



Rev Diana Rattray

Love abides

Acts 10:44-48

John 15:9-17

Year B Easter 6

9 May 2021

Yesterday we held a Parish retreat day, on the feast day of Julian of Norwich. In the last year, in the Covid-19 year, there has been a resurgence of interest in Julian. Julian was one of the leading women in English writing, in theology, and also in spiritual and pastoral care of a community in chaos.

During her lifetime, Julian experienced two waves of the Black Death in England, which historians estimate to have killed 40-60% of the population in the first wave and 20% of the population during the second wave.

Julian perceived that “glory comes through suffering, in particular the suffering of Christ, and not in spite of it.” And she knew and heard a lot of suffering, death and grief.

We too have experienced a time of lockdowns. We have been isolated geographically from people we love. The current scale of the tragedy and unfolding crisis in India is overwhelming. This pandemic is far from over. Our borders are tentatively open to some. Yet we as a country remain in isolation.

I think this is similar for the church.

Rev Monique Stone, Rector of Julian of Norwich Church in Ottawa asks - How is it that we in our time...are in this liminal space of isolation, [which] asks us to look into our structures of church, and yet also look out into and receive what’s going on in the world around us?

It was through her own prayerful solitude that Julian experienced her visions and developed her theology. Among the most famous of her visions is seeing “a tiny thing” in the palm of her hand “the size of a hazelnut,” which God told her represented all of creation and God’s presence in everything.

Sometimes the only thing that people can remember about Julian is that Christ told her in a vision: “All shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.” It was a profound message then and it remains a profound message now.

As we think about our COVID world.... There’s a bigger story that we’re participating in.”

Today’s gospel stresses that love, is expressed in affection and modelled by the relationship between God and Jesus.

That *agape* love is transformed into a joyous existence, bearing good fruits and dwelling in a loving community of friends. It also talks of community which is built as the body of Christ, the living organism. *Koinonia* is present in the life of Jesus, the Spirit and the Creator. It is a hope of glory and eternal life in a coming realm manifested here and now in praxis of solidarity in suffering, and in sharing spiritual gifts.

It leads to a reconciling dimension confronting conflicting – and even violent – relationships and situations. Love becomes a transforming power more than a superficial and emotional power.

In our Covid-19 world inequity has been highlighted. The growing gap between rich and poor, between first world and developing nations is a chasm. Tensions and protests erupt when basic health care is not available, or only available for those who can afford it. Inequity has become more pronounced in Aotearoa too. Our whole society has a lot to answer for by not asking vital questions and facing with courage the truth that emerges in this time of crisis. Systemic poverty, cycles of abuse, lost opportunities for education. It is all of our responsibility.

It is not just the responsibility of whichever flavour of government is in power at the time, to act in humane and compassionate ways to address the social inequities which have been highlighted by Covid-19 in our country and around the world. The responsibility lies within each and every one of us. We need strong leadership within the church and the community to show us a way forward. A way of compassion and caring.

All will be well and all will be well, and every manner of thing will be well. Julian's vision is comforting but her writing seeks active responses not passivity.

The reading we heard from Acts is a story about the Holy Spirit and how the Spirit's purposes are accomplished in spite of boundaries constructed by humans. The Holy Spirit was working a powerful transformation among the early Christians.

Their perspective of who was 'in' and who was 'out' was being changed not by their own doing, but by the intervention of the Holy Spirit.

The boundaries 'of the inner circle' kept widening to the point that the assumed boundaries were no longer legitimate. Peter's own utterance that God shows no partiality is a radical departure from his own definitions of what or who is clean and unclean.

Today's reading from Acts shows the extravagance of the Holy Spirit and the wideness of God's grace. This story demonstrates that the Spirit is not bound by the limitations that even faithful believers have. The Spirit is not poured out only on the Gentiles, it is given to the Jewish Christians enabling them to see with new eyes, and capture a new vision of, the realm of God.

Neither society or the church has overcome racism, sexism, classism, ageism, nationalism, hetero-sexism and other prejudices. We continue both intentionally and unintentionally to

propagate segregation in many forms perpetuating the invisible boundaries of “us” and “them”.

Peter and those gathered were not able to cross boundaries on their own. But the outpouring of the Holy Spirit empowered each of them to move from their segregated places. The Holy Spirit broke the barriers and propelled the witness of the resurrection beyond the boundaries of Jerusalem and Galilee. We need to continue to listen to the voice of Julian from the past, and to hear the voices of visionaries in the present, we continue need to hear and respond to voices from the margins. Sometimes the Holy Spirit has a hard time getting thorough our stubborn desire to stay the way we are.

Julian ruffled many feathers in her time. She had to be careful because she went against a lot of church doctrine.

On this Mother’s Day let us reflect too on Julian’s feminine imagery for God.

“The human mother can suckle the child with her milk. But our beloved Mother Jesus can feed us with himself. This is what he does when he tenderly and graciously offers us the blessed sacrament, which is the precious food of true life.”

Julian continues in her writing to say that

“Christ the Mother is entwined with the wholeness of life which includes all the sacraments, all the virtues, all the virtues of the word-made-flesh, all the goodness that holy church ordains for our benefit. The human mother can tenderly lay the child on her breast, but our tender Mother Jesus can lead us directly into his own tender breast through his sweet broken-open side. Here, he reveals a glimpse of the godhead and some of the joys of paradise with the implicit promise of eternal bliss.”

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in me.

Love is a verb, a doing word.

Go and bear fruit, fruit that will last.