

Time on our hands

In the writing *"The Imitation of Christ"*, assumed to be by Thomas A Kempis (but there are others who have been suggested) in Book 2 he writes:

"rest in the passion of Christ, and love to dwell within his sacred wounds."

Our next person of prayer was given a vision of the passion of Christ and allowed to dwell within his sacred wounds and became the first woman to write a book in the English language of her day, Julian of Norwich. She was a recluse who lived in an anchorage on the side of St Julian's Church in Norwich. Here begins many of the "known unknowns" about Julian. Was Julian her real name or was she named after the church where she lived? We know nothing really about her early life, was she married, did she have children, why did she become the anchoress at St Julian's? So many questions with as many unknowns or speculations about her life. Then there are questions about her book *"The Revelations of Divine Love"*. We know from the book itself why she wrote it, but how did it survive? It is clearly written by someone who has meditated long and hard on the revelations she was privileged to receive, but some of her thought would have been challenging to the orthodox theologians at the time. Tracing the history of the book has been done beautifully by the BBC in a documentary, "The Search for the Lost Manuscript". It still leaves many questions unanswered, but it may inspire some to go and read the book.

Julian was given her revelations when she was desperately ill during the plague that hit Norwich in the mid 14th Century. She was deeply religious and asked God for three gifts:

"The first was recollection of the Passion. The second was a physical sickness at the young age of thirty. The third was to receive three wounds as God's gift."

For the first, she wanted to see with her own eyes the passion of Christ, to have been there with Mary Magdalene (on whose Saint's Day I am writing) and the others who loved him, that she could understand better the physical pains of Jesus, the compassion of Our Lady and all those who loved him. She wanted to be there with them and to have suffered with them.

The second, the gift of physical illness, which seems very strange. She wanted it to be to the point of death so that she could experience the rites of the Church given to someone on the point of death. She wanted it to the point of death but not to die so that she could be drawn close to God through his mercy and afterwards live a more consecrated life to the glory of God. She saw it as an advantage in her Christian journey as she thought she would not live long anyway. She said in prayer:

"Lord you know what I want, if it is your will let me have it... but if it is not your will, good Lord, do not be angry for I want nothing that is not your will."

The third gift was to receive three wounds, the wound of true contrition, the wound of natural compassion, and the wound of unshakable longing for God.

So Julian begins her story in a book that has inspired so many.