

Love Was His Meaning

An Introduction to the Writings of Julian of Norwich

ELIZABETH RIMMER



About the Author

Elizabeth Rimmer was born in Liverpool in 1954 and educated at Notre Dame School where she subsequently taught for a year. In 1975 she obtained a BA (Hons) degree in English at Liverpool University where she met her husband Paul through the Catholic Chaplaincy. They were married in 1977 and have three children. From 1984-8 Elizabeth studied for an M Litt at Stirling University and became associated with the Chaplaincy there. As well as being involved in prayer and the care of house, garden and family, she is interested in Poetry and medieval and Cistercian spirituality.

Cover illustration of Laindon Church, Essex. The timber-fronted annexe is an anchorage. (The existing windows were added later)

A Simple Unlettered Creature – Who Was Julian?

Not much is known about the author of *The Revelations of Divine Love* apart from the facts that she was an anchoress who lived in Norwich in the late fourteenth century – she is known to have survived until at least 1416 – and that she is referred to as Julian. What else is asserted about her is subject to controversy, and there is no consensus about whether she was a lay person or a member of a religious community; how much education she had received, or even whether she was an orthodox member of the Catholic church, or linked in some way to the (orthodox, but always under suspicion) community of Beguines who were associated with Norwich in the fourteenth century, or with the Lollards of a later period.

Felicity J Riddy, in her article *Women Talking of the Things of God*,¹ draws attention to the existence of women's reading groups, sometimes linked to religious communities, but by no means restricted to them, at other times under the influence of devout laywomen such as Lady Margaret Beaufort. These groups supported each other in lives of retirement and prayer, and circulated books of devotional literature amongst themselves, particularly books of the sort known to have influenced Julian. One copy of *The Revelations* was certainly owned by such a group, and Felicity Riddy believes that this is the public for whom Julian wrote.

This would explain how Julian, whether she was religious or lay, could have had access to some of the best spiritual teaching then available, even though she was, as she claims, ignorant and unlettered. There is considerable dispute about how literally this should be taken. Some scholars, reasoning from the technical brilliance of her writing and the clear mastery of the theological teaching current at the time, conclude that this is simply a modest disclaimer. Others, feeling that this would be to catch Julian out in an obvious and unbecoming lie, attribute her achievements entirely to her personal integrity and native genius. The probability is that like many women of her age, she had received no formal academic training and could not read Latin, but had been taught to read and write at home by her mother.

It is uncertain when Julian entered the anchorhold, and at what stage in her religious development, but I subscribe to the view of the editors of the critical text, Edmund Colledge OSA and James Walsh SJ, that she had entered the religious life at an early age, and that entering the anchorhold was a deepening of this commitment, rather than the more romantic speculation that it was a response to being widowed and/or the loss of a child.

That she was already committed to a life of devotion from an early age appears from an account of a prayer she made “when I was young”² for three gifts from God. The first gift was a deeper, more personal understanding of the Passion of Christ. The second was an experience of a deadly illness, in order might be more prepared for death and so that she might live a better life and one more to the glory of God afterwards. The apparent paradox of desiring to experience death in order to live better on earth is typical of the richness and complexity of Julian's thinking. She neither denies the value of the world, nor affirms it except in the context of our eternal destiny. Even in her youth, Julian was never a glib or facile thinker.

Recognising, as she says, that these were rather unusual requests, Julian asked for

¹ *Women and Literature in Britain 1150-1500* ed. Carol M Meade 1993

² *Showings*, p178

these gifts only on condition that they were in accordance with the will of God. She had no such inhibition about her last request, which was for ‘three wounds’ – *“that is, the wound of true contrition, the wound of loving compassion and the wound of longing with my will for God.”*³

The story of The Revelations of Divine Love is the story of how those gifts were granted.

When Julian was “thirty and one half years old”⁴, she became ill, and it was believed that she would shortly die. She was given the last rites and propped up in bed with a large crucifix before her, so that she could gaze on it in her last moments of life. Instead of dying, however, she experienced a “revelation of love --- in sixteen showings”⁵ over a period of about twenty-four hours, which describes and analyses in her book. Many of these dealt, as she had requested, with the Passion of Our Lord, but instead of dwelling on the extent of his suffering, as she seems to have expected, and as would have been more typical of the devotional practice of her day, they concentrated on the love Jesus showed in redeeming us, and the joy he felt in undertaking this suffering on our behalf. Other revelations dealt with the role of the Trinity in creating, redeeming and uniting us with God, with the nature of prayer, with devotion to Our Lady, the effects of sin on our lives and the eventual triumph of the mercy of God.

The book is not merely an account of a mystic’s spiritual adventures. There is nothing sensational or exhibitionistic about Julian of Norwich, and she is very concerned to discourage any cult of personality, and instead to focus on what her experience reveals of the love of God for every Christian in the Church.

*Everything I say about me I mean to apply to all my fellow Christians for I am taught that this is what Our Lord intends in this spiritual revelation. And therefore I pray you all for God’s sake, and I counsel you for your own profit, that you disregard the wretch to whom it was shown, and that mightily, wisely and meekly you contemplate upon God, who out of his courteous love and his endless goodness was willing to show it generally to comfort of all --- if I pay special attention to myself I am nothing at all; but in general I am, I hope, in the unity of love with all my fellow Christians. For it is in this unity that the life of all men consists who will be saved.*⁶

Julian meditated on the content of these revelations for twenty years, and even at the end of this period she could write *“This book is begun by God’s grace and gift, But it is not yet performed as I see it.”*⁷ It is this long struggle to integrate her experience with the teachings of the Scriptures, with the traditions of the Church and the ordinary faith experience of her fellow Christians that transforms this book from the story of a particular personal experience to a profound theology of the spiritual life.

³ p. 179

⁴ p.179

⁵ p.175

⁶ p191

⁷ p.342

See How I Loved You - Julian of Norwich on the Passion of Our Lord

The first of the three gifts Julian of Norwich asked for in her youth was “recollection of His passion”.⁸ By this she meant a vision, in which she might see and understand the suffering of Christ, and share the grief of Mary Magdalene, Our Lady and other witnesses who were, as she puts it, lovers of Christ, in order to live in deeper devotion afterwards. This prayer was answered in a series of sixteen revelations, of which the first, second, fourth, eighth, ninth and tenth deal explicitly with the events of the Passion. However, as she develops her understanding of what she sees, Julian moves beyond personal piety to a deeper and more universal understanding of the mysteries of salvation.

The revelations began during the course of an illness which everyone, including Julian herself, believed to be fatal. She was gazing upwards, towards the Heaven where she trusted that she would shortly go, when her curate brought a crucifix to her bedside and told her to look at her Saviour and trust in Him. Her ready obedience, in spite of her initial reluctance to give up a position which she had thought appropriate, would later acquire a greater significance as she responded to the revelations.

The first revelation deals with the crowning with thorns; the second is of the face of Jesus as he endures the mockery of the soldiers. The fourth is of the scourging at the pillar; the eighth is of the death on the cross and the desiccation of the body as Jesus draws slowly and agonisingly towards the moment of extinction; the ninth is of Jesus’ joy which transcends all pain, in saving his creatures, and the tenth is of Jesus’ pierced heart, which becomes both the source of the cleansing flood of blood and water which washes sins away, and the sanctuary for all those who are to be saved.

The descriptions Julian gives of what she sees in her visions are very detailed and clear, almost as if she is giving a statement in court. There is no attempt to stir up emotion in the reader, or to involve us in her emotions as she watched. From the beginning she seems to have felt the need to record and transmit her impressions very carefully, as we see from this description of the blood trickling down from the crown of thorns:

At the time three things occurred to me: the drops were round like pellets as the drops issued, they were round like a herring’s scales as they spread, they were like raindrops off a house’s eaves, so many that they could not be counted. This vision was living and hideous and fearful and sweet and lovely.⁹

In spite of Julian’s careful detachment, this is no sanitised Hollywood version of the Crucifixion with a quick cut to the happy ending in case we get disturbed by the challenge and brutality of human evil. In her attempt not to sensationalise the cruelty of what is going

⁸ Chapter 2 p.177

⁹ Chapter 7 p 188

on, Julian is also concerned to avoid a merely escapist, and in the end, a trivialised presentation. In the eighth revelation there is a long description of Jesus' death on the cross:

*The long torment impressed me as if He had been dead for a week, dying and on the point of death, always suffering this great pain. And when I say that it seemed as He had been dead for a week, that means – that the sweet body was so discoloured, so dry, so shrivelled, so deathly and so pitiful that He might have been dead for a week, although He went on dying.*¹⁰

When Julian comments that the pain she experienced in sharing Jesus' suffering 'exceeded any mortal death' she thought that she herself was on her death-bed. This is no naïve exaggeration. The death of the Son of god is the worst event that ever befell the world, and all creation is implicated in it:

*All creatures which God had created for our service, the firmament and the earth, failed in their natural functions because of sorrow at Christ's death, for it is their natural characteristic to recognise Him as their Lord, in whom all their powers exist. And when He failed their natures constrained them to fail with him insofar as they could because of the sorrow of His sufferings.*¹¹

Thus all our suffering ever since is seen as a participation in the outrage to nature that Jesus' death was.

At this point we see not only the richness and complexity of Julian's reflection on her vision, but also her grasp of her material, and of the overall purpose she has in writing. She asks herself if there is anything worse than this, and her answer is prompt: '*Hell is a different pain, because in it there is despair.*'¹² But hell is not Julian's concern, and she does not allow herself to be side-stepped. Having made her point, she moves directly on to talk of the 'pains that lead to salvation.'

We can see how thoroughly she has absorbed this idea in her reaction to the 'friendly proffer' made to her to stop looking at the cross before her, and to look up to the Father in Heaven. She has not denied the unpleasantness of the experience, nor her reluctance to undergo it, but now she goes a step further. She chooses Jesus, even in his suffering, for her Heaven, refusing to recognise any other way to Heaven other than by him, and realising that behind all the pain is love, which will turn all this suffering to joy.

This is only the beginning of what Julian recognises as mature understanding and recollection. She points out that there are three ways of contemplating the Passion of Our Lord. The first is in compassion for his pain, leading us to contrition for our sins and to humble gratitude. But this would be incomplete without an appreciation of the joy to which we are led, so complete that it wipes out the significance and even the memory of any pain.

The second way of contemplating is in realising the love which impelled Him to suffer for us. Julian gives Our Lord language of a startling strength to express this: "*It is a joy, a bliss, an endless delight to me that ever I suffered my passion for you, and if I could suffer more I should suffer more*" (Chapter 22 p216).

¹⁰ Chapter 16 p 206-7

¹¹ Chapter 16 p 210

¹² p 209

Of course He would- isn't that what love means, to be delighted to do anything for the beloved, and think nothing of the cost? And is not Jesus the most powerful, most noble and most honourable lover? If this seems naive, superficial and obvious, as sometimes it does, we should compare Julian's exuberant faith and love with a reaction that, if we understand ourselves at all, we recognise as a fairly typical reaction to a barely adequate understanding: DH Lawrence's vision of a Jesus who would "thrust His hands under her face, and pointing to His wounds, say, 'Look Ursula Brangwen, I got these for your sake. Now do as you're told'" (The Rainbow, Chapter 10, p275 Penguin edition).

In the third way of contemplating the passion, Julian completely rejects this kind of sado-masochistic bullying. She draws our attention to the 'joy and bliss which made Him take delight in it'. Comparing Jesus to a cheerful giver:

All His desire and all His intention is to please and comfort the one to whom He is giving it. And if the receiver accept the gift gladly and gratefully, then the courteous giver counts as nothing all the expense and labour because of the joy and delight that He has because he has pleased and comforted the one that He loves (Chapter 23 p220).

No morbidity, no lingering guilt should prevent us from enjoying the gift. We should see ourselves not only as saved from damnation and brought into joy, but as a source of joy to the One who did so much for us.

In the tenth revelation, Jesus says to Julian "see how I loved you" (Chapter 24 p221). He has not only redeemed us and brought us to Heaven; He offers us the gift of His perfect and eternal love, simply so that we may freely trust in Him and be happy. Julian's personal understanding and response to the passion has certainly deepened during the course of the revelations, but at this point it ceases to be of merely personal concern. The place to which she is drawn is "large and wide enough for all mankind that will be saved". This is an experience that is available to everyone.

It is this which explains the care with which Julian describes and develops her experience. The growth which has taken place while she meditates on her vision makes her conscious that this is a gift for the whole Church, and she is concerned to pass it on intact. Julian's theology is not merely abstract, a body of thought. It is dynamic, a relationship of love which reaches out through the centuries to all those who will be saved.

LIFE, LOVE AND LIGHT IN ONE GOODNESS -The Teaching of Julian of Norwich on the Trinity

The mystery of the unity of three persons in one God is fundamental to the Christian faith, but its concept is so daunting that we often acknowledge the concept mentally, while in practice neglecting it. It is not so for Julian of Norwich. The doctrine is fundamental to her experience of faith, and a major key to the way in which she chooses to express it. It forms not only the subject of some of the revelations, but also shapes the underlying theology of her interpretations, her understanding of human psychology, and even, as we shall see, her literary style. In this she follows the example of the theologians who influenced her, particularly William of St Thierry whose *Aenigma Fidei* she seems to have studied closely, and St Augustine, whose *De Trinitate* was a standard work. Although she frequently reminds us that her work is a simple narrative, not a philosophical or theological treatise, from the first revelation of Jesus crowned with thorns, in which, she informs us, the Trinity is comprehended, to the last, in which she perceives 'The blessed Trinity, our maker' dwelling

endlessly in our soul, her writing shows both a profound intuitive grasp of the doctrine, and its overwhelming importance to her.

For Julian, as she says in the fourth chapter, the Trinity is God, and God is the Trinity;

wherever Jesus appears, the presence of the whole Trinity is implied. Although 'only the maiden's son' died on the Cross (Chapter 23), all the Trinity worked in the passion of Christ. From the Creation to the Last Judgement and final consummation of life on earth, it is the Trinity which acts to save us (Chapter 32).

By the eternal intention and assent and the full agreement of all the Trinity, the Second Person chose to be ground and head of all this fair kindred [i.e. the human race]; and from Him we have all come; in Him we are all enclosed, and to Him we shall all go, finding in Him our complete Heaven in everlasting joy by the eternal foreseeing purpose of the whole Trinity. For before He made us He loved us, and when we were made we loved Him, and this is a love made by the natural inherent goodness of the Holy Spirit, mighty in reason by the power of the Father, and wise in heart by the wisdom of the Son_ And thus is the human soul-made by God and at the same time united to God (Chapter 53,; translation mine).

Although Julian is profoundly conscious of the unity of God, and is at pains to stress it from the beginning, her experience of God is everywhere three-fold. She speaks of three ways in which the revelations are presented: by bodily sight, by words formed in the understanding, and by spiritual sight (C 73; those who are interested in this kind of experience may like to compare this with the teaching of St John of the Cross in *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Ch 23-32). She writes of the "three moods" - suffering, compassion and bliss, shown by Christ in the visions (Ch 70), and writes, not only that God shows us three feelings, love, longing and pity, but that His longing for us is three-fold: to teach us to love Him, to bring us to Heaven and to fulfil us in bliss (Ch 75). Most characteristically, she uses the figure of "appropriation" - that is, attributing different aspects of divine activity to the different persons of the Trinity. Thus in the thirteenth revelation 'our good Lord' says, 'I may make all things well and I can make all things well, and I shall make all things well, and I will make all things well'. Julian gives this a Trinitarian interpretation, attributing 'I may' to the power of the Father, 'I can' to the Wisdom of the Son, 'I will' to the goodness of the Holy Spirit, and 'I shall' to "The unity of the Holy Trinity, three persons in one truth" (Ch 31;110).

This appropriation is most fully worked out in discussion of the fourteenth revelation, "that our Lord God is the ground of our beseeching":

In our Father God Almighty we have our existence, and in our Mother of mercy (i.e. our 'mother Christ') we have our reformation and restoration, in whom our faculties are integrated and made perfectly human, and by the generosity and the giving of grace by the Holy Spirit we are fulfilled. And our nature is in our Father God almighty, and our nature is in our Mother God all wisdom, and our nature is in our Lord God the Holy Spirit all goodness, for our nature is wholly in each person of the Trinity, which is one God"

(Ch 58,1156-63),

This return to the unity in trinity reminds us that to Julian the Trinity is not a club of three members, but a three-fold unity which can only be rendered intelligible by a conscious use of symbol and analogy. She reminds us of this in Chapter 51 where she describes her teaching as *"the beginning of an ABC whereby I might have some understanding of Our Lord's meaning hidden within it, notwithstanding that all the revelation is full of mystery"* (p269-272). When she describes the Son sitting on the Father's right hand, she warns that it is not meant to be taken in a literal, physical sense: *'for there is no such sitting, as I see it, in the Trinity'* (p325). Perhaps the closest theologian to Julian is Karl Rahner in Foundations of Christian Faith. He is concerned to correct what he sees as an unduly anthropomorphic psychological interpretation of the word 'person', as if it meant 'character, personality', and instead suggests, as an analogy for the threeness of God, three 'modes of perception' whereby one God reveals Himself to us.

This may seem dry, abstract and impersonal to us, but it would certainly make sense to Julian. As she sees it, being made in the image and likeness of God, we are "made Trinity", and have a three-fold unity in our essential being: first in our nature as we are created, then in the mercy which redeems us, and thirdly in the grace which fulfils and unites us to God - *'three properties in one goodness'* (Ch 56, line 45). There is a threeness in our response to God: *'our soul sees God, and contemplates God, and loves God'* (Ch 4411. 14-15). It is natural, then, that three kinds of knowing are required of us in order to relate to God:

the first is that we know our Lord God. The second is that we know our (true) self, what we are by Him, in nature and grace. The third is that we humbly recognise that our (true) self is opposed to (or by) our sin and our weakness (Ch 72 1154-7).

Finally, when we experience the indwelling of God in our soul, we realise that it is God's pleasure *'to reign in our understanding blessedly, and sit in our soul peacefully, and dwell in our soul endlessly'* (Ch 57 1154-6).

Julian seems to build her sentences in triads, as we can see 'intention...assent...agreement'; 'all mighty, all wisdom, all love'; 'love, longing and pity'. But this, although a common rhetorical technique, for maximum emphasis, as we can see from many adverts and political speeches, is, for Julian, no mere stylistic trick. The threeness in unity she experiences in God is reflected in her awareness of all His activity. In Chapter 78 she writes that His justice punishes mightily, judges discerningly and loves tenderly. In Chapter 80 she describes three means of God's self-revelation - natural reason, the teaching of the Church, and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Our experience of the Beatific Vision (Chapter 83) is of *'life, love and light in one goodness'*. The light of faith which enlightens the dark night of our life on earth is charity -

charity unmade, charity made and charity given. Charity unmade is God, charity made is our soul in God and charity given is virtue, which is a gracious gift of working in which we love God for Himself, and our self in God and all that God loves for God's sake (Chapter 8411. 10-15).

Julian's language is deceptively simple; it is easy to take her at her own valuation, as an "unlettered woman" but she is not therefore a merely spontaneous child of nature, or a naive transcriber of a passive experience. It is frequently stated that western culture is too intellectual, too cerebral, and that we need a more 'holistic' approach to life; the result is often a contempt for the intellect, or a compartmentalising of the spiritual life, so that theology and spirituality are seen as separate and

competing activities. Julian of Norwich, however, provides an example of a mystic who is not afraid to think study and criticise, as well as feel the experience. The result is not only a moving devotional work, but also a thoughtful and profound Trinitarian theology.

THE GROUND OF OUR BESEECHING -The Teaching of Julian of Norwich on Prayer

The trouble with us is that we make prayer too complicated. We have books and theories and schemes and themes and exercises, and think in terms of 'progress' and 'states' and 'stages' and 'methods'. For Julian of Norwich, however, Prayer is very, very simple. For her, prayer is 'beseeching' - what we call, more pompously, petition; put bluntly, asking for things. We are embarrassed by this, whether through the obvious pride that does not want to be thought a beggar, incompetent, unable to fend for oneself, or through the perverted, masochistic kind of pride that would rather die than be a nuisance. Julian will have none of this; for her, 'beseeching' is the major focus of the relationship between us and God.

This arises from the basic common sense awareness of who she is and what God is. Julian comes across quite clearly as a 'theologian of light', stressing the consolations rather than the trials of the spiritual life, but she does not try to evade or deny the reality of human life, spoilt and frustrated as it is by grief, sin and difficulty. Indeed, in a phrase startling in its bleakness to those who think of her only as the woman who wrote "all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well", she points out that *this place is prison, and this life is penance* (Chapter 77). Those who find the 'vale of tears' type of spirituality morbid, and are looking for relentless optimism in their prayer life had better leave now. Her references to our helplessness, unimportance and inadequacy are frequent and uncompromising; we are little, weak, simple, low, wretched, helpless, poor; we are 'servants'; most tellingly of all, we are 'creatures'. We have no rights, no standing before God.

Yet the prevailing impression Julian leaves us with is not of God's superiority, but His courtesy, His familiarity - homeliness - in the original:

I was greatly astonished by this wonder and marvel, that he who is to be revered and feared would be so familiar with a sinful creature living in this wretched flesh (Chapter 4).

Although He is so far above us as to be incomprehensible to us, Julian declares that it is a 'great delight' to God that we should approach Him familiarly, in simplicity and in humble trust in His goodness. Nor should we be over-worried about the methods we use. Although a simple attitude of faith and trust is the best and purest form of prayer we can come up with, (Chapter 6), all the methods of prayer and meditation that we can use come from God and are good; all equally to be used in humble gratitude. Through the Incarnation, Christ shares our nature and He adapts Himself to every level of our spiritual development, making Himself present and available to us according to our need. The bottom line of Julian's assessment of the human condition, then, is not that we are inadequate, but that we are loved - tenderly, intimately, gratuitously and endlessly loved.

This love is not simply something that guarantees us a fair hearing or a generous answer to our requests; it is not a response to our needs and desires; it is more intimate and more basic than that. God Himself is the 'ground of your beseeching' (Chapter 41). He chooses to give us what we pray for; He inspires us to desire it and He motivates us to pray for it. It is therefore ridiculous to imagine that God would fail to answer prayers of this sort. One would be tempted to imagine that Julian had no

experience of the sort of prayers to which this does not apply - frivolous or misconceived prayers to win the lottery, to become famous and good-looking, or to gain vengeance on one's enemies or the more heart-breaking ones which appear to go unheard - to mend a failing relationship, to spare a friend unhappiness, to save the life of a loved one. Her answer to this is gentle and profound:

that either we are waiting for a better occasion, or more grace or a better gift (Chapter 2).

Thus, true prayer is not simply about asking and getting. It does not make God more responsive to us; it makes us more 'supple and obedient' to Him (Chapter 43). To people going through the Hell of such unanswered prayers, this concept might seem the last straw, portraying God not only as a torturer, but one who wants us to be grateful for being tortured, but this is not the case. We cannot make God more flexible, more docile, more amenable to our desires, but this is not because He is the boss, and we have to take what we are given and like it. It is because '*God's love does not change*'. It is impossible to exceed infinity; it is impossible for God to love us more or behave better to us than He does already. The experience of prayer and the grace gained through prayer make us more conscious of God's purposes, and His dealings with us; if we pray, and we get what we pray for, we are aware of God's goodness in answering us. If we don't, and we nevertheless persevere in prayer, we often become aware of a deeper purpose and a greater wisdom protecting us from the too-narrow focus of our short-term thinking. Julian must have been a wise, gentle and profound counsellor.

She is a practical guide to the more mundane problems of our prayer-life too. She knows the difference between acknowledging a point of faith and actually believing it:

Some of us believe that God is mighty and may do everything, and that He is wisdom and can do everything, but that He is all love and wishes to do everything, there we fail. (Chapter 73)

She is matter-of-fact about the temptation to ask for special guidance and explicit answers to particular problems. We all do it, even Julian herself, as she reveals in the thirteenth revelation. It is interesting that she does not seem particularly embarrassed by her faux pas; nor does she feel rebuked by God's failure to answer. She simply realises that such knowledge is of no actual use to us and the least we can do is to respect God's sovereignty, and not concern ourselves with questions He does not choose to answer.

Equally down-to-earth is her treatment of the problems caused by our own self-consciousness - feelings of dryness and futility in prayer, attachment to moments of consolation, and worst of all, our tendency to too much self-analysis, blaming ourselves when prayer seems to go badly, pluming ourselves when it goes well, constantly wondering if we are doing it well enough... In her seventh revelation (Chapter 15), Julian experienced rapid alternations of feelings of consolation and desolation. This taught her not to attach any importance to such states. She had done nothing to deserve or bring about either her feelings of bliss, or her feelings of being abandoned. She realised that both experiences are necessary to the spiritual life, both are sent by God for our benefit, but whereas desolation is fleeting, our bliss will be eternal, and we must simply trust in patience until our happiness is achieved.

Nor must we believe our prayer is 'better' or in any way more pleasing to God if we feel more recollected, more satisfied or more enlightened after it:

Pray wholeheartedly, though you may feel nothing, though you may see nothing, yes, though you think that you could not, for in dryness and in barrenness, in sickness and in weakness, then is your prayer most pleasing to me, though you think it most tasteless to you (Chapter 41).

God wants us to pray continually, not because He desires what we have to give Him, but because of the reward He longs to be able to give us. It is important that we take in this truly staggering concept, that God's love for us is more important than our love for Him, that He wants our success even more than we do, at the very beginning of our spiritual life, because sooner or later we are going to come up against the real obstacles to our relationship with God - sin, temptation and despair.

Julian's comments on sin are extreme and paradoxical. On the one hand, sin is '*the sharpest scourge*' (Chapter 41), a '*devouring pit of stinking mud*' (Chapter 64), a sight '*so foul and horrible that we should not endure to see it as it is*' (Chapter 78). On the other hand, '*it has no kind of substance*' (Chapter 27) and can only be recognised by the pain it causes. This pain is especially revealed in the suffering it causes to Jesus during the Passion, and, as we saw in Part 2 of this series, this pain is completely wiped out by the joy He feels in our salvation. Because of the completeness of our redemption, sin is no shame, in eternal life, and we are assured that sin, despite its painful and confusing consequences to us, never actually puts up any barrier to God's love:

We shall truly see in Heaven without end that we have sinned grievously in this life; and, notwithstanding this, we shall truly see that we were never hurt in his love, nor were we ever less of value in his sight...enduring and marvellous is that love which cannot and will not be broken because of offences (Chapter 61).

We have no business, therefore, in wasting our time in self-doubt, self-pity or despair. Our very consciousness of sinfulness comes from God. It is our guarantee that He is looking after us and will not let us go heedlessly astray (Chapter 78). Our reaction to this awareness ought to be that we realise our dependence on God, and trust in Him more readily and completely, but is an observable fact that we do not:

there still persists a fear which hinders us, by looking at ourselves and our sins committed in the past...and the perception of this makes us so woe-begone and so depressed that we can scarcely see any consolation. And sometimes we take this fear for humility, but it is a reprehensible blindness and a weakness and we do not know how to despise it like any other sin that we recognise, and this comes through lack of true judgement and is contrary to truth (Chapter 73).

This is quite simply a temptation, an assault on our faith that Julian describes as 'Enmity'. Julian describes a highly personalised experience of this enmity before the last revelation, during which she has a horrible vision of the devil. We may find this a little too remote from our psychology, but we all experience the sensation of having to do battle with temptation, illusion, despair and confusion of mind and heart. We have all picked up negative and destructive messages about ourselves, each other, and the way life is - that we are too stupid, too clumsy or too unattractive to amount to anything; that friends can only be trusted so far; that you have to look out for yourself in this life because no-one else is going to. It is often hard to pin down where these ideas come from and not always helpful to blame parents, teachers or society. Even the least fundamentalist of us may find it helpful to name and externalise the feeling of being opposed, as Jesus does with Peter (Matt 16:23).

Terrifying, wearying as this experience may be, Julian encourages us not to take it too seriously. God keeps us safely. The devil is something to laugh at, and no matter what storms we may go through, we will never be overcome (Chapter 68). Indeed, difficult times should be a sign of hope for us:

He wishes us not to be oppressed because of the sorrows and travails which come to us, for it has always been so before the coming of miracles (Chapter 36).

Our job, then, is patience and trust; whatever happens, however we feel, we must go on, simply and directly, knowing that God is working through our prayer to bring us closer to Him. As we pray; becoming more radically responsive to God's will, more aware of His goodness, more grateful for and dependent on His mercy, we gradually realise that this is what prayer is all about. The final goal of all our desires and aspirations is God Himself - that He will give Himself to us, wholly and forever. Sometimes we get a fleeting glimpse of this in contemplation:

When our courteous Lord of His special grace shows Himself to our soul, we have what we desire, and then for that time we do not see what more we should pray for, but all our intention and all our prayers are wholly directed towards contemplating Him. And as I see it, this is an exalted and imperceptible prayer; for the whole reason why we pray is to be united into the vision and contemplation of him to whom we pray, wonderfully rejoicing with reverent fear, and with so much sweetness and delight in Him that we cannot pray at all except as He moves us at the time (Chapter 43).

Our prayer is fulfilled for a short time, but when it fails, the memory of our happiness and our longing for Heaven inspire us to pray more fervently, more steadfastly and more appropriately (Chapter 42).

And so it is appropriate to finish with the only example we have of Julian's own prayer, which sums up her beliefs so aptly:

God, of your goodness, give me yourself,

for you are enough for me

and I can ask for nothing which is less which can pay you full worship.

And if I ask you anything which is less

always I am in want;

but only in you do I have everything.

Author's Note

Two versions of the text exist, one considerably shorter than the other. Some doubt exists about whether the short version is a later digest of the longer one, primarily because it is preserved in a manuscript largely consisting of such digests, but it is now generally concluded that the longer version is later, extended and modified in the light of Julian's long period of reflection on it. Many modernisations of both versions are now available, but the one I have used is entitled *Showings* by Colledge and Walsh. It is published by SPCK in the *Classics of Western Spirituality* series (London, 1978).

© Elizabeth Rimmer 1998