

JUST A CHESTNUT FLOWER

It was a little thing, a hazelnut, that revealed the nature of God to Julian of Norwich as she meditated in lockdown for over twenty years in her little anchoress' cell.

On May 8th 1373 Julian just into her thirties was struck down by a mystery illness. It wasn't the familiar plague that ravaged mediaeval times. It did strike indiscriminately and few survived its coming. It was the Covid-19 of her day! It's coming threatened to be terminal and for some days the young woman hovered between life and death. No preparations had been made for her sudden collapse – there was no science that could define her illness and offer any vaccine, no ventilator to aid her suffering, no skilled professionals equipped with PPE to protect those who cared for her, no isolation or social distancing to shield her. But she was one of the fortunate ones and as she slowly recovered she began to speak of what she had experienced –not the experience of the illness itself but of sixteen visions revealing to her aspects of the love of God.

Following her recovery Julian spent the next twenty years of her life in self-imposed lockdown in an anchoress's cell attached to St. Julian's Church in Norwich, pondering the meaning of her visions and writing down her conclusions in what was the first book written by a woman in English "The Revelations of Divine Love". Julian of Norwich's book is short – only around 150 pages but it can be reduced to three statements of four words each. These three statements sum

up what Julian wrote in her book and what she taught to the many folk who flocked to her cell to hear her teaching, standing outside her little window on the world and pondering every word.

The three statements were “*Love was His meaning*” “*With pity not blame*” and “*All shall be well*”. The first proclaimed her conviction that there is no room for any ifs or buts – love is the heart of God’s activity, love defines what God is and what God does and it is the greatest reality in our lives – the knowledge that we are loved. The second proclaimed that even though we sin against God, yet He always looks at us with mercy not with condemnation and that frees our spirits to relax into His joy, knowing His unconditional forgiveness. The third proclaimed that nothing can overcome the love and the mercy of God so that we can be full of hope knowing that all shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well.

For Julian of Norwich the hazel-nut summed it all up. She writes of a vision of a hazelnut. *He showed me a little thing – the size of a hazelnut, in the palm of my hand, and it was as round as a ball. I looked at it with my mind’s eye and I thought “what can this be?” I marvelled that it could last for I thought it could have crumbled to nothing, it was so small. In this little thing I saw three truths – the first is that God made it, the second is that God loves it, the third is that God looks after it.*



The little thing that speaks to me through our lockdown is a chestnut flower. It too is a little thing, just a chestnut flower, but God made it in all its complicated beauty and delicate colouring that I hadn't really seen before – it was just a candle on a tree! God loves it as it hangs precariously amongst thousands of neighbours on the mighty majestic chestnut tree whose branches gently sway in the wind or bend to its force. God cares for it in rain and sunshine – it is not going anywhere for it is in lockdown on the tree, but it will survive and in a few months become that lovely shiny conker that small boys love and that carries the life of the tree into new adventures.

Sometime we shall emerge from lockdown into a changed world with a new normality. During lockdown people have been finding all sorts of things to occupy themselves – reading, knitting, jigsaw puzzles, gardening, curling on the kitchen floor! TV has offered keep fit and language courses. The churches have streamed worship, Bible studies and countless other aids to people unable to come to church. But the main question is what will we bring out of the lockdown?

Have we been challenged by a little thing to meditate anew on God's relationship with us rather than on our relationship with God. For Julian it was a hazelnut for me it has been a chestnut flower....what has it been for you?

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