

The Julian Lecture 1996



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[1] **Introduction**

Dear friends.

The exceptional privilege to speak to you in this very shrine fills me both with awe and with ineffable joy.

Here centuries ago Julian pondered and prayed and questioned her Lord. Here she took down in writing the revelations shown to her at the age of thirty and gradually completed them with teachings and insights received in the many years to follow, making the "Book of showings to the anchoress Julian of Norwich" into a complete and well-balanced entity. It reflects not only the very *mature character* of its author (whose reason, feeling and will are perfectly integrated) but as far as words can do so it also reflects her *spiritual vision of God*, the result of her contemplating the Divine, her "seeing into God" as she often puts it, by his own special grace. These insights she wanted to communicate, to share them with all her fellow-Christians.

Christianity in Julian's age being a matter of course, it may have been a most natural thing to speak about the seeking of God and to try to know him better. Today our ears are more accustomed to talking about the self and self-realisation in harmony and cosmic unity.

Accents and starting-points may vary, but the human soul in search of happiness and fulfilment remains very much the same.

As a soundly religious, intelligent and mature person constantly submitting her thoughts to the divine light, Julian has been endowed with a gift of language overlapping cultural differences and piercing right into the heart of the matter: linking self-knowledge and God-

knowledge, acknowledging individual brokenness and universal wholeness, actual reality and ultimate reality, trusting in the unchangeable loving holiness of God.

And this is the theme I would like to elaborate for you today: how Julian may help us to integrate our actual experience of individual and social woundedness, whimsicality and insecurity into the broader, more general, cosmic, divine and ultimate reality of unity, wholeness and consistency.

^[2] **Basic attitude: willingly vulnerable**

I think we can best develop our theme by starting at Julian's starting-point. Before the hard realities of life, the acute awareness that this life is in many ways wanting and crippled, the very deep personal feeling of shortcomings and woundedness, Julian prays to the Lord that she may willingly stay vulnerable. She prays thus: please Lord, don't allow me to shut my eyes and my heart on all this poverty, shortage, suffering and want of fulfilment. Grant that I may constantly feel the stab of my own shortcomings, that I may never turn my back on the sufferings of others, that I may stay permanently conscious of the desire of my heart for fulfilment in You. Grant that these three wounds of contrition, compassion and longing for You never silt up in this lifetime, cutting myself off from the truth and from humanity: myself, my fellow-men, You Lord, from the past, the present and the future.

Remark how this perfect prayer encompasses a whole life-span: contrition referring to the past, compassion to the present and longing to the future. How it also encompasses all possible

relationships: to myself, my fellow-men and God, openness being the essential pre-condition to any relationship. The metaphor of wounds may seem to us a little odd, old-fashioned, even masochistic. However, you now may notice how rich it is and how it is meant to symbolise a realistic attitude in acknowledging the existence all-over and all-along of defects and sufferings. Beyond pure "wisdom and truth" it also symbolises a basic moral attitude of personal responsibility and openness to others. Indeed: cutting off myself from everything and everyone in self-defence and false security is the most immoral and self-deceiving thing to do. Moreover the pure fact of praying for this openness, especially for openness tended towards God, reflects a deeply religious attitude.

^[3] **Christ being the model**

You already heard me call Julian a mature and deeply religious person. I would now designate her specific morality, especially her attitude towards suffering and brokenness, as being thoroughly and essentially Christian ethics. She constantly sets her eyes on Jesus as a model, contemplating and questioning him. That is why I call Julian an alert Christian, knowing what she is doing, what she wants, whom she is following and why she follows him. Seeing Christ she realises that he cares for us to the point of voluntarily and freely assuming the inconveniences, labour and sufferings of our condition, that he is compassionate in the very sense of the word: sharing our pain not from without as a pitying spectator, but from within experiencing it himself unto death.

This fully engaged compassion of the Divine is unique of our Christian faith and most touching. In no other religion you will find

divine solidarity with man to this extent, to the point where, in my personal feeling, it stands almost proof of its truth, proof of divinity itself. To me this makes more sense and gives more meaning than any philosophical reasoning or logic, or than any other religion I know of.

You will in fact find compassion an essential notion in all ethics and religions. Take Buddhism for instance: compassion with all living creatures is absolutely central. The altruism and self-renunciation of a *bodddhisattva* resembles rather closely the sacrificing love of Christ. A *bodddhisattva* is a Buddha, purified and trained in virtue who, on the very point of entering into Nirvana, instead of doing so prefers to return into samsara, the cycle of life and death on the sole purpose to help his fellow-men to attain salvation. But apart from the reincarnation-belief, the main difference with Christianity is that Buddhists do not recognise and worship a one and only Supreme Being at the origin of all life and being, no one and only loving God maintaining a love-relationship with his creatures and thus keeping them alive.

Using Julian's own words: from the first showing on she could see that "he who created all things created them for love. By the same love they are preserved and always will be without end". She saw that "God is everything which is good and the goodness which everything has is God."

By the same goodness, the same endlessness and unchangeability of his love by which the blessed Trinity, by which God unanimously created man, he also wanted to heal his brokenness, make him healthy, [(w)holesome] and holy and bring him to bliss and unity with him. In ^[4]order to do so Christ willingly became vulnerable, extremely vulnerable for he was the most pure of all man. And, as you may

know and as Julian explicitly states, purity makes sensitive and susceptible to all kinds of pain.

In complete solidarity he willingly suffered for and from our sins and brokenness, as much and more than we ourselves suffer from them. Contemplating the cross and this immense divine compassion, Julian on her part was so filled with compassion with Jesus that she no longer felt her own sufferings. She felt no pain at all except for Christ's pains. I do not know if it has hit you, but everything in Julian's book is reciprocity, dialogue, loving relationship. The more one loves the more one feels the pains of the beloved one.

However how hard and how real Christ's Passion may have been, however how crucial to our salvation, like every man he only once lived and died on earth, and we believe he is now glorified.

Still Julian could distinguish another quality of compassion, a kind of spiritual thirst. a longing and wanting which has not yet ceased and will persist till judgement day. This she could see in the thirteenth showing, where, puzzled and miserable about sin and all the calamities it engenders, she insistently, almost too forwardly, asks the Lord for more clarity on this issue. Then she understands there is in Christ a persistent spiritual thirst to gather all of us into him, safely and united forever.

On seeing this second form of compassion, also qualified as pity on us because of our sins, Julian herself is suddenly filled with compassion for all her fellow-men.

Here I'd like to quote one of my favourite passages (ch. 28):

And then I saw that, along with the virtue of charity, also

each spontaneous (natural) compassion (whatsoever) of one person with another is Christ in this person. Moreover in this second type of compassion I discerned exactly the same aspects of self-renunciation as were shown in the passion of Christ.

As to the Lord both types of compassion have their proper meaning. The one (his compassion on our sins) must make us understand the bliss that we are brought to, in which he wants us to rejoice. The other one (the compassion of his passion) is for consolation when we are in pain, knowing that we suffer in no way alone, but together with him, seeing in him our foundation.

[5] And another quote from chapter 31, again referring to his pity and truth:

For as truly as there is in God a quality of pity and compassion, so truly is there in God a quality of thirst and longing; and the power of this longing in Christ enables us to respond to his longing, and without this no soul comes to heaven. And this quality of longing and thirst comes from God's everlasting goodness, just as the quality of pity comes from his everlasting goodness. And though he may have both longing and pity, they are different qualities, as I see them; making the point of his spiritual thirst, which will persist in him so long as we are in need, and will draw us up into his bliss.

Remembering the wounds Julian prayed for, you can see how they are in a way Christ's own wounds. He is longing and we are longing.

He has compassion and we take pity. He suffered for us and we suffer from our own brokenness.

[6] **The paradox of Christianity**

But wounds call for healing. They can never be the end, the ultimate purpose. Rather confusingly on one occasion Julian calls them 'medicines', contrition, compassion and longing for God being three means through which all souls come to heaven. This paradox, this notion of healing by means of wounds which is in essence the paradox of our salvation by the cross is I think very close to being the central paradox of Christianity. It is often misunderstood, misinterpreted and not at all easy to understand.

In this respect Julian may be very helpful. The ninth vision or showing for instance is very revealing. When very near to the end of the passion, Julian looks at Jesus on the cross, expecting, fearing to find him quite dead, the expression of his face suddenly changes into an expression of heavenly bliss and at that instant her own feelings turn over from deep sorrow into joy. She understands "that in our Lord's intention we are now on his cross with him in our pains, and in our sufferings we are dying, and with his help and his grace we willingly endure on that cross until the last moment of life. Suddenly he will change his appearance for us, and we shall be with him in heaven"... "But now we are in suffering and in labour with him as our nature requires. And the reason why he suffers is because in his goodness he wishes to make us heirs with him of his joy."

There is much more to be explained on this issue and there is a lot more in the book. The example, the parable of the Lord and his

servant for instance is very revealing. Anyway: pain is not the aim, but joy and fulfilment.

^[7] **Fullness, wholeness and failing**

I said I intended to talk about wholeness and I have only been speaking of wounds.

Wholeness and holiness are what we are longing for. Note there is only one tiny letter of difference between these two words. In Middle English, whole and wholeness are written without w. If I would have had the critical text on disc I would have counted the number of times those words are used. It would be very high. In translations there is generally much less conformity and words like sound, perfect, complete, entire may have been used. Also mark the connection between whole and healing, wholesome and healthy.

The text is also full of the words full, fullness, fulfilment, as opposed to fail (spelled *feyle*) and failing. Those words appear whenever something is incomplete, short, lacking, wanting, and they are etymologically very close to fall (falle) and falling.

You may rightly presume that wholeness and holiness refer mostly to God and to heaven, while failing and falling have something to do with man and with earthly conditions. And still there is some entanglement. I already explained about failing: how Christ chose to share the earthly failing condition of manhood unto the ultimate failure of the cross. In the parable of the lord and his servant Julian even applies the same verb "to fall" be it in a different way when referring to Adam and to the Son.

Would it then surprise you to find the concepts of wholeness and holiness connected not only with the Divine himself, but also with his most beloved creatures and with the universe he created?

[8] **Endless being**

It is, according to Julian, God's wish that we truly know him as "he who is"; he wants us to know him as being pure "Being in himself, endless, that is to say from without beginning and without end. It is curious to note that this knowledge about God stands in no way apart from self-knowledge. In the sentence preceding the foregoing definition of God, Julian "verily saw that our substance is in God", in other words that our being is founded in the Being of God. We'll come back to that later.

Let us first have a look at the third showing, very striking and one of my very favourites. It starts like this:

And after this I saw God in one point (that is to say in my understanding), by which sight I saw that he is in all things.

By what follows we learn that Julian does not primarily want to draw our attention to his divine presence in his creatures, but to the fact that God does everything that is done; that he is the author of every act. The first question to rise immediately is "what is sin?" and the answer will ultimately be "sin is not".

In this third vision Julian goes only so far as to conclude that sin is no act. Later on, in the thirteenth vision she'll proceed to state that sin

has no substance at all, no part in being: that it cannot directly be known, but only indirectly through its consequences, by the pain it causes.

As far as the essence, or rather the non-essence of sin is concerned, I'll leave it at that; fascinated as I am by Julian's description of the fundamental characteristic of God's actions which she qualifies by the term "rightfulness", immediately splitting it up in its two poles "right" and "full". All the works of the Lord are both right and full. In consequence, Julian adds, they do not need the working of mercy or of grace, as in them there is no failing, there are no shortcomings.

This playing on the words has challenged my imagination. I am tempted to visualise this graphically. You can imagine all God's deeds being straightforward like a straight line. They show no deviation and need no restoring. At the same time they are full, round like a circle, lacking nothing, in no need of finishing or fulfilment. Beware: in this showing there is no question of purely human deeds nor sin - those do need to be restored by mercy and complemented by grace but only of the working of God in his creatures.

The idea of representing God's rightfulness simultaneously as a straight line and a full circle is not as irrational as it may seem. The greater the radius of a circle the lesser its arc and the closer this gets to a straight ^[9]line. God being full Being (full like a circle), the greatest of all, without beginning and without end (just like a straight line and like a circle) the paradox of his actions being at the same time perfectly round and perfectly straight makes sense to me.

[10] **The human soul**

The divine rightfulness characterising all his deeds is also God's proper standard of judgement. Julian was astonished to see that divine judgement in a way did not coincide with the judgement of the Holy Church. She wanted to know more about it and prayed God for insight. Moreover she experienced a natural desire for self-knowledge, for knowledge of her own soul.

She saw this soul as being composed of two parts: a natural substance of which we are and that is constantly dwelling in God, and a sensuality. I would qualify this "sensuality" as being our human psychosomatic condition, not our body itself, but our soul as far as it is linked to and conditioned by the body. Both parts are united. made one in Christ. So in God our nature is whole. By this union in God both our substance and our sensuality may truly be called our soul.

It may seem somewhat complicated but by this union you cannot speak of dualism in a strict sense.

In our substance, Julian says, there is a godly will, a good will which never assented to sin nor ever will. God wants us to know that we have this blessed will whole and safe in Christ. He also wants us to know that our beloved soul was preciousy knitted to him in its making, by a knot so subtle and so mighty that it is united in God and made endlessly holy. Furthermore, he wants us to know that all the souls which will be saved in heaven without end are knit in this knot, and united in this union, and made holy in this holiness.

In our substance we are full (complete, perfect) and in our sensuality we fail, which shortcomings God will restore and complement by the

working of mercy and grace, plenteously flowing into us by his own natural goodness.

The reason of the difference between divine and human judgement is their different point of application.

God judges us according to our natural substance, which has in it a godly will and is kept one in him, whole and safe without end. This is a judgement by the divine standard of rightfulness.

Man judges us in our changeable sensuality, which now seems one thing and now another as it draws on one part or the other and as it shows in external appearance.

In God Julian could find no kind of blame to anyone who will be saved, no kind of wrath. God is always one and unchangeable in love. If he ^[11]could be angry for only one moment we should neither have life nor place nor being. As truly as we have our being from the endless power, wisdom and goodness of God, just as truly we have our preservation in his endless power, wisdom and goodness.

^[12] **Shifting the borders**

In the third vision Julian has contemplated the rightfulness of God's works and she had to admit that all is well.

In the thirteenth vision she received the Lord's promise that 'all shall be well' in spite of human failings. Because of his unchangeable

rightfulness, his unity, his eternal love, the consistency of his acts and purpose he shall protect and preserve us in our falling, restore us through his mercy, bring us to fulfilment through his grace, gather us all into him.

Because of this unity of all men in Christ, because of his gathering and unifying activity, throughout the book Julian has gradually been taught to overstep the individual level. She has learned to look at reality from a general point of view (because everything has to be taken "in general", nothing "in particular") and go beyond the individual border of personal tribulation.

She has learned to place all things in a general setting and, doing so, to understand the unity among all and everything, the unity of creation as a whole.

Already in the ninth chapter, at the end of the first showing, she states: "For if I look at myself alone, I am nothing at all. But in general I am, I hope, in unity of love with all my fellow-Christians. For it is in this unity that the life of all men stands firm. For God is all that is good, he has made all that is made and he loves all he has made. And he who generally loves his fellow-men because of God also loves all that is (exists). For in mankind that shall be saved is comprehended all, that is to say all that is made and the maker of all. For in man is God and in God is all. And he who loves thus loves all."

As the strength and the foundation of the entire revelation was already tied up in the first showing, the conclusion of this first vision may be seen as a general outcome. What we see is a marked broadening of Julian's range of vision, a certain move from individualism to solidarity and cosmic unity; gradually leaving the

narrow perspective of human short-sightedness in order to enter into the divine perspective of eternity.

All we have to do is to put our trust in God.

Verda Valkenborgh

