*Love to the loveless shown that they might lovely be.*

Samuel Crossman, the author of these words is sometimes presented as a Puritan, but his spiritual vision is wider than the narrow affiliations of his day.

He invites us to enter into a world of devotional realism that unflinchingly confronts the reality of the passion of Jesus. It evokes the instruments of his torture, the impact they make on his body, and it calls from our wayward hearts a response of human compassion and the virtue of repentance for our sins as the cause of his passion.

And Crossman understands that something is truly lovely because it is love-filled, fully itself as God sees it, because it exudes the quality of being loved for itself, not for any cosmetic reason that flatters human vanity. We’re not dealing here with “lovely” as in a lovely cup of tea or a lovely photograph in a glossy magazine. We become lovely through our capacity to expand into the contours of the life of God. Loveliness is a moral quality of life before it is an assessment of external appearance.

The cost of revealing and documenting all this takes us into a rich seam of imagination, although it must be admitted that today, our churches and cathedrals are largely devoid of images that help us to engage with the cost of love God’s love for us in the work of redemption. But not all is lost.

The recovery of attention to the writings of Julian of Norwich and the *Revelations of Divine Love* connects us with a history of devotion to the passion of Christ, though at times can seem a bit overwhelming for our modern sensitivities. Julian lived in an age of barbarity that we rarely witness today. The commonplace evidence of brutal warfare conducted by hand to hand engagement and the spectacle of blood-curdling public execution boldly intrude from beyond the safety of the anchorite cell into Julian’s religious imagination. In one of the chapters on the Passion, Julian writes, “I could see that the dear skin and tender flesh, the hair and the blood, were hanging loose from the bone, gouged by the thorns in many places.”

And with an accuracy that comes from familiarity with death Julian tenderly describes the change of colour in the face of Christ. “I saw his dear face, dry, bloodless, and pallid with death…Then, dead, it turned a blue colour…as the flesh continued to die.”

This description of the face of Christ in the moment of death might seem shocking to us in the context of worship. But this year I fear that it is not unfamiliar, for it resonates with some of the heart-rending accounts of the suffering caused by the COVID pandemic and a sense of helplessness expressed by families and loved ones as a cruel disease has brought unexpected death to so many. As Julian observes: “This is the greatest pain…to see your Love suffer.”

I have been struck by how the highly politicised, medical apparatus of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) has become almost iconic. The gloves, the face shield, the apron, the gown – these are all instruments deployed in the task of engagement with a deadly contagion, and as instruments of care and compassion they have become like icons of love.

They are about the skill and heroic dedication of those who have served others selflessly and often at personal cost. These practical emblems of health care have been a symbol of the determination of doctors and nurses to ensure that victims of this terrible pandemic can still be seen to be lovely. For in the agony of illness and death, our COVID victims are still the recipients of our love, they are still the cause of past joys and achievements, the enrichment of life at its best. They are the people who have won our forgiveness and forgiven us for our failing, the people who bring out our best selves. Here is love to the stricken and the dying shown, that they might lovely be.

In a rich inheritance of artistry and imagination, the Church has a wealth of images that might help us with understanding how these instruments of medical care today might be understood alongside the instruments that attended the passion and death of Jesus Christ. As he enters into our condition of lovelessness and death, the instruments of his passion also become icons of love.

Still, in ancient churches, or newer ones inspired by them, you will see the depiction of these instruments, often carried by mighty angels who, as messengers, bear them as reminders of our salvation. These instruments are the garment woven in one piece and the dice played for who would get it, the whip, the nails, the crown of thorns, the reed and sponge of vinegar, and the title on the cross itself, Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.

These are the signs of what St Paul identifies as “Christ crucified…Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.” They are emblems of the power of God’s love to overwhelm evil, and to confound its logic.

It has always struck me as odd that in the 20th century when this cathedral was busily installing works of art, none of them presents any narrative of the mystery of the cross as the cost of love in God’s work of salvation. Perhaps the horror of two world wars and the Nazi holocaust inhibited engagement with the reality of the passion. But it is a distinct omission that we should still feel.

At the end of fifteen years and the intensity of the Revelations of Divine Love that took Julian of Norwich into the very depth of its reality, she was left with this question: “What was our Lord’s meaning?” And, the passion, its blood and sweat, its tears and agony, the anguish of his mother, Our Lady St Mary, and the overwhelming tide of divine mercy led Julian’s spirit to understand this conclusion: “Love was his meaning. Who showed it you? Love. What did he show you? Love. Why did he show it? For love. I saw for certain…that before ever he made us, God loved us; and that his love never slackened, nor ever shall.”

*Love to the loveless shown that they might lovely be.* And through his wounds, we are healed.