

‘SAINT’ OF THE WEEK

We intend each week to focus on a ‘Saint’, some canonised, some not, whose ‘feast day’ is during the following week. We will offer a ‘pen picture’ of a remarkable life, often known about by only a few, which can give hope and encouragement as to how a person truly living the Christian faith can be a real inspiration for each of us as we seek to follow Christ.

Blessed Julian of Norwich

Mystic (1342 – 1416) – Feastday: 13 May

*“As truly as God is our Father, so truly is God our Mother.
Our Father wills, our Mother works,
our good Lord the Holy Spirit confirms.”*

The late fourteenth century was a time of terrible upheaval. With the Black Plague, the Hundred Years War, and the crisis of church authority occasioned by the long papal schism, Europe was burdened by an atmosphere of anxiety. Intense concern about the prospects for personal salvation, coupled with doubts about the efficacy of the church and its prescribed channels of spirituality, led to a proliferation of new forms of religious expression. Much of the new spirituality emerged from lay people aspiring to lives of holiness outside of conventional religious orders.

The yearning for a personal, experiential faith contributed to a flowering of nonmonastic Christian mysticism. Fourteenth-century England produced a significant number of mystical classics, written in the vernacular, often by lay people living as solitaries, and addressed to other lay people seeking a more intimate relationship with God. The *Showings* of Julian of Norwich is one - and perhaps the greatest - of these works.

We know little of Julian's biography; her name itself is uncertain, possibly being taken from the church of St. Julian in Norwich, to which she attached herself in her later life as an enclosed anchoress. As an anchoress, she would have been literally sealed in a dwelling attached to the wall of a church. Her cell would have allowed a view of the church interior, as well as an outside window for the delivery of food and the reception of visitors seeking spiritual counsel. She may also have enjoyed a garden and the companionship of a cat. Otherwise, her life was devoted to prayer and reflection.

What may today seem like an extreme form of rejection of the world was recognized in her own time as serving an important social function. In any case, her writings testify to the profound love and compassion that were the fruit of her solitary existence. As for other details of her life we are entirely dependent on the testimony of her *Showings*.

Thus, we learn that she was born in 1342. At some point in her youth, she prayed that she might be granted three graces: recollection of Christ's passion; bodily sickness; and "three wounds" of contrition, compassion, and longing for God. Her prayer was answered at the age of thirty when she fell so seriously ill that she was given the last rites of the church.

She did not die, but as she lay gazing on a crucifix, she experienced sixteen distinct revelations concerning Christ's passion, after which her sickness left her completely. She recorded these revelations in two versions written some twenty years apart.

In Julian's first revelation she beholds Christ's crown of thorns, the effects of which are described with clinical exactness: "the red blood running down from under the crown, hot and flowing freely and copiously, a living stream." Yet this vision, while "hideous and fearful," is also "sweet and lovely." This unexpected conjunction of adjectives underlines the most distinctive quality of Julian's work. For her the cross becomes a source not of terror and anguish but of consolation, a sign of Christ's "friendliness" and extreme "courtesy."

In that the one who is highest has assumed the point reserved for the lowest, God pays the honour of a king who condescends to familiarity with a servant. Physically she sees a bleeding head. Spiritually she sees into the depth of God's love and goodness.

This single vision proves an extraordinarily rich soil, yielding reflection on a range of theological issues, including the value of creation, the power of atonement, and the impotence of evil. Creation amounts to no more than a hazelnut in the hand of God. Physically it is nothing. But spiritually its value is measured against God's love and the price God has paid for it in blood.

Thus, to gaze into the heart of darkness itself is to enter the mysterious immensity of God's goodness. The smaller our value the greater is God's love. For all its weakness and sin, God suffered for this world; Christ's blood was its price. And in the end God's suffering is turned to joy. For our Creator, who is also our Protector, is also our Lover, working good through all manner of things. The logic of joy and mercy is predetermined ever before Christ suffered his crown of thorns. We are "soul and body, clad and enclosed in the goodness of God."

There are many themes in Julian's writings that speak directly to the heart of contemporary spirituality. Among these is her frequent recourse to feminine images of God. Jesus, she says, is our true Mother, who bears us in the womb of his love and nourishes us with his own flesh. Throughout her writings, the affirmation of the goodness of creation and her stress on the beauty, friendliness, and love of God contrast sharply with a theology that lays stress on the anger and omnipotent judgment of God over a sinful world.

Julian did not directly address the major political and ecclesial crises. But it cannot be said that she was remote from the concerns of her day. In an age of anxious uncertainty, Christians were desperate to seek assurances of salvation, of the meaning of suffering, and of the power and goodness of God. Julian's answers spoke directly to these issues. Her central insight was that the God who created us out of love and who redeemed us by suffering love, also sustains us and wills to be united with us in the end. This love, and not sin, fundamentally determines our existence. Evil has no independent status; whatever we may suffer, God has already suffered. "The worst, as she noted, "has already happened and been repaired." As for our suffering in this life, insofar as we share Christ's passion we may look forward as well to sharing his joy in heaven. Thus, she could say, in her most famous and characteristic words, "*All shall be well, all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.*"

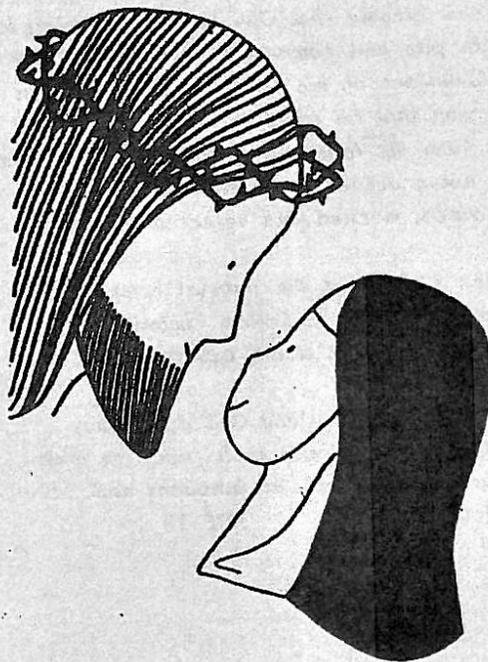
See: Julian of Norwich, *Showings*, trans. James Walsh, S.J., *Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York: Paulist, 1978).



He said: 'See how much I love you.'
 It was as if he said: 'Behold & see
 that I loved you so much before I died
 for you that I was willing to die for you.
 Now I have died for you, and suffered
 willingly what I could, and now all my
 bitter pains & hard labour have turned
 into endless bliss & joy for you and for me.
 How should it be that you should ask me
 now for anything that pleases me, and
 should I not give it to you with pleasure.'

This has been shown to me by our good
 Lord to make us glad & happy.

RDL 24



Our good Lord asked me:
 'Are you well satisfied that I suffered for you?'
 I said:

'Yes, good Lord, & thank you very much.
 Yes, good Lord, may you be blessed.'

Then Jesus our good Lord said:
 'If you are satisfied then I am satisfied.'

To have suffered the Passion for you
 is for me a great joy,
 a bliss,
 an endless delight.

And if I could suffer more I would do so.'

And in these words:

'If I could suffer more I would do so'

I saw truly
 that as often as he could die
 he would die,

and love would never let him rest
 until he had done it.

RDL 22

JULIAN OF NORWICH

1342 ~ 1422(?)



Prayer one-eth the soul to God

Faith is our light in darkness
 and our light is God the everlasting day

'God of your goodness, give me yourself
 You are enough for me.
 I cannot ask anything less to be worthy of you.
 If I were to ask less I should always be in want.
 Only in you have I all.' (Julian's prayer)



I saw clearly that Our Lord even rejoices with pity and compassion over the tribulations of his servants. And on each person that he loves & wants to bring to bliss, he lays something that in his eyes is not a defect, yet makes them to be scorned, mocked and rejected in this world...

Then I saw that the natural compassion anyone has for a fellow Christian is due to Christ living within them...

In his great courtesy God does away with our blame, and looks upon us with pity & compassion, as innocent and beloved children. RDL 28



I saw that God is everything that is good and comfortable for our help. He is our clothing, which for love wraps and enfolds us, embraces us & fully shelters us. And with tender love he is so close to us that he can never leave us...

For just as the body is clothed in clothes and the flesh in the skin and the bones in the flesh and the heart in the whole, so are we, body & soul, clad & enclosed in the goodness of God.

RDL 5,6



'Sin is necessary, but.. all shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well.'

These words were revealed to me most tenderly, without any kind of blame either towards me or anybody else who shall be saved...

When we know this mystery, then we shall truly know why he allowed sin to come and, knowing that, we shall rejoice with him forever. RDL 17