



Last week I spent a few days in Norfolk for the annual gathering of the Companions of Julian of Norwich of which I am one. We stayed next door to the little church of St Julian's where, back in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, a woman whom we now know by the same name lived a simple life of prayer. But we know tantalisingly little else about her. However, we know something of her way of life because we know the Ancrene Riwe which she followed. This sets out how an anchorite would eat, sleep, work and pray, her days balanced with the psalms and prayers of the Church, watching Mass through one little window in her cell just by the altar, then doing chores, reading, and keeping silence, and reflecting.

It's her way of life that inspires us as Companions, translating it into our own individual present-day circumstances. So, for me, my 'cell' is my whole life, so to speak, the particular boundaries of my existence. Many of those I can choose for myself, but some are set for me. Yet even within the limitations I would most fear being imposed I believe I'll be able to find a way to live which is to my good and for the good of others – the 'art of the possible!' Like Julian, my days are framed by the psalms and prayers of the church, given the duty as a priest in the Church of England to pray daily the offices of Morning and Evening Prayer. Silence is a key feature for me as well: trying to start each day with time for the silence of looking and waiting and wondering. This quietness is the space allowed for when we look to the full truth and refrain from filling it with quick assertions about what we do or do not believe, letting it be, if you like, a 'pregnant silence'. There's a spiritual revolution occurring in our society, and it may be that what the Church has most importantly to offer in it is just space, the readiness to let there be this full, peaceful, silence in which the questions can be asked more and more deeply. Archbishop Justin Welby gave a wonderfully insightful address at General Synod last week. "We live in a time of revolutions", he said:

"We are called by God to respond radically and imaginatively to new contexts – contexts that are set up by revolutions.... 59% of the population called themselves Christian at the last census, with 25% saying that they had no faith. But the YouGov poll, a couple of weeks back, was the reverse, almost exactly, for those under 25. If we are not shaken by that, we are not listening."

When people – young people especially – are no longer convinced by the old certainties, the most helpful response is not to shout out those supposed certainties even louder!

Like Julian we have a window onto Jesus in the regular celebration of the Eucharist. Mass must have been at the centre of her daily life of prayer, and it can centre ours too. We just need to be careful not to let it be routinized so that we become addicted to its ritual. To be a community of prayer here is really perhaps our particular vocation for St Nicolas' church: a holy space in which to ask the deeper questions, and to regain some inner equilibrium. Archbishop Justin spoke about the need to reimagine ministry in the Church and he said:

For that reimagination to be more than surface deep, we need a renewal of prayer... It has been said that we can imagine only what is already in our minds as a possibility; and it is in prayer, individually and together, that God puts into our minds new possibilities of what the Church can be.

Then, as well as this silence for receptiveness, for me there's a silence for intercession. In this I consciously try to hold in my heart from day to day those I should be caring about, but whose needs I can't really put into words. Finally, there's a silence of mindfulness. And this is hardly 'praying' at all, but just silent because it's a sense of God's all-inclusive love as the transparent, omnipresent depth to all experience. At the end of the day – actually it's usually while I'm doing the washing-up – I become aware of this good silence in which then to rest all night.

Well, with the window onto the altar Julian probably had another one onto the busy street outside so as to be available for anyone passing by who needed a patient, listening ear to pour out their troubles. And in that, again I identify with Julian, sensing that just being ready and available to listen is often the most important ministry.

The 14<sup>th</sup> century was, for sure, a long time ago! But staying in the actual location where Julian lived helps us to connect with her. And her way of life helps us Companions to see how *we* might connect with God, albeit in this very different world today. For, most importantly, Julian received some special personal insights into the nature of God. The 14<sup>th</sup> century was a terrible time to live through: there was the Peasants Revolt, the Forty Years War with France, and worst of all, the Black Death in which at least a third of the whole population of Europe died. Norwich itself was decimated – it's hard to fully imagine the horrors. There's some evidence that people were angry with God, and many must have felt let down by the Church. But, in the midst of all this, Julian received her burning

insights into the unconditional love that God enfolds us all in: a love that will ever hold us, and in which we can now trust even where we do not understand. These *Revelations of Divine Love* pierce radically to the heart of the gospel: to a total and absolute compassion and commitment to our welfare. This is an announcement that much of the world has never really heard – and to which we ourselves have probably still not yet been fully converted. Perhaps this is where evangelism has to start in 2013 – with me and you! So, 'All shall be well, all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well'. Julian's 14<sup>th</sup> century revelations point out the way for us now to connect deeply with God in all the anxieties and real threats and serious questionings of our times.

'Connect', as you know, is the key word the PCC used when framing our mission-values. We didn't want to feel that St Nicolas' was disconnected from the realities of the modern world – nor from the local community which, when we thought about it, we realised we are here as a church to *serve*. And I believe we've already made some progress in those ways. Emma's helping us through MESSY CHURCH, and slowly our attitudes are changing. It's going to be a long process to become a more *engaged* church community, though we can already see that it's the only good way forward. But, at the heart of it all, how connected *do* we feel *with God*? The speed of modern life doesn't help, nor living in an often very sceptical environment. Yet many people (and many who never come to any church) sense the mystery of God, and the need in themselves to connect more deeply. Yet, how? We're no different. Being involved in church life can even make it harder when it wraps you up in all sorts of secondary issues! How Julian coped in the terrible circumstances of the 14<sup>th</sup> century might help us. I mean, how she had a definite way of life.

Last week we remembered St Benedict. Even further back in history he set up one of the early communities of monks. The way he did that was to look at the sort of Rule other communities regulated themselves by, and to collect up their best bits, all in the light of his own experience, to form a Way of Life that Benedictine brothers and sisters still follow today. It isn't too hard, and it is practical, and it contains a lot of wisdom. What he did for his monks was to pinpoint the things that would help them to connect with God, and then to make sure that they could have space for them in the shaping of their daily lives. You and I might not want to follow the Rule of St Benedict exactly, and much as you love St Nicolas' you probably wouldn't want to live in a cell attached to it! But looking for a pattern might be good. And some of the same priorities that Benedict and Julian found helpful might even work for you too. Things like opening our hearts fully to the sort of worship we're involved in now, and then sustaining that in a rhythm of daily prayer. It doesn't need to be too churchy either, because we just have to be ourselves: I have to be my truest self, and you need to be just more fully yourself. But maybe it would be good if our way of life did prioritise having an open mind for learning, and for everything to fit together in a balance that made it holistic?

It's certainly good that we now have our mission-values, but only if we can all connect with them. And it helps that we have a Mission Action Plan – but what makes it real is when all of us can connect with its objectives in the way we are individually living. And, of course, as I said, before all that we need to feel that we know how to connect with God. So I invite you each to consider developing a personal Way of Life this summer.

But what sort of a *person* are you? What do people meet when they meet you? I might be very disciplined in my prayer-life, but am I kind and gentle? In the gospel reading this morning a Samaritan asks Jesus what was perhaps a serious personal question: how can I connect with what God really wants? And the parable of the Good Samaritan gave him the answer. God has a compassionate heart. And so we need likewise to be, *there's* our Way of Life.

*Father Andrew*