

St. Mary Magdalen, Oxford

5th Sunday of Easter 2020

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The month of May is commonly celebrated among Catholic Christians as the month of Mary. Longstanding tradition encourages special devotions to the Mother of our Lord throughout the month. But as Christians in this country we might also say that May gives us a bumper crop of our own domestic saints and holy souls.

If we look at the saints days celebrated in *Common Worship* we find all the English saints and martyrs of the Reformation on 4 May (and there is an ecumenical memorial to them all fairly recently installed in our University church); Julian of Norwich (14th C anchoress and spiritual writer) on 8 May, Dunstan (10th C Archbishop of Canterbury and restorer of monastic life) on 19 May, Alcuin of York (one of the greatest western scholars of the 9th C) on 20 May, John and Charles Wesley on 24 May, the Venerable Bede (8th C monk and historian) on 25 May, Augustine, first Archbishop of Canterbury on 26 May, and Josephine Butler (prominent 19th C social reformer) on 30 May. At a time when our country, like so many others, is gripped by a crisis of dimensions and implications unseen in our lifetimes, it is helpful to remember their constancy in faith, in good times and in bad, and their witness to the unchanging love of God. Their “bad times” were worse than anything we have experienced. Bede as a young boy in the 7th C survived an outbreak of plague in Jarrow which killed most of the monks in his monastery. Julian wrote in the 14th C., and as a child lived through the infamous Black Death, a plague pandemic which probably killed 40% to 50% of Europe’s population. With them in mind we could well use a modern collect which I admit is rather a favourite of mine!

God, whom the glorious company of the redeemed adore, assembled from all times and places of your dominion: we praise you for the saints of our own land and for the many lamps their holiness has lit; and we pray that we also may be numbered at last with those who have done your will and declared your righteousness; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

But it is to the Lady Julian of Norwich that I would like to turn briefly. Most of you will know something of her I am sure. She lived perhaps all her life in Norwich, but otherwise we know nothing about her family life, her origins or education. As a young woman she became so seriously ill that she was given the last rites. But in this crisis she received a number of mystical visions or showings which she later wrote down, in a longer and a shorter version. This is the first surviving work to be written in English by a woman. At some stage, probably after this experience, she became an anchoress – committed to a type of religious life more isolated and confined even than that of a hermit. Anchoresses were literally walled up into cells attached to a church, and at the time of their incarceration the Office the Dead was said to show that they were now dead to the world. Some outside contacts remained - attending Mass and receiving Communion through a squint hole into the church, and the services of at least one maid to bring food etc. Julian we know also acted as a spiritual director and advisor to those who came to seek her out. (Other sources suggest that anchoresses were allowed to have a cat!) So Julian lived in the most extreme form of lockdown. Her *Revelations of Divine Love* would make some good reading at this time of social isolation.

At the heart of the revelations Julian received was assurance of the constant outpouring love of God to humanity, shown in the Passion of the Lord. She was daring (though not alone) in likening God to our Mother as well as our Father, caring for beloved children. People have often stripped out particular quotations from her writing to help their own spiritual lives. For example, there is the famous passage about the hazelnut which Julian sees and by it understands that it is a symbol of all creation that God created, loves and sustains; and the Lord's saying that all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well. Underlying it all is a sense of the passionate love of God for human kind – he desires us and we find our true selves in him, we living in him and he in us.

Lockdown for us as for Julian strips away so much of our normal lives – secular and spiritual (if one can make such a distinction). Our props and disguises, our masks, diversions and status; for some our work; and even the presence of family and friends - all are limited or removed. And we are left with the question, Who are we before God? For Julian there was no doubt about the answer.

This was one of the questions Jesus tried to help his friends with in the days before his passion and death, as we hear in our gospel reading for today. A time of darkness, fear, betrayal and apparent abandonment by God and by their friend and teacher was imminent. In the passage just before our reading the author had written the haunting words on the departure of Judas from the shared table, “And it was night”. But Jesus assures them that they are his friends, beloved by him and his Father, and that they must trust that he will prepare a place for them in his Father’s house. These places for his friends are translated variously – as mansions/ rooms/ dwelling places. The Greek word is close kin to the verb often used by the author for dwelling/abiding; it is used soon after in the metaphor of Christ as the true vine. “Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.” (John 15:4) Jesus urges them (and us) that our true identity, our home-coming, is as beloved friends and children. We are called to dwell in him and he promises that he will dwell in us. This will be elaborated in our gospel for next Sunday with the promise of the Comforter. “On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.” (John 14:20)

Despite Jesus’ exhortation not to be troubled but to trust, now as so often the disciples were confused – even though they had been so closely in his company for so long. It is the down-to-earth Thomas who challenges Jesus – we don’t know where you are going so how can we know the way. This elicits one of the great I Am sayings which the writer of the gospel puts into the mouth of Jesus. I Am – so reminiscent of the ancient Jewish sense of the divine – the Way. But in what sense? He is the way to the truth about ourselves and about God– just as the Lady Julian put it in a rather different idiom and culture. In Christ we find who we really are because we find we are greatly beloved of God, called to abide in him. Christ is the way, the truth and the life because he is the very image of God, the one who demonstrates God’s very nature.

Our calling is to keep close to Christ, to abide in him. He is our only true identity and security. Here is an echo of last Sunday’s gospel about Christ as the Good Shepherd. The shepherd of Jesus’ day went before his sheep in his own person walking the way and showing a safe path, leading them to life, even at the cost of his own life, rather

than leaving them to death as a frightened hired hand might in the face of danger. We might do well in these uncertain times to remember the words of a modern hymn, “Be not afraid, I go before you.” Or as the Lady Julian wrote of her 13th Revelation, the Lord told her that “all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.”

Amen