Norfolk’s long Christian history features a surprising number of Christian women who have shaped the life of the Church not just locally, but nationally and even internationally. Go back six hundred years and you have Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich, a mystic and a spiritual writer. What other English county could lay claim to two such remarkable women? Three centuries earlier the Lady Richeldis had a vision of the Virgin Mary at Walsingham which still bears fruit nine and a half centuries later. We cannot quite claim that Our Lady belongs only in Norfolk but nowhere else in England is there such a place of pilgrimage. Travel on to the nineteenth century and Elizabeth Fry, the great prison reformer, features in the Anglican calendar on October 12th. Born here in Norwich in Earlham Hall she married a Quaker and became a speaker and preacher on behalf of those condemned to live in squalor in our cities and especially in the prisons of the time. She died on this day in 1845, so shares this day in the Anglican calendar with Edith Cavell, this being the day of Edith’s execution. How extraordinary that two women of Norfolk share the same day of commemoration and thanksgiving for their life and faith. Julian, Margery Kempe, the Lady Richeldis, Elizabeth Fry and Edith Cavell: these women are reason enough to make Norfolk exceptional in its Christian history and a deserved place of pilgrimage.
What some of them would have made of what has been written after their death I sometimes wonder. Julian of Norwich was so keen not to draw attention to herself that she doesn’t even mention her name in her writings about the love of God. We call her Julian only because of the dedication of the church where she lived. Edith Cavell has been presented to the world in a host of different ways since her execution. Think of the publications about her and their titles. “The dutiful Edith Cavell”. That booklet declares by its title what moral line it will take. “Edith Cavell, pioneer and patriot”. It is intriguing that the word “patriot” is used so unequivocally about someone who said “patriotism is not enough”. There is a publication about Edith Cavell, her life and her art, recalling her ability as a painter. And in 1934 a short volume was entitled “Nurse Cavell, dog lover”. I am fairly sure that’s not the most significant thing about her.

There is a vast corpus of literature about Edith. No-one can now personally remember her a century after her execution so we rely on letters, documents and the writings of people who did know her. All this shapes the way we think of Edith. But how did she think of herself?

I think there was only one occasion when Edith commented on her posthumous reputation. It was the night before she was executed. The Anglican priest, Stirling Gahan, had given her Holy Communion and then commented “We shall remember you as a heroine and a martyr”. He records her as replying “Don’t think of me like that. Think of me as a nurse who tried to do her duty.”
“A nurse who tried to do her duty.” These words are more profound than we sometimes realise. Let us take Edith at her word tonight.

Edith’s vocation to be a nurse came late. In her adolescence she wrote “Someday, somehow I am going to do something useful. I don’t know what it will be. I only know that it will be something for people. They are, most of them, so helpless, so hurt and so unhappy.”

By the age of thirty Edith had not really found her true vocation. She had done what many unmarried daughters of vicarages did in her day. She became a governess, though that is a rather grand term for her initial modest employments. It applies, though to her service in Belgium with the François family. That came to an end in 1895. Aged thirty, Edith found herself back at home in Swardeston, supporting her mother and helping to look after her ailing father.

Edith’s two younger sisters, Florence and Lillian, had both left home by then to train as nurses. Perhaps this was enough to prompt Edith herself to do the same. Nursing, which was once regarded as menial work for women of poor reputation, had lost its social stigma. Florence Nightingale had ensured that. Respectable women could now enter what had become the nursing profession. But at the age of thirty Edith might have been considered already too old to train as a nurse.
So she applied to the Metropolitan Asylums’ Board in London, not for training, but for the most menial and untrained nursing tasks. Two days after her thirtieth birthday she sent an application to be an Assistant Nurse Class II. She wrote “I have had no hospital training or any nursing engagements whatsoever.” But she did say she could start work at any time, and they needed a great deal of labour.

This was a woman who had worked in Belgium and was already accomplished. But her application suggests remarkably little self-confidence. As an Assistant Nurse Class II she went to the Fountains Fever Hospital in Tooting. It was gruelling work with long hours, little pay and where the chances of contracting disease was high. Many nurses experienced breakdowns in their own health. But Edith had found her vocation and within a year she had applied to the London Hospital in Whitechapel to be a probationer nurse. In subsequent years she was given more responsibility though at the age of forty one she found herself once again without a job. A call came from Brussels, from its leading surgeon, to ask whether Edith would set up a training school for nurses there. She was an English nurse with experience who had trained at a London hospital and who possessed fluent French. There weren’t many of them at the time.

Edith’s Christian faith was exemplified in a spirit of service. She looked to Jesus Christ as the pattern of all self-giving. That’s why she treasured Thomas à Kempis’ classic from the fifteenth century “The Imitation of Christ” which she read over and over again during her final weeks before her execution. Her humility may have matured as a result of many years of not being quite sure she was doing what God wanted her to do. She developed a quiet spirit though she
had leadership and teaching gifts too. In nursing she discovered what it was to have a fulfilling life to which she could give herself wholeheartedly. She was a nurse who wanted to be remembered as such. It is one of the noblest Christian vocations to soothe wounds, to clean bodies, to reduce pain, to give comfort. These things are reflective of Christian self-giving love.

The very word nurse derives from the Latin *nutricius*, meaning a person who nourishes. We have almost forgotten the connection between nursing and nourishing in our language. Yet we know there are few things more nourishing than the care a good nurse gives.

Edith Cavell knew she needed her own sources of spiritual nourishment if she was to nourish and nurse others. It is no accident that on the night before her execution she received the Holy Communion of the Body and Blood of Christ so gladly. It was the sacramental nourishment she needed for her journey to the life to come. The connection between her nursing, her faith and her desire for sacramental grace is fundamental to understanding her.

It was said that when a young girl arrived in Calcutta and asked Mother Teresa whether she could join her Missionaries of Charity, Mother Teresa asked her to do two things. First she sent her to the chapel, to receive Holy Communion, and then to stay there for several hours praying before the Blessed Sacrament. This was often a surprise to a young girl expecting to be sent out on the streets. But first of all she was asked to receive the Body of Christ in Holy Communion and to pray in adoration before him. Later in the day she would be asked to clean the latest person brought in from the streets of Calcutta. She would be expected to bathe
their wounds, to bring them comfort, to spend hours tending a wretched body which could be flea ridden or worm infested. If that young girl could see Christ both in the sacrament of the altar and in the body of the person brought from the street Mother Teresa thought she may just become a Missionary of Charity.

“Think of me as a nurse who tried to do her duty.” Let’s take Edith at her word. Her duty in her final year was to tend the wounds of those injured in war and to give them a chance of a better life, and a free one, even though she knew she was in peril and danger herself. She had found her true vocation before God. She was executed just hours after receiving the Blessed Sacrament of Christ’s body and blood. It was in the words of scripture, the Blessed Sacrament and in those whom she nursed and cared for that she saw Jesus Christ, the man of sorrows and the Lord of Glory.

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