

My courteous Lord

Lessons from a 14th century English mystic and a 21st century Bishop of Rome

Julian of Norwich

By Chris McDonnell

Courtesy is often found wanting in the many exchanges we make in the marketplace of our society, be it in politics, sport, the media or the general to-and-fro that arises when we attempt to live in community.

It is the word that has been attached by many to the life of Sir David Amess, the conservative British Member of Parliament who was tragically stabbed to death on October 15 in his constituency.

Disagreement over policy can and should be conducted in a courteous manner for the good of all.

We have a phrase that says, "I won't say behind your back what I wouldn't say to your face." In other words I will be honest with you.

But much of the insult and bad attitude that is expressed in the public domain often verges on libel or slander, but not quite. In any case it certainly leaves a nasty taste in the mouth.

Expressing one's views online

In recent years the opportunity for sharp-edged comment has been extended by the rapid growth of the internet and the huge expansion of websites and social media that support particular points of view.

Fine. Such growth has made available a vast amount of information to anyone interested, wherever they may be on planet Earth. The global village is with us.

But then consider the manners of contributing to a website blog. The principle should be that of exchanging ideas and points of view, of initiating a dialogue of debate.

Yet so often we find language being used that is critical of the blog poster rather than a concentration on arguing a case.

Some people on blogs, of course, protect themselves from personal criticism by using a pseudonym.

Invective even among Christians

But that is a poor response to honest discussion. It allows you to hide your true identity behind the invective of your words.

If you have something to say, say it in well-chosen language, vigorous yet polite. And in so doing acknowledge the opinion expressed as your own. It is too easy to be rude and duck the returns.

There have been times when I have been on the receiving end of abusive commentary through postings on the internet. But it will never prevent me from putting my name to an honestly held point of view.

It is sad that even on sites purporting to be Christian that we also find invective that is hurtful and malicious.

In recent months comments have surfaced that have been antagonistic to Pope Francis, critical both of his words and of his person. The tone has been uncharitable, the mind-set that gives rise to such a distasteful expression of views hard to justify at any time.

Our courteous Lord

Julian of Norwich was an English mystic of the 14th century whose thought and attitude was way ahead of her time.

Her birth in 1342 is documented although there is an element of doubt about the year of her death. The general consensus is that she died around 1416. So we are just five years passed her anniversary.

In her writings, especially in *Revelations of Divine Love*, she often uses the word "courteous".

"Then our courteous Lord showed himself to the soul cheerfully with glad countenance, with a friendly welcome," she says at one point.

That single word -- courteous -- says so much about the relationship between God and humanity, a relationship of respect, of concern and of love.

All shall be well

There were problems in abundance during Julian's lifetime, not the least being the presence of plague in England which cost a huge loss of life.

But despite misgivings and difficulties, Julian had the confidence to write a phrase that has become a key remembrance of her writing -- "And all shall be well. And all shall be well. And all manner of thing shall be well".

We know so little about her personal life, whether, for example, she was a nun or a laywoman. Even her name may well have been adopted from the Church of St Julian in Norwich where it is believed her anchorite cell was situated.

Yet through her writing, the texts left to us reveal the aspirations of a woman of faith and confidence in God. "All shall be well".

A pope and a parliamentarian

Next March we will mark the 9th anniversary of the election of Pope Francis who travelled a long way from his South American homeland to occupy the Chair of Peter.

He has shown us by his gentleness and compassion, his humility and care for the poor, a fine example of "the courteous Lord".

The Church deserves in our response a similar courtesy, not only to Francis, but also between each other when we consider, debate and teach the values and principles of faith.

Maybe we should reflect on the ethos of Rugby, when after a hard-fought match, played within a framework of the rule book, the players shake hands and acknowledge each other's sportsmanship.

Courtesy goes beyond words and writing. It is about the very substance of our relationships with one another.

May a courteous man, David Amess, rest in the peace of the Lord.

Out of all this
must come laughter
and the gradual drying of tears,
fears diminish as the finish,
slow to show at first is seen
after all his is done and gone.

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