

Jesus: Saviour, Mother and Brother – Mothers’ Day and PWRDF Sunday, May 9, 2021

The Rev’d Canon Tom Patterson

“All things will be well, and all things will be well, and all manner of things will be well.” Is that how we feel these days? Well, Julian of Norwich, whom we commemorate today in our Anglican calendar, recorded those famous words after barely surviving three awful pandemics that killed half the population in the region. It was May 8, 1373. The latest pandemic was coming to an end, but she was horribly sick and on the edge of death. Then, beginning that day and ending the next – 648 years ago today – she experienced a series of powerful visions of Jesus, and in them she heard Jesus himself say those amazing words of unconditional grace to her and to the world: “All things will be well”.

Lady Julian wrote down a description of her visions shortly after that, and after 15 or 20 years of contemplation, wrote a fuller account of their interpretation and meaning.

Besides pandemics, the years of her life (like ours) were full of political and religious conflict. The Hundred Years War was raging. The Roman Catholic church was in schism under two Popes. Right in Norwich, a Peasants’ Revolt uprising was brutally crushed by the Bishop. The seeds of the Protestant Reformation were beginning to sprout among John Wycliffe and his followers, who were declared heretics. The Archbishop of Canterbury cracked down on English translation of the Bible and on women teaching. Julian had to be careful; in fact, there were attempts after her death to suppress her books.

And Julian knew more than most of us about staying at home. Whether before or after her visions - we don’t know - she became an “ anchoress”, spending the rest of her life sealed in a small dwelling attached to a church. It wasn’t total isolation. There was a little opening into the church where she could watch the Mass and receive Communion. There was a small window onto the street where she could speak with visitors, and she became known as a wise counsellor.

Watching worship through a little opening, but not being physically among the people. Talking with people through another little opening

and at a distance from them. Kind of sounds like watching church and talking with people on a screen – or from behind masks and two metres away. No touch. No hugs.

Julian wrote almost nothing about herself except for her illness and visions. But she certainly knew despair and pain. And she knew Jesus - oh, did she know Jesus! She knew the love that poured out of the Trinity. She knew deep joy even in suffering. There is great comfort and healing in her words, and a welcome corrective to old ideas of a judging and punishing God. She wrote:

“Our sweet Lord the Holy Spirit, who is the endless life that dwells in the soul, keeps us fully safe and makes peace in our soul and gives our soul rest.... In my [visions], I never saw anger, except on the part of human beings, and God forgives us for that.... [God] cannot be angry. It would be impossible.”

Julian’s writings are a rich and beautiful expression of Jesus’ words in today’s passage from the Gospel of John: “I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.” Jesus called the disciples his “friends”; Julian described Jesus as friendly, down to earth and accessible.

A recurring theme in Julian’s writings is oneness: that we are all one with God, with one another, and with creation. One of her most stunning visions is this:

“Then he showed me a small thing, the size of a hazelnut, nestled in the palm of my hand. It was round as a ball. I looked at it with the eyes of my understanding and thought, What can this be? And the answer came to me: It is all that is created. I was amazed that it could continue to exist. It seemed to me to be so little that it was on the verge of dissolving into nothingness. And then these words entered my understanding: It lasts, and will last forever, because God loves it. Everything that is has its being through the love of God. I saw three attributes of this small thing: the first is that God made it; the second is that he loves it; and the third that he sustains it. But what did I behold in that? Well, I saw the creator, the lover, and the sustainer.”

In these times of globalization, instant communication, and world-wide pandemic, we know how very small and inter-connected is this planet and all the life that it is in it. How do we, with Jesus, be its lovers and sustainers and co-creators?

Well, today is also the day that we remember and celebrate the work of the Primates' World Relief and Development Fund. It's our Canadian Anglican agency for sustainable development and relief. It works to help and empower the hungry, displaced, sick and oppressed. It's a response to Jesus' mandate, "I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last". It's a way to share God's love with our relations all around this little world.

PWRDF works with partners all over the world: churches and faith organizations, development and aid agencies, governments, medical and health care providers, educators, local community development groups, and women's groups. PWRDF staff identify the needs, make connections, and build relationships where we can help with donations, advocacy, prayers and raising awareness. PWRDF staff monitor the work – often directly on the ground – to ensure that the projects and programs we support are responsible and effective.

All this has continued throughout the pandemic, and thankfully so, because the needs have grown enormously. COVID-19 has displaced 2.6 million people around the world. Most of the progress in poverty reduction over the last 15 years has been undone. 60% of the world labour force – 80% in Africa - have lost employment due to COVID. Food systems - already damaged by climate change – have been disrupted.

Let me tell you about a few of the currently active projects and programs that PWRDF is supporting:

All Mothers and Children in Mozambique, Rwanda, Burundi, and Tanzania is working with communities to ensure physical distancing, access to clean water, soap and disinfectant, PPE for health workers and access to reliable health information. PWRDF received \$1.9 million from the Canadian government to help with this program.

The National Council of Churches of Kenya is providing people in the Kakuma refugee camp with medical equipment needed for COVID:

oximeters, blood pressure machines, non-contact thermometers, oxygen equipment, masks, reusable face shields, and disposable gowns.

UBINIG in Bangladesh is helping pregnant and breastfeeding mothers and vulnerable people who've lost income - farmers, garment workers, weavers, domestic workers, and traditional birth attendants. They provide soap, masks, food, and seed, and help farmers sell crops. PWRDF's grant to UBINIG supports 965 families.

In the Diocese of Edmonton, outreach to Indigenous communities continues, especially for women leaving abusive situations or trying to get off the streets. This includes work to implement a birth and doula service.

In South Sudan, a new project is providing COVID-19 support in the form of water, sanitation, hygiene services, and disease preparedness and prevention for over 500 internally displaced families.

In another new project in South Sudan, Finn Church Aid is working to reduce hunger, improve nutrition and build resilience for people affected by conflict and COVID-19. 2,800 households will be helped with cash, vegetable seed, tools, training, and technical support for 18 months. 70% will be women. 200 young women will have a three-month training program as well as tools, materials, and mentorship to help them establish small businesses.

In the rural community of Saint-Marc in Haiti, people distrust their government and are afraid to go to the hospital. PWRDF helped the Haitian Women's Federation of Saint-Marc to organize trained teams to provide education and awareness about COVID-19 prevention, and funded PPE for medical staff and hygiene products and medication for patients.

In Quebec, KOR Language and Cultural Centre produces award-winning puppet shows in the Mohawk language. PWRDF funded two episodes to inform and encourage the community during the pandemic.

ILSA in Colombia empowers women, but travel restrictions and social distancing prevented the necessary training, so PWRDF funded technology to livestream the workshops. That also freed up money to grow plants to restore fragile land. At the "virtual Outreach Lunch" at 12:30 today, you can see a short video from ILSA.

Recently, PWRDF has started fundraising for oxygen and other essential COVID supplies for India.

A great new program was initiated by Primate Linda Nicholls: the Vaccine Equity Fund. When you get vaccinated, you can pay it forward through the PWRDF website with a donation to buy vaccines for vulnerable communities that PWRDF and its partners serve.

A growing priority for PWRDF is “Creation Care / Climate Action”. More and more projects involve sustainable agriculture practices and land and water protection to reduce local pollution and improve food security, incomes, and health. We’ll have a short video about that, too.

Just as with COVID-19, global warming inflicts the worst harm on the poorest and most vulnerable populations. 10% of the richest populations globally are producing 50% of the green-house gases, the poorest 50% are generating 10%. PWRDF partners such as ILSA in Colombia are resisting and trying to remediate the damage Canadian companies and others are causing to extract resources or clear forests for industrial agriculture. Changing OUR ways of extracting, consuming, and polluting is far more critical than what can be done by poorer communities. It’s a matter of morality and justice. It’s a call for repentance!

This is why, at our “virtual Outreach Lunch” today, we will be focusing on climate change, not just the problems, but also the hopeful possibilities for going new, better, and more loving ways. *All things will be well, and all things will be well, and all manner of things will be well.*

There are many ways we can support the work of PWRDF. You can donate on-line or by cheque directly to PWRDF or through St. James for specific projects, programs, or emergency appeals. I sometimes do that – as with the Vaccine Equity Fund – but mostly I prefer to make a general donation and let the knowledgeable people at PWRDF identify where the greatest needs are. St. James receives these donations by e-transfer, cheque or pre-authorized payment, and forwards the accumulated parishioner donations to PWRDF in Huron (formerly the Huron Hunger Fund). I find the easiest way is a monthly pre-authorized payment through St. James.

One thing that stands out in the PWRDF stories is how centrally important women are to imagining, inspiring, initiating, and delivering so many of the programs and projects. Empowering women in vulnerable communities, supporting women's organizations, and working for the health and security of mothers and children are critical to driving positive, healthy change everywhere. This really is something to uphold and to celebrate today on Mothers' Day!

It is also a sign and expression of something revealed to the wonderful Julian of Norwich in her visions, a recurring teaching throughout her writings. When she speaks of God, she usually says "he", but often she also refers to "God the Mother" and "Mother Jesus". She called Jesus, "our Mother, our Brother, and our Redeemer". This is captured in our Collect for Julian of Norwich in our Book of Alternative Services, with which I will close:

Source and Partner of the eternal Word, who brought to birth in the Lady Julian many visions of your nurturing and sustaining love, move our hearts we pray, to seek your will above all things, that we may know the joy of your gifts and embrace the gift that is simply yourself; through Jesus Christ, our Saviour, Brother, and Mother, who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen