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Christ Church West Wimbledon
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“Advent Sunday”

ADVENT SUNDAY

One of the most significant pieces of furniture in any church in my view is the votive candle stand, giving worshippers and visitors alike the opportunity to say their prayers and to light a candle in peace and quiet. I imagine that Southwark Cathedral will be full today as people come to terms with yet another terrorist attack at London Bridge and need a safe space in which to pray and light a candle. We all need places where we can feel safe, feel a sense of calm, of quiet. I often try to find some quiet space when I am visiting somewhere. If ever I have the misfortune to be in Oxford Circus in London (!), I love to walk through the side streets to the magnificent peace and beauty of All Saints Church in Margaret Street – a stunning church, always open. But probably my favourite quiet spot is St Faith’s Chapel in Westminster Abbey. This chapel was built in the 1250s and the 13th century wall painting shows St Faith wearing a crown and holding the symbol of her martyrdom, a holy space reserved for private prayer throughout the day – just tell the stewards you want to say a prayer and they unfailingly let you through. Situated next to a busy Poets Corner, you push open a heavy oak door and enter this haven of peace and quiet, where the noise of the tourists doesn’t intrude. You feel the centuries of prayer that soaks this Chapel.

Another place I discovered recently is the church of St Julian in Norwich, which houses the Shrine of the great 14th century mystic Julian of Norwich. Very little is known of her early

life. She regarded herself as a simple, unlettered person, but she came with her a message of divine love and hope. She was not a nun but was an anchoress. An anchoress is a person called to a solitary life, but one that is not cut-off from the world, but one anchored in it. Her life was one of prayer, contemplation and counselling, a life highly thought of by people of the time. Her home was a small cell, attached to the Church, which had three windows that opened; one into the Church, so she could hear Mass and receive the Sacrament of Communion; one to communicate with her servant, who would have lived close at hand; and one to give advice to those who sought it. After receiving a series of visions, she wrote the first book to be written in English by a woman – the Revelations of Divine Love.

The subject of The Revelations is love - God's love for all humanity shown in the Passion, suffering and death of Jesus Christ, and the response of humanity towards God, Maker, Keeper and Preserver. She writes that this love creates all that exists; it sustains all and redeems all; it is unfailing even in times of sorrow or trial; in this love there is no place for anger; it is unconditional; it is all powerful and all embracing. God's whole purpose is to bring all into the bliss of heaven, so that "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well". This well-known phrase was claimed by Julian to be said to her by God Himself, and very much reflects her theology. It is one of the great sayings and gives great comfort to many: "All shall be well".

And it is simply this phrase that I want us all to remember from this morning. As I have been speaking about the conditions that confronted Julian some of you may have resonated with the situation that she faced in the 13th century – a world in turmoil, a church at loggerheads. Ring any bells? Certainly we hear in our readings something of the turmoil that has affected all human beings since time began.

In the reading to the Romans, we are encouraged to wake from sleep, lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light, clothing ourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ. And

then Matthew encourages his readers to keep awake for the day of the Lord, a vivid picture of the return of Jesus in triumph and judgement. That early hope of those first disciples was not fulfilled, but the essential confidence in God which it expresses remains to this day, even if we might put it less dramatically.

Yet God says to us today, as he said to Julian, "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well". As we enter the wonderful season of Advent, a month of frenetic activity and work for us all, let us each take time, make time to stop and pause in some quiet place and say to yourself "All shall be well". Amen