

Sermon for 29.4.18 Rev'd Jenny Simson

My recent pilgrimage in Europe to the places of the mystics, has given me much to sit with and contemplate.

I have this great desire to share with you immediately all that happened.

Yet I don't want to swamp you in this way, for to do so would be to overwhelm you and I don't want to do that.

I believe, therefore the way to proceed is slowly and steadily, integrating the scripture readings with my experience abroad.

As I noted in the pew sheet message this week, the readings today about the intricate nature of the love of God, fit beautifully with the writings of the mystics,

especially with Julian of Norwich, the first mystic we visited on pilgrimage.

The gospel reading writes of Jesus as the true vine, and about the indwelling of mutual love. Jesus tells us that he **is the** Vine, and we are the branches.

Now as the vine, Jesus is not separate from the branches.

In other words, Jesus is not separate from the people, but is part of them – joined in fact - one with them - feeding them and giving growth to new life.

The imagery is wonderfully descriptive, personal, and easy to imagine.

As the vine- all life flows from Jesus, through Jesus and into us, the branches. As the branches, we draw deeply from the vine – and, fed with the riches of the vine, are able to bear fruit. “Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because cut from me you can do nothing.” Jesus tells us.

The words *Abide in me* describe the believer's relation to Jesus.

And I in them, describe the mutuality of the relationship between Jesus and his disciples. They describe the indwelling intimate love between both.

In terms of emotional maturity, this indwelling love offers confidence, assurance, self-worth, deep peace and life in abundance in those who enter this intimacy.

God's love however, is inclusive - always at work in us – offering to draw us deeper, taking great care in the cleansing process or the pruning process - cutting away the dead wood that we accumulate and sometimes cling to.

In very simple terms, this pruning process is part of a rhythm of dying and living that can be painful, yet one in which we can trust.

Julian of Norwich, writes about it this way “If there is anywhere on earth a lover of God who is always kept safe, I know nothing of it, for it was not shown to me. But this was shown: that in falling and rising again we are always kept in that same precious love.”

One of Julian of Norwich's famous sayings –as I'm sure many of us know, is, *“All shall be well and all manner of things shall be well”*.

These amazing words of assurance that still make their mark on our lives today, were given to her by Christ in one of her showings or revelations.

I'd like to just take a minute now to say a little about our time at Julian's church.

Our accommodation in Norwich was right next door to the Norwich Cathedral and a 15 min walk to St Julian's church and the hermitage where Julian of Norwich was the anchoress.

During our first afternoon we walked to her church and all sat in her cell or anchor hold, which was a room about the size of the children's chapel and attached to the side of the church – in the way the vestry is attached at St Matthews church (only her cell was much bigger than the vestry).

It was here where she lived for nearly 40 years as the anchoress of the parish church. (It felt quite extraordinary to be in her “place” her space there).

Now the word Anchoress comes from the word meaning “to withdraw” and was used to refer to a recluse.

The anchor hold and its recluse, are said to be anchored in God, and are likened to an anchor for the church so that waves or storms of life do not overturn it.

In Julian's anchor hold, she had a small opening on the wall attached to the church, where she would receive communion from the priest at Mass. On the opposite side, there was a large window where she would converse with people who came to her for spiritual counsel.

Julian's holiness and divine wisdom grew as she contemplated a vision of the crucifixion granted to her when she was 30 years old in 1373 and while she suffered a severe illness.

For the next twenty or so years, she wrote down all her God given understandings of the vision. (As far as we know, she was the first woman to write a book in English.)

Sharing her revelations was important to her because she believed that what she had been shown about the tenderness of the love of God, was meant for all her fellow Christians not just for her personal understanding.

Her focus and understanding of God as relational, personal, loving and caring – was indeed very different to the understanding of the church of the day that preached about a God of judgement and damnation, and saw salvation as a spiritual event on a supernatural plane that loses contact with the day to day lives of the people.

Julian was well aware of the struggles in life through sadness and suffering because of isolation and desolation.

Central to her work is the understanding that for the time of this life we have in us an amazing mixture of well and woe.

The changeable nature of this life gives joy and pain, laughter and fear, disease and health, assurance and doubt.

The love of God however is unchangeable. No matter what outer or inner turmoil people have, they remain in God, and this is a comfort to those living in any age.

Such a perspective is not a denial of reality, but a realisation that human substance is grounded in and one'd with God, who kindles our understanding, directs our ways, eases our conscience, comforts our soul and lightens our heart.

Julian believed that despite wretchedness, debates and strife, humans, and all of nature, are in all ways enclosed in the goodness and love of God.

And as God assured Julian, *All shall be well and all manner of things shall be well.*

And as Jesus calls us in the readings today: Abide in me, as I abide in you.

