

## Sermon – Lent 2 (Year A)

1 March 2026 Derby Cathedral

Genesis 12.1-4a Psalm 121 Romans 4.1-5, 13-17 John 3.1-17

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Life was hard in England in the middle of the fourteenth century. As Thomas Hobbes would put it three hundred years later, life was “nasty, brutish and short.” The 50-year reign of Edward III was marked by a constant stream of military campaigns including the start of the Hundred Years War. About 90% of the population were peasants working virtually every daylight hour, and only half of those born reached the then adult age of twelve. The early part of the century saw a great famine, and just when life could not get worse along comes what we know as the Black Death. Between 1346 and 1352 between a third and half of the population of England died of bubonic plague. After the death of Edward, the social and economic misery, and the introduction of a poll tax, led to the Peasants Revolt of 1381. Fourteenth century England was a grim place.

In the midst of all this calamity we find a remarkable woman in the city of Norwich. She had been born in 1342 but in May 1373 when she was “thirty and a half years old” she became very ill. She and those with her thought she was about to die. She then received fifteen visions on the Holy Trinity and the Passion of Jesus. The following night she received a further vision. She recovered and wrote an account of the *Shewings* or revelations she had received. Shortly afterwards she started living a solitary life in a cell attached to St Julian’s Church in Norwich. From there she gets the name Julian by which we know her. Her cell had a small window on one side so that she could observe Mass and receive the sacrament, and another on the opposite side so that visitors or passers-by could talk to her. Over the years she meditated on her *Shewings* and wrote a longer text which sits alongside the shorter. Her book is the oldest known book by a woman in the English language, and remains one of the most important.

Julian of Norwich is focussed on the love of God for the world. In her *Shewings* she tells us that there is no wrath in God, that God does not blame us for our sins, that Christ redeems our whole human nature, and that God rejoices to be our father and rejoices to be our mother.

Time and time again and in different ways Julian teaches us that “God so loved the world.” Despite the misery of the world around her and contrary to the gloomy theology of her day Julian proclaims the infinite and unimaginable love of God. In the final chapter she writes, “And from the time it was revealed, I desired many times to know in what was our Lord’s meaning. And fifteen years after and more, I was answered in spiritual understanding, and it was said: What, do you wish to know your Lord’s meaning in this thing? Know it well, love was his meaning. Who reveals it to you? Love. What did he reveal to you? Love. Why does he reveal it to you? For love.” (*Shewings*, chapter 86).

We think we live in hard times, but not compared to Julian, and we need to hear her teaching. There are no rose-tinted glasses here. And of course, Nicodemus lived in hard times too and would have rejoiced in her message. But he did get to quiz Jesus!

Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a group of lay Jews that tried to live by the Law despite the impact of both exile and gentile occupation of their land. They worked on interpreting the Law for their own time and in many ways deserve respect for their commitment to preserving the faith. But because the evangelists often set them up as foils for Jesus’ teaching we tend to view them more negatively than is fair.

Nicodemus, however, is presented in a more favourable light by John. He is mentioned three times; in the encounter we have just heard, in chapter 7 where he counsels against judging Jesus without a hearing, and finally, when he assists Joseph of Arimathea in burying Jesus.

There is nothing in the discussion to suggest that Nicodemus is being anything less than genuine, but he is struggling to accept the radical generosity of God’s love. Jesus spells it out, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.” God does not so love a select group or a chosen few, but the world. Nicodemus knows the foibles of himself and the people around him and finds it hard to believe in such generous love. Yes, those who are strictly faithful to the Law might be accepted by God, but that is not many.

We heard in Genesis that Abram was called that “all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” In the epistle Paul makes it clear that we do not receive the promises of God through works or any kind of just deserts, but through faith. How hard it can be for us to accept this, and our sense of guilt throws up all kinds of hesitancy and one barrier after another. And what a disaster this is. It mars our relationship with God

and our relationship with those around us. Because we see things as being based on merit we throw up barriers around what we regard as precious to make sure others cannot have a share. Our individual and our collective lives become meanspirited, grasping and exclusive. Like Gollum in JRR Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* we are distorted by protecting "my precious."

By contrast God's love is generous beyond measure and beyond our imagining. It is radically inclusive and draws in all sorts and conditions of children, women and men. "God so loved the world." This should gladden us every day, and it should challenge us every day. It is good news beyond measure but it should encourage us too to be generous in love and inclusive in how we lead our lives as individuals, as church, as citizens. How different this is from what we see around us in our world today.

Last Friday we celebrated the English priest and poet George Herbert remembered most for hymns such as *Let all the world in every corner sing*, *Teach me, my God and King*, and *King of Glory, King of Peace*. He died in 1633 and his collection of poems *The Temple* was published in the same year. The final poem, *Love*, wonderfully captures the infinite love and generous inclusiveness of God which accepts us as we are and lavishes us with goodness. Like Julian of Norwich, George Herbert recognises the extraordinary love of God and urges us to get over ourselves and embrace it. This Lent, let us deeply embrace God's love for us and for all the world.

### **Love** (by George Herbert)

Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,  
guilty of dust and sin.  
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack  
from my first entrance in,  
drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,  
if I lacked anything.

A guest, I answered, worthy to be here:  
Love said, You shall be he.  
I the unkind, ungrateful? Ah, my dear,  
I cannot look on thee.  
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,  
Who made the eyes but I?

Truth, Lord, but I have marred them: let my shame  
Go where it doth deserve.  
And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame?  
My dear, then I will serve.  
You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:  
So I did sit and eat.