

**“Tumultuous Times”****(Mark 13.1-11)****Grant Bullen*****Julian of Norwich***

On the 8<sup>th</sup> of May 1373, an English woman, who we know as Julian of Norwich, was desperately ill... and while teetering on the edge of death, received a series of remarkable visions... revelations of Christ that she called ‘*shewings*’. Unexpectedly she recovered, and lived the rest of her life as an anchoress, a sort of ‘hermit-nun’, in a cell attached to St Julian’s Church, Norwich... Where she spent her days meditating and writing on the insight into God she’d been given. She’s regarded as **the** great woman mystic of the English church.

Best known of all her words are these...

*“... but all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.”*

*“All shall be well...”*

Words often used, even in general conversation... nothing religious... but generally misunderstood.

For it’s not a naïve optimism... not a denial of the reality of suffering written from a privileged place of safety. For Julian lived in tumultuous times – repeated bouts of the Black Death (that killed half the population of Norwich), in an era of almost continual war<sup>1</sup> and social discord in England<sup>2</sup>. There are biographical hints that she may well have lost husband and children in the plague... not an unusual occurrence for a woman of her time...<sup>3</sup> This is not a vague, “*She’ll be right...*”

*“All shall be well...”* is rather a deep conviction of faith, forged in the *midst* of turbulence, loss and pain... And it’s a very different perception of GOD and the nature of reality, from our 21<sup>st</sup> century view. (It’s a voice so different, it sounds as if it’s not just from another time but another planet.)

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<sup>1</sup> The *Hundred Years War* between France and England.

<sup>2</sup> Including the *Peasant’s Revolt*.

<sup>3</sup> And it’s most likely the plague that almost killed her.

According to Julian, the reality is, that we are *entirely* dependent on GOD... even for our next breath. There is no separate independent 'me'. I am not in charge of my own life and destiny. We are not in charge of what's going to happen in our world. (*It sounds like blasphemy to our ears.*)

For Julian, the good news is that the essence of GOD is LOVE... The alpha and omega of GOD is LOVE... and in *this*, we are held and carried, no matter what storm rages... no matter what pain and loss we go through. This LOVE will inevitably bring all creation to fulfilment...

For *this* reason – and no other – “*All shall be well...*”... though it is a mystery we'll never be able to comprehend, and the path leads through great turbulence.

We can trust ourselves to this faith, but we can never master it.

### ***Destruction of the Temple***

In today's Gospel, the disciples, simple rural folk from Galilee, are overwhelmed at seeing the Temple in Jerusalem. *‘Wow, look at this will you!’*

The temple built by Herod the Great was impressive – covered with plates of gold that shone in the sun; huge stones... so white, that from a distance it looked like a mountain covered with snow.<sup>4</sup>

But Jesus is unimpressed... “*Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.*”

And this does come to pass... the Temple is destroyed by the Romans just 40 years later. (70CE)

Did Jesus, as the Christ, have inside knowledge of the future?<sup>5</sup>

Or was this more a savvy prediction, based on what he saw happening in Jewish political life in the inflammable context of Imperial rule?

Or... was it a bigger reflection on the nature of reality... not just tied to this time and place, but for all time? That all human pretension, regardless of its seeming power and magnificence, is transient... temporary... passing into decay... ending in ultimate ruin.

I assume it's the last of these options... based on what follows next...

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<sup>4</sup> Josephus. “*War*”, V,v,6

<sup>5</sup> If so, it had its limits as the Temple was burned down, not pulled down.

## **Turbulence**

Disturbed by what Jesus says, the disciples come to him later in private... seeking something approaching *certainty*. They assume the destruction of the Temple will be part of a bigger calamity – perhaps the *end of time* (?) – and they want to know ‘*when*’... (as in, ‘*Give us a date*’)... and ‘*how will we know?*’ What will be the sign that this is about to happen?

Jesus gives them neither...

Instead he says, predicting the ‘*end of time*’ is a game for fools and charlatans – 2,000 years of Christian history proves that true!

But more than that... Jesus says that *turbulence* is a sign of nothing more than business as usual... nothing but the passage of life itself. Wars, revolutions, social collapse... earthquakes, floods, fires and famine – expect them all, because that’s how history unfolds, and that’s how life is.<sup>6</sup>

Tumultuous times come and go in human history... and in the evolution of the planet itself.

We’re always tempted to see our own times as *unprecedented* in terms of both chaos and threat, but I’m not sure if the data actually supports that. Reading history gives one a different perspective.

Regardless... comfortable peaceful stability *is* wonderful... but so rare and short-lived, that it’s hard to see it as the norm. If we *are* blessed to experience patches of it, then we should know it’s passing by... and that it can’t be held onto, no matter how hard we try.

I doubt if Jesus’ words did much to alleviate the disciples’ disturbance.

How is it for us 2,000 years on?

## **Generalised Anxiety**

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<sup>6</sup> There is this sentence about “*This is but the beginning of the birth pangs*”, that **might** suggest such tumult is actually **how** life comes to its ultimate fulfilment... but I’ll leave that for another time.

I think our society lives with generalised anxiety – exploited and amplified by the media, and by manipulative power mongers... (the charlatans of our age) – because we perceive that we live in troubled times. In fact, times so troubled, that it's easy to believe they signal the end of everything we know and value.

We live in the ruins of many temples – institutions, (like the Church), that we've trusted and relied upon, are falling-down all around us.

We live in the horrible global suffering of numerous wars and conflicts... and political/social discord in many countries.<sup>7</sup>

And that's before we speak of climate change and the rolling thunder of frightening fires, storms, famines etc... (you can fill out the list yourself).<sup>8</sup>

It's not surprising we're anxious... and like the disciples, we would very much like Christ to give us some comforting certainty. (Please!)

We live in a society convinced that we are independent separate beings... and that it's all up to us. *'Somehow, we've got to get our act together and sort this out.'* It is a belief in human potency writ large in our political and social life. (In last week's US election, *"Trump will fix it"* said the election slogan of the victorious team.)

And many of us experience a similar thing in our personal lives. I'm always afraid of the next disaster that will come to the people I love... because pain and suffering is inevitable. And I was taught... that if I just tried hard enough... I could fix it all.

But history and life experience, gives no confidence in this.

We don't seem to be able to *permanently* fix anything much at all – not anything which really matters anyway.

If it is up to us... then we have every reason to be anxious.

### ***Faith In Tumultuous Times***

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<sup>7</sup> And then our American cousins frighten us by voting in a manner totally inexplicable to many Australians.

<sup>8</sup> And I'm studiously avoiding any mention of Artificial Intelligence!

Julian however, speaking to us from tumultuous times... inspired by the revelation of Christ, in harmony with her fellow mystics... Julian said, that it's not up to us at all. In fact, we *can't* fix anything. We can't hold onto anything... save anything... protect anything.

Everything is passing... held and carried in Divine Love. That's reality!

All we can do, is respond in love to the call of LOVE... living in compassionate integrity with ourselves, each other and all creation.

LOVE will carry us to whatever that ultimate fulfilment intended by the Creator is. We don't know *how, what* or *when* that is... but we don't need to... because we're not in charge.

Jim Finley, says

that our faith is grounded in the absolute love of GOD...

that protects us from nothing,

(that protects us from nothing)

even as it inexplicably sustains us in all things,

grounding us to face all things with courage and tenderness.

I'm not sure such a faith was what the disciples were looking for when they pressed Jesus for an answer in today's gospel. I think they were looking for much more than that.

And I hear the same challenge today... *"Is such a faith sufficient for me?"*

Can I give myself to a faith such as this?