Spirit. So he says this, 'Pray inwardly, even though you find no joy in it. For it does good, though you feel nothing, see nothing, yes, even though you think you cannot pray. For when you are dry and empty, sick and weak, your prayers please me, though there be little enough to please you. All believing prayer is precious in my sight.' God accepts the good-will and work of his servants, no matter how we feel.

It pleases God that by the help of his grace we should work away at our praying and our living, directing all our powers to him until in the fullness of joy we have him whom we seek - Jesus.

As by his courtesy God forgives our sin when we repent, even so he wills that we should forgive our sin, and so give up our senseless worrying and faithless fear.

If we fall we are to get up quickly; for the worst pain a soul can have is to let sin take it away from God.

The testing experience of falling will lead us to a deep and wonderful knowledge of the constancy of God's love, which neither can nor will be broken because of sin. to understand this is of great profit.

He says, 'Do not blame yourself too much, thinking that your trouble and distress is all your fault. For it is not my will that you should be unduly sad and despondent.'

Our enemy tries to depress us with false fears which he proposes. His intention is to make us so weary and dejected, that we let the blessed sight of our everlasting friend slip from our mind.

It is a beautiful humility - brought about by the grace and mercy of the Holy Spirit - when a sinful soul willingly and gladly accepts the chastisement our Lord himself would give us. It will seem light and easy, if only we will accept contentedly what he calls upon us to bear.

The soul which would remain at peace when another's sin comes to mind, must fly as from the pains of hell, asking for God's protection and help. Looking at another's sin clouds the eyes of the soul, hiding for the time - being the fair beauty of God - unless we look upon this sinner with contrition with him, compassion on him, and a holy longing to God for him. Otherwise it must harm and disquiet and hinder the soul that looks on these sins.

*Many more Julian sayings may be found in *Enfolded in Love and In Love Enclosed* (both published by Darton, Longman and Todd) available from the Julian Centre, St Julian's Alley, Rouen Road, Norwich NR1 1QT (01603 767380) or from bookshops.*

He is our clothing. In his love he wraps and holds us. He enfolds us for love and will never let us go.

God is our sure rock, and he shall be our whole joy and make us changeless as he is, when we reach the heavens.

God of your goodness give me yourself for you are enough for me.

He did not say, 'You shall not be tempest-tossed, you shall not be work-weary, you shall not be discomforted.' But he said, 'You shall not be overcome.' God wants us to heed these words so that we shall always be strong in trust, both in sorrow and in joy.

Flee to our Lord and we shall be comforted. Touch him and we shall be made clean. Cling to him and we shall be safe and sound from every kind of danger. For our courteous Lord wills that we should be as at home with him as heart may think or soul may desire.

Prayer is the deliberate and persevering action of the soul. It is true and enduring and full of grace.

Sayings of Julian of Norwich

It is God's will that we should rejoice with him in our salvation and that we should be cheered and strengthened by it,

He loves us and enjoys us, and so he wills that we love him and enjoy him, and firmly trust him; and all shall be well.

He is quick to clasp us to himself, for we are his joy and his delight, and he is our salvation and our life.

Our lover desires that our soul should cling to him with all its might, and that we should ever hold fast to his goodness. For this above all pleases God and strengthens the soul.

When a soul holds on to God in trust - whether in seeking him or contemplating him - this is the highest worship it can bring.

Our soul rests in God its true peace, our soul stands in God its true strength, and is deep-rooted in God for endless love.

The simple enjoyment of our Lord is in itself a most blessed form of thanksgiving.

The love that God most high has for our soul is so great that it passes understanding.