

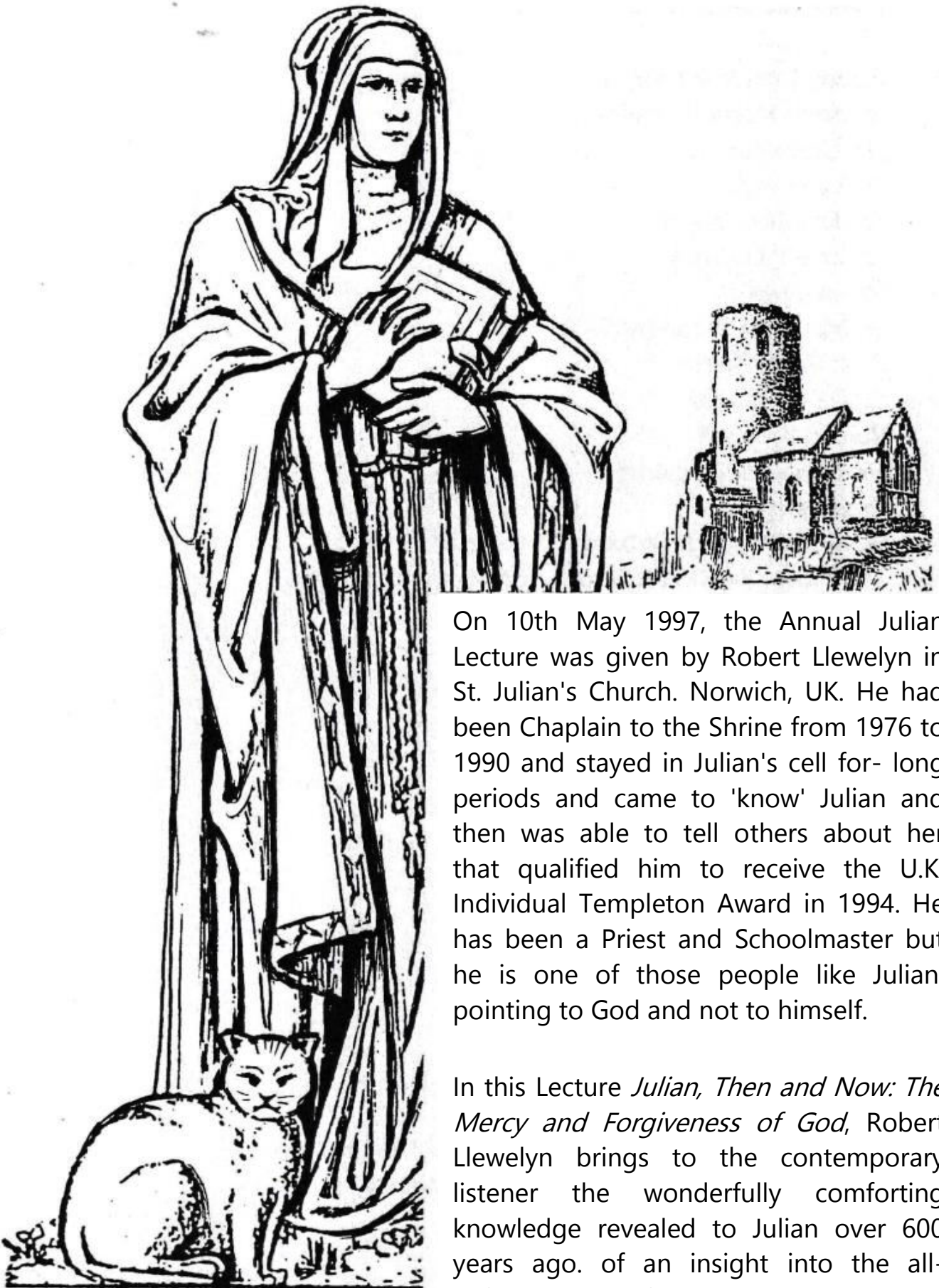
The Julian Lecture 1997

The Mercy & Forgiveness of God



Robert Llewelyn





On 10th May 1997, the Annual Julian Lecture was given by Robert Llewelyn in St. Julian's Church, Norwich, UK. He had been Chaplain to the Shrine from 1976 to 1990 and stayed in Julian's cell for- long periods and came to 'know' Julian and then was able to tell others about her that qualified him to receive the U.K. Individual Templeton Award in 1994. He has been a Priest and Schoolmaster but he is one of those people like Julian, pointing to God and not to himself.

In this Lecture *Julian, Then and Now: The Mercy and Forgiveness of God*, Robert Llewelyn brings to the contemporary listener the wonderfully comforting knowledge revealed to Julian over 600 years ago. of an insight into the all-enfolding love of God.

The text of this Lecture also appears in the book
Memories and Reflections
By Robert Llewelyn,
Published by Darton Longman and Todd.

Other DLT publications include the *Enfolded in Love* series,
of which Robert Llewelyn was the general editor.

He also wrote
Our Duty and Our Joy,
With Pity Not With Blame
and edited
Circles of Silence

[1] Julian, then and now: the mercy and forgiveness of God

Julian is known to us today almost only through her book *Revelations of Divine Love*, now widely acknowledged throughout the Christian world as one of the great classics of the spiritual life. Of independent contemporary witness there is simply the evidence of several wills, the record of a visit for spiritual counsel from the colourful Margery Kempe, and a mention from a scribe-editor in a brief introduction to the shorter version of her book. There he refers to Julian as a 'devout woman, who is a recluse at Norwich and still alive, AD 1413'. For the rest there is silence.

There are two versions of Julian's book of which the first was almost certainly written shortly after she received her sixteen showings of the love of God, fifteen in the early hours of May 8th 1373, and the sixteenth on the following night. After meditating upon her visions for many years she wrote an extended version which was completed in 1393. Almost certainly at some time between these dates she became an anchoress, living in a cell attached to St Julian's Church in Norwich. It is generally assumed that Julian took her name from the church which would then have been about four hundred years old.

Julian tells us that at the time of the showings she was thirty and a half years old and we thus know that she was born towards the end of 1342. She also tells us that in her young life she had prayed for three graces to be given her if it were God's will: the first that she might be given a revelation of Christ's passion, the second that she might receive a bodily illness so severe that she would think that she would die, and the third that she might receive three wounds - the wound of contrition, the wound of compassion, and the wound of a longing of her will for God. The first two requests, she said, had passed from her mind but the third was with her continually. On that memorable day, falling that year on the third Sunday after Easter, her prayer was granted.

Julian had been lying desperately ill for about a week. In the early hours of May 8th, with her mother and friends at her bedside, the parish priest ^[2]came to administer the last rites. Even as she was seemingly sinking into death, her eyes fastened upon a crucifix held before her by a serving boy, her life was remarkably restored. 'Suddenly all my pain was taken away and I was as fit and well as I have ever been'. The showings, centred upon the Holy Trinity and the Passion of Jesus, followed at once.

In reading Julian's book it is important to bear in mind for whom it was written. The scribe who adds a colophon at the end of the longer version expresses the fear lest it should fall into the hands of the impious and thus be misunderstood and misapplied. 'It is' he tells us 'for God's faithful lovers', echoing Julian's own words that she is writing 'for men and women who, for God's love, hate sin and turn themselves to do God's will.' To such people, her 'even-Christians' as she calls them, she frequently refers. In the colophon to which I have referred, *Revelations* is admirably summarized as 'a sublime and wonderful revelation of the unutterable love of God'. Simply to read the book prayerfully as a form of spiritual reading, without pausing to puzzle out the more difficult theological points - that will be a rewarding study later - is to expose oneself to be drenched in the all-embracing love of God, its length and breadth and depth and height, as St Paul speaks of it.

But Julian is not simply a devotional writer whose treatise brings renewed hope and strength to troubled souls. She is, too, as is increasingly recognised today, an astute and perceptive theologian who has profound and important things to say, and who brings to bear new insights in the interpretation of God's love and purpose. Thomas Merton, who refers to her as a 'true theologian', regarded her as one of the two greatest English theologians of all time, and Richard Harries, now Bishop of Oxford, has, in a radio programme, speaking in a wider context, wondered if she may not one day be seen as the greatest woman this country has produced. With such tributes it behoves us to take Julian seriously and to listen carefully to what she has to say. Theology and devotion come together in Julian as they should always do in works of spirituality and the value of her book as a devotional manual springs directly out of its theological integrity.

In her recent study of Julian, Grace Jantzen aptly comments that 'Julian will settle neither for an undevotional theology nor for an untheological devotion'.

[3] **A wrath-free God**

As Julian piles up image upon image to bring home to us the unutterable and inexhaustible love of God certain features stand out. One is the constancy of God's love. No power in heaven or on earth - and that includes sin - can stop God loving us. God's love, which is pure compassion, will search us out to the end in whatever state we may be. In this love there is, and can be no wrath, a statement made by Julian no less than ten times, and four times she tells us it formed a part of each of her sixteen showings. When we fall into sin, it may seem to us (says Julian) that God is angry with us. But that is an appearance only. As Canon Michael McLean so well puts it 'what we call anger (in God) is simply a name to express the sensation caused in a sinner by the fire of God's love.' The wrath, in fact, as Julian explains, is in us, and not in God, and when we are once again restored through grace (still following Julian) we shall 'see' that God was with us all the time, drawing us back to himself in tender love, even though we could not see it in that way at the time. The word 'wrath' for Julian, I should explain, has a wider meaning than plain anger but includes, in her own words, 'everything which is opposed to peace and love'. (chapter 48)

Julian's teaching on the wrath-free nature of the love of God is made explicit in the fourteenth revelation which begins at chapter 41 and ends with chapter 63. It is not possible to quote much here, but those who are interested may care to consult chapters 45 to 49 of

the *Revelations*. Julian was greatly exercised in her mind because her own revelation appeared to be at variance with the teaching of the Church, which taught her that sinners deserved blame and wrath. She refers to what was made known to her directly as the higher judgement whilst the lower judgment was what she received through the Church. And this lower judgement, she is at pains to say, she could by no means ignore. She writes in chapter 46:

And so in all this contemplation it seemed to me that it was necessary to see and to know that we are sinners and commit many evil deeds which we ought to forsake, and leave many deeds undone which we ought to do, so that we deserve pain, blame and wrath. And despite all this, I saw truly that our Lord was never angry, and never will be. Because he is God, he is good, he is truth, he is love, he is peace; and his power, his wisdom, his Charity and his unity ^[4]do not allow him to be angry. For I saw truly that it is against the property of his power to be angry, and against the property of his wisdom and against the property of his goodness. God is that goodness which cannot be angry for God is nothing but goodness. Our soul is united to him who is unchangeable goodness. And between God and our soul there is neither wrath nor forgiveness in his sight.

The passage is clear as it stands and needs no comment. But the last sentence may to some come as something of a shock. 'Between God and our soul there is neither wrath nor forgiveness in his sight'. It is a carefully worded and logical sentence. For if there is no wrath in God it must follow that there is no forgiveness in his sight. Julian repeats that thought three chapters later where she writes, "Our Lord God cannot in his own judgement forgive, because he cannot be angry - that would be impossible." The reason God cannot forgive is because

he has already done so. The reason I cannot come to this church is because I am already here. Yet it is not quite so simple as that because there was a time when I came to this church but there was no point in time when God forgave.

Julian is speaking here in a strictly logical and theological sense. There is no moment in time when God forgives because there can be no moment of time when he has been unforgiving. She doesn't always speak in this sense (notice how carefully she has qualified her sentences with 'in his sight' and 'in his own judgement'); at other times she uses the word forgiveness in the ordinary sense in which we use it. Thus in chapter 40 we have the sentence, 'And then we hope that God has forgiven our sin; and this is true.' And again in the same chapter we have, 'So sins are forgiven by grace and mercy' And it is in this sense I shall continue to speak.

Personal application

What bearing does Julian's teaching at this point have on our own lives? Let me speak in personal terms and from there we can make application to ourselves. For most of my life I have believed that if I sinned against God and repented then God would forgive me my sin. And this is a blessed truth. But Julian's truth is yet more blessed. For Julian's truth is that if I sin against God and don't repent then God still forgives me, though, (and ^[5]this is vital), I can only appropriate that forgiveness, take it in to myself and make it my own, after I have turned to him again. But the forgiveness is already there, whether I choose to take it or not. Julian is shown that God's love is pure compassion. This compassion, or we might say this all-forgiving love (for in him is no wrath) is streaming out to us all the time from the

arms of God. It is there for the taking. And there is nothing I can do, however deeply I fall from grace, to turn that all-compassionate love into wrath. As Julian says 'if God could be angry for any time, we should neither have life or place or being' (chapter 49).

An illustration I often use is this. If the sun were shining into your sitting room you could, if you wished, draw the curtains and live in the dark. But one thing you could never do, however thick the curtains and deep the darkness, you could never turn the sun's light into darkness. Draw the curtains back and there is the sun's light waiting once more to fill your room with light. And I could, if I wished, draw a curtain across my heart to separate myself from God's all-compassionate love and live in my own little darkness. But one thing I could never do, however thick the veil across my heart, I could not change God's compassionate love into wrath. Draw the curtains back, and there is that all-compassionate love waiting to stream into my life.

The truth may be put otherwise by saying that we may be responsive to God or we may fail to be responsive to God, but God is at all times and in all places responsive to us. God can never fail to be responsive to us. As Julian puts it in chapter 43:

When we pray, the soul is made willing and responsive to God. There is no kind of prayer which can make God more responsive to the soul, for God is always constant in love.

Once we can make it our own, this doctrine of the wrath-free nature of God, we shall find it to be a liberating truth.

We must, however, be careful not to interpret this joyous gospel as though it implied that sin was of little account. Julian is no

sentimentalist. 'Sin', she says, 'is the sharpest lash that any soul may be struck with' (chapter 39). And again 'I was shown no harder hell than sin'. Julian firmly believes in hell, but she knows that it is our wrath and not God's which may take us there, the wrath in ourselves which we have not allowed God's ^[6]compassionate love to quench. Furthermore, as Julian's writings make clear, the wrath-free character of God does not mean that we shall not suffer as our natures are cleansed in the purifying fire of his love. What it means is this: that in our suffering God is on our side. And it is this which makes the difference between hope and despair.

This is not an acceptable theology to some. I doubt if it is often preached in our pulpits. Sermons speaking of God's wrath resting on his sinful people are not uncommon, and preachers who never make reference to God's wrath are also frequent, but sermons which state categorically that the wrath is in us, waiting to be quenched by God's all-compassionate love, are at least sufficiently rare for me never to have heard one myself. This is understandable because they might so easily be misunderstood. For a God for whom no wrath is possible could easily come across to many as a God without backbone, a God without bite, an easy going, apathetic figure, a lax, spoiling person for whom the fleeting happiness of his children is his chief concern.

As a precaution against these dangerous misunderstandings of the nature of God's love it may well be, it seems to me, desirable that in our human vocabulary the word 'wrath' in relation to God should remain. It helps to safeguard certain qualities in God which might otherwise be forgotten. I would list three. It helps to safeguard God's holiness, the righteousness of his love and his abhorrence of evil. Secondly, it safeguards God's passionate concern for our own welfare. God is not indifferent, he cares and he cares mightily all the time. However far and fast we run he will never go away. And the

third truth which the concept of wrath keeps alive is this - the awareness that if we persist in our own selfish ways without reference to the demands of God, as he would relate to each of our lives, then we are moving to our own destruction. But if we choose to keep the word wrath in our own vocabulary we must be quite clear that there is no place for the word, as we understand it, in God's vocabulary. I think we might say of the wrath of God, if the phrase has to be used, and in the Bible, and especially the Old Testament, it often is used, something like this: Just as the so-called foolishness of God is wiser than the wisdom of men, so is the so-called wrath of God more compassionate than the compassion of men.

[7] **Relative and absolute truth**

I think we must see the wrath of God, as expressed so often in the Old Testament and less often in the New Testament, and incidentally never by Jesus, as expressing a relative truth. We are all familiar with relative truths and they serve us well until we are ready to move on to something more absolute. When I was a child I learnt through a well-known hymn that heaven was above the bright blue sky. It was sufficient to go on with but it wouldn't satisfy me now. The doctor gives us a diagnosis in terms relative to our understanding and that tells us how we are to proceed. To his medical colleague he is able to speak in more absolute terms. Sir Isaac Newton brought to light many truths in mathematics and physics, which have served the world well for two hundred and fifty years, when Einstein took us on to a more absolute truth, and I gather we have already moved on a good way from there. In the days of the Old Testament, the Jews were well served for centuries by a sacrificial system which included the day of atonement, but then with the coming of Jesus it came to

be understood that the blood of bulls and goats could never take away sin. So, too, as I see it, belief in the wrath of God is a relative truth serving us well for a while in helping us safeguard truths I have earlier mentioned. And yet if anyone has the image of a wrathful God I would not press to take it from them until they feel ready to move on. We have to come to Julian when we are ready for her and we shall not be helped if we come before our time. It is a safe rule that if ever we have before us an image which is helpful we are not to reject it until we can replace it with another image which is more helpful and takes us closer to the truth. Otherwise the danger is that we shall be left floundering in a spiritual vacuum. Thus if anyone thinks of the devil as a creature with horns and hoofs and tail let them remain with that picture until they can find a better image of the evil which threatens to destroy us all. And if someone thinks of heaven in terms of minstrels playing endlessly upon golden harps, and of streets paved with gold, the image should be retained until something better is possible. This is simple imagery, but it has value, even if limited value, in preserving ideas and realities largely beyond our present comprehension. The point I am wishing to make is that we must hold ourselves open to be taken on in God's time to ^[8]the more absolute truth which Julian offers. And I say 'in God's time' because to do the right thing at the wrong time is in fact to do the wrong thing. For many years, in fact for all of my 66 years before meeting Julian 21 years ago, I have lived in the earlier relative 'wrath of God/mercy of God' truth and it has been a great liberation to come to the other. And since what we believe of God determines our attitude to others this truth has an important social dimension as well.

There is plenty of wrath around. But it is, says Julian, in us and not in God. If Julian were writing today she would be using the terms of modern psychology and would be saying that we project our own

wrath on to God and then see it as God's wrath coming towards us. We are probably all familiar with the process of projection. We ask someone why he was angry with us yesterday only to learn, perhaps, that this was quite untrue, and we realise that it was our anger projected on to him which provoked the question. God's work, for Julian, (it has been forcibly said) is 'to love the hell out of us', for everything in our nature which opposes peace and love - lust and greed, jealousy and covetousness, judgementalism, pride and anger is a little bit of hell which remains in us. As we allow our natures to be exposed to God's all-compassionate love these contrary elements are dissolved. 'I must needs grant', says Julian 'that the purpose of God's mercy and forgiveness is to lessen and quench our anger'. (chapter 48)

The influence of theology on behaviour

What I am saying of the character of God, as Julian expounds it, is, as I have indicated, immensely important for ourselves as individuals, or members of a family, or of the wider society around. For it is an inescapable truth that we ourselves become in character like unto, I will not say the one whom we worship, for that is not quite true, but we become like our mental image of the one we worship. Allow me to illustrate that with a story from my own childhood. When I was six years old I remember walking with my nurse when a Roman Catholic nun in full array walked out of a side street in front of us. To me she was a magnificent sight and to my young eyes she looked like a ship under full sail. I whispered to my nurse, "Isn't she beautiful?" "Hush, you mustn't say that", came the reply, ^[9]"she worships the Virgin Mary." That was enough for me and I felt I must keep off that tack for ever. But I hope that in later years I may have grown wiser. We all

know that instructed Catholics don't worship the Virgin Mary, but there may well be some who in their ignorance of the Church's teaching do exactly that. What I would want to say now is that if there is someone in the world who worships the Virgin Mary and sees in the Virgin Mary the fullness of compassion which Julian saw in God, then that ignorant person is closer to God as he truly is, than his orthodox Catholic brother who worships what he calls God, but whom he sees as a harsh, forbidding wrathful person. That ignorant person will be a true Christian whereas the orthodox brother will present in his living a warped image of God. The importance of Julian is that she has put the all-compassionate nature of Mary, which the Catholic Church delights to proclaim, right into the middle of the Godhead itself.

When Thomas Merton spoke of Julian as being a true theologian he meant she was one whose vision of God was true. We all have our vision of God and in some measure all our visions are off target. Some of us may be but a few degrees to right or left of the bulls-eye, others may be wildly wide. Thomas Merton is saying that of all the people he knew, and he had an extensive knowledge of the saints, Julian's vision was the most true. It is this which is so important, this matter of being on target. For we grow to be, as I have said, into our image of the one we worship. If we see God as a tyrant, we too shall become tyrants, not for most of us on the world scene, but in the family, the church, the school, the hospital, wherever we are. Many of the world's dictators have been religious men. Their tyranny has been but a reflection of what they saw in God. It may be much better to be an atheist than to be a religious person with a seriously distorted image of the one we worship. I say 'may be' because atheists, too, can be tyrants as we know so well from the recent history of the Soviet Union. But a religious person who has a tyrannical image of God is bound to be a tyrant, his tyranny depending on the degree in

which his faith is sincere. The more sincere he is the more thorough it will be. Saul of Tarsus, when persecuting the Church, was a deeply religious man acting consistently with his distorted image of the same God whom Jesus declared.

[10]The thought can be followed through taking one by one the various false images which people hold. The one who worships a Father Christmas God will be kindly and spoiling and sentimental. Not that the original St Nicholas was like that, but then it is hard to see St Nicholas operating in Selfridge's or Sainsbury's. The devotees of a policeman God will have their eyes set on law rather than grace. If, for some, God is seen mainly as the Almighty judge, then they themselves are likely to be censorious and judgemental. If our God is bigoted and narrow we shall be that way too, intolerant of other faiths and of other denominations than our own. The nationalistic God of Battles will make for a warlike tribe or nation. The early settlers in South Africa were religious people whose conception of a racist God has left its mark on centuries of history. Our computer age could well usher in the image of a Company Director God leading the Church to become so overloaded with paper work that the worshipping and pastoral side would be smothered. And so we might go on. For most of us it is not a matter of having one of these distorted images but a mixture of several.

The foregoing, it is hoped, makes it clear that worshippers who attach false images to God will absorb into their characters (more or less according to their measure of devotion) the distortions placed in the Godhead, leading to a consequent aberration of behaviour pattern. A recent writer has said of our love of God that it is the root of all evil, a startling saying, but in the light of what I have written it is easy to see the point he was making. Hence the importance of discovering the true image which an increasing number today

believe Julian's Revelations set before us. Many must have found, as I have found myself, that the undistorted image of the wrath-free, all-compassionate God whose forgiveness is always coming to meet us (for God cannot deny his own nature) which Julian presents, must affect character in the direction of gentleness and forbearance, patience and understanding. The one who absorbs Julian can no longer believe in the 'Vengeance-is-mine-I-will-repay' type of God, excepting in the sense of a vengeance which returns good for evil thereby heaping coals of fire upon the offender's head. (In returning good for evil you will make your offender 'burn with shame' is how the Good News Bible translates. See ^[11]Romans 12: 19-20). I think that many people in discovering Julian feel with me that they have come home. We know there is much to be tempered yet, but we believe ourselves to be in the right house.

Our love for one another must necessarily follow the same pattern as God's love for ourselves, a pattern in which, as we have seen, forgiveness precedes repentance and does not simply follow upon it, even though we know that the appropriation of forgiveness must await a renewed turning to God. Christian behaviour, as I have endeavoured to show, follows directly from Christian theology, and a sub-Christian theology as it is maintained is one which acknowledges wrath in God, must lead to a corresponding modification of our attitudes to one another. The direct link between the two - the nature of God's love for us and our love for one another - is unmistakably set before us in the words of Jesus: 'Love your enemies and pray for your persecutors, only so can you be children of your heavenly Father, who makes his sun to rise on the good and the bad alike, and sends his rain on the honest and dishonest' (Matthew 5:44-45).

It is impossible to pray for one's enemies whilst one is willingly harbouring anger against them. Just as God's forgiveness is always coming towards us, so must our forgiveness be always going out to one another. There can be no saying to my brother or sister, 'You say you are sorry and then I'll forgive you'. My forgiveness must be reaching out to my brother before he is sorry. Though he rejects it, it does not belong to me to withdraw it. It is in fact in the power of our outgoing love to one another that encouragement is offered towards reconciliation. Our brother is to be forgiven before he repents, even though he can only assimilate his forgiveness after he has turned again. I may add two quotations which admirably illustrate this point.

The first from Archbishop Anthony Bloom reads:

One should not expect to be forgiven because one has changed for the better, neither should one make such a change a condition for forgiving other people. It is only because one is forgiven, one is loved, that one can begin to change, not the other way round. And this we should never forget though we always do.

And Dorothy Sayers writes crisply:

While God does not, and man dare not, demand repentance as a condition for bestowing pardon, repentance remains an essential condition for receiving it.

Julian ^[12]is the apostle of reconciliation, her wisdom and sanity transcending all boundaries, and the strong and enduring love she holds out in the name of the crucified and risen Christ, is the only balm which may heal our souls.

If, then, our forgiveness is at all times to go out towards others does that mean we are not to forget? The question is often asked in an international context: 'Is the Christian to forget the evils of the Nazi regime in Germany, the concentration camps, the holocaust?' The answer is clear. We are no more to forget the tyranny against which we fought, than we are to forget the yet greater evil, the crucifixion of the Son of God. There it stands, the cross of Jesus, on the pages of history, and must ever stand for all to see. The Church enshrines its memory in the heart of its liturgy and every time we say the creed we recall his death. But we are to forget in the sense that we are no longer to hold the remembrance of the scene against those who laid him bare, and this sort of forgetting is what we mean by forgiveness. Or to put it otherwise, God does not require us to forget, forgetting is in fact an impossibility where any event affects us deeply (can any forget a war time bereavement?) but God does require us to forgive and by his grace we are enabled to do so. If we do not, hoping thereby to punish another, time will only reveal that we have punished ourselves. It is not for us to sit in moral judgment upon any person, and in any case by what measuring line do we measure the extent of another's sin against that of our own? It may be that the hearts of some are hardened and that they cannot receive the forgiveness which God or man is offering to them. Nevertheless the spirit of forgiveness must continue to flow and, lest it be betrayed into condescension, it must flow in the remembrance of the forgiveness which we have received of God and which we all need of one another.

The harm of continued self-blame

These thoughts take me on to our next Julian theme. God does not blame us for our sins. This is not just an isolated thought in Julian's writings. She returns to it no less than ten times. God is not in the business of blaming. But it is a thought which worried her because her revelation was here contrary to all that the Church had led her to believe. 'I saw our Lord', she^[13] writes, "putting no more blame on us than if we were as clean and holy as the angels in heaven.' (chapter 50). Julian, we remember, is writing for her 'even-Christians', for people such as ourselves who are often despondent over our failures, and yet who long to grow in the knowledge and love of God. For such people, Julian sees clearly, self-blame, especially where it is prolonged, will be a serious stumbling block to our growth in Christ. Julian's picture is that after a fall her even-Christians should make a brief act of contrition ('Do not blame yourself too much', she writes in chapter 77) and then go on their way without looking back in self-recrimination. Too often we blame ourselves, not realising that such irritation with ourselves is in reality pride sheltering under the guise of humility. The primary meaning of the Greek word for forgiveness (aphesis) is release, in this context release from guilt and fear. Julian was greatly concerned to tell her readers that it is not God who would bind us, but rather that we, through want of faith in his promises so often fail to take possession of the release God is offering us.

What lies at the heart of the matter is this. We mistake our self-blame for humility. In chapter 73 Julian is speaking to a situation in which we cannot let go of our past sins. In Julian's own words:

When we begin to hate sin and to amend ourselves according to the laws of Holy Church, there still persists a

fear which hinders us, by looking at ourselves and our sins committed in the past, and some of us because of everyday sins... And the perception of this makes us so woe begone and depressed that we cannot see any consolation.

And here comes the punch line: 'sometimes we mistake this fear for humility'. But it is not humility, says Julian, but 'a reprehensible blindness and weakness'. But she adds that whilst we are able to despise other sins, we are unable to despise this one for the simple reason that we are unable to recognise it as sin, kidding ourselves all the time that we are being humble. Here we have a not uncommon example of pride masquerading as humility. We think we are honouring God in continuing with self-blame but in truth we are dishonouring him, blaspheming him would not be too strong a word, because we are denying the generosity of God's love. We are blind (Julian argues) as to the nature of love and because of this blindness we make a mistaken response to God. True humility, Julian ^[14]would have us know, comes not from the denial of God's love but from its acknowledgement, 'for love makes his power and wisdom very humble to us. We have measured God's love by our own, but so far is it beyond our own that 'no creature can comprehend how greatly, how sweetly and how tenderly our maker loves us' (chapter 6). Our horizons are limited by our poverty in love. We have to break through the barrier by faith so that we may reach God's perspective, and when we have done this we shall see self-blame for what it is, an indulgence on our part enabling us to live within our sterile limitations at the expense of dishonouring God.

Here is a true story. The details may not be exact but the point remains. Wendy went to spend a few days with her friend Anne. On Anne's mantelpiece was a beautiful piece of Dresden china given her by her father shortly before he died. Wendy admired it, took it into

her hands and let it slip to the floor where it now lay in many pieces. Her apologies were profuse. How could she be so clumsy, and with something so beautiful and so valuable? Moreover, since it had sentimental as well as market value it was irreplaceable. How could she ever forgive herself for being so careless? Anne took it well, telling Wendy that accidents happen to everyone, that she must put the matter behind her, that she freely forgave her and that she really must forgive herself. But Wendy could not let the matter rest. Time and again through the morning she would refer to her calamity, blaming herself anew and apologising again and again.

Finally Anne spoke out plainly: "Wendy, you have come to spend three days with me, you have already ruined the first morning for both of us and if you go on in the same way you will ruin the whole visit. For God's sake put the matter behind you and don't refer to the incident again. If you could see things in a right proportion you would know that the breaking of the china is quite a small thing compared with all the negativity, the wallowing in self-blame and guilt, and the destruction you have brought to my house." It was exactly the plain speaking Wendy needed, for in some perverse way she thought she was doing something praiseworthy in her continued expressions of blame, and from then on relationships began to improve and at least two days were not wasted. If I were to say that God speaks to us when we persist in self-blame in much the same way as Anne spoke to ^[15]Wendy, I would not be misinterpreting Julian's teaching at this point. Perhaps we have here a simple parable on which many might profitably reflect.

There is a great deal in Julian's writings which supports what has been said, often directly when she returns to the subject of blame (more than ten times) and even more often when she speaks of the joy in which we should live because God is working out his salvation

in us. Self-blame, whereby we return again and again in a spirit of remorse to the failures of the past is, of course, the enemy of that joy. That is why Julian sees it as the hammer blow of the devil. 'Our enemy', she writes, 'tries to depress us with false fears which he proposes. His intention is to make us so weary and dejected, that we let the sight of our everlasting friend slip from our minds' (chapter 76). But the enemy is the great deceiver, the father of lies as Jesus describes him. The truth belongs to God. And God's truth, as it was to her astonishment' shown to Julian was that God looked upon his servant 'with pity and not with blame' (chapter 82). Indeed she goes further and says that all that has been a shame to those who shall be saved shall be turned into honour and joy (chapter 39). And further still, that when our healing is complete our wounds shall be seen by God 'not as wounds but as honours' (chapter 39). Julian's teaching in this whole area in which we have been speaking is, in her great parable of the Lord and the servant, linked to the atoning work of Jesus. She writes: 'So has our good Lord Jesus taken upon himself all our blame; and therefore our Father may not, does not wish to assign more blame to us than to his own beloved son Jesus Christ'. (chapter 51). There is an echo of that life-bearing sentence in George Herbert's well-loved poem, Love bade me welcome. 'And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame'? The whole poem, we may note in passing, is pure Julian.

Justice swallowed up in mercy

What I have written, or rather what Julian has written, must seem shocking to some. If all this be true what becomes of God's justice? The possibility of God being angry has already been denied. Is God's justice to be swept away as well? The answer is yes: in the logic of

Julian's thought God's justice has to go. God is unjust, that is to say if we measure ^[16]justice by our ordinary accepted standards. To soften the shock it might be put like this. 'Just as the foolishness of God is wiser than the wisdom of men, so is the injustice of God more just than the justice of men'. Or more simply: 'God's injustice is the highest form of justice'. That accords well with something Pope John Paul II has written: 'True mercy is the most profound form of justice'. In Julian we find 'justice is swallowed up in mercy'. I take the phrase from Canon A. M. Allchin though he is using it, not of Julian, but of a saint who in many ways is very close to her, Isaac of Syria. Isaac spells out this theme in a way in which Julian does not and it will be worth following him through for a few minutes. Isaac, by way of introduction, was Bishop of Nineveh in the seventh century. He is held to be one of the greatest writers in the Christian East and in the Orthodox Church he is undergoing a renaissance today.

Isaac writes as follows:

Do not speak of God as just, for his justice is not in evidence in his actions towards you. How can you call God just when you read the gospel lesson concerning the hiring of the workmen in the vineyard? How can someone call God just when he comes across the story of the prodigal son who frittered away all his belongings in riotous living - yet merely in response to his contrition his father ran and fell on his neck and gave him authority over all his possessions?...It is God's own son who testifies about him in this way. Where then is this 'justice' in God, seeing that, although we were sinners, Christ died for us. If he is so compassionate in this, we have faith that he will not change.

Justice and mercy, as we commonly use those words, are concepts we need in a fallen world to help hold the fabric of society together. No law court could run on the principle of the parable of the prodigal son, and no business could flourish on the example of the labourers in the vineyard. And yet those parables remain valid in portraying the nature of God's dealing with us. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, saith the Lord' (Isaiah 55:9).

The point we have to learn is this: God's justice is revealed not in the way in which we ordinarily think according to our customary usage of that word, but in the way in which we respond to his mercy. Look back to the ^[17]parable of the prodigal son. Take a look at the elder brother. I picture him as a diligent, dutiful, hard-working young man, a fair overseer on the farm, a moral and upright person. And how was he judged? He was judged by the manner in which he responded (or more accurately, in this case failed to respond) to his father's mercy. He could not accept the compassionate forgiving love of God shown to his brother and so he was excluded from the celebration. Look at the labourers in the vineyard. They too were judged by their incapacity to respond to the compassion of the owner of the vineyard.

What I am saying has been vividly portrayed in one of the most insightful books of the Old Testament, the book of Jonah. Jonah was told by God to go to preach to the city of Nineveh, a city notorious for its wickedness, but instead Jonah ran in the other direction and tried to take a ship to Spain. This is not the place to follow Jonah in the adventures ascribed to him. It is enough to say that they led him to repentance and that when God asked him a second time to go to Nineveh he at once obeyed. Why did he refuse in the first place? It was not because he was afraid for his own skin. But in another sense

he was afraid, he was afraid Nineveh would hear his message and repent. He knew how great was the depths of God's mercy and he couldn't bear to see it exercised on a city so wicked as Nineveh. You will remember, that in response to Jonah's preaching Nineveh did repent and the allegory tells how the king and the people and even the animals wore sackcloth and fasted. And God, just as Jonah had expected, forgave them. And now, Jonah, thoroughly angry, explains his behaviour. I quote from the Good News Bible (Jonah 4:2).

Lord, didn't I say before I left home that that is just what you would do? That's why I did my best to run away to Spain! I knew that you are a loving and merciful God, always patient, always kind, and always ready to change your mind and not punish.

And God gently rebuked Jonah for his anger. That isn't the end of the story but it is all that we need for our purpose. The question I want to ask is how was Jonah judged? He was judged by the way in which he failed to respond to God's mercy on the people of Nineveh.

Or take the case of the two dying thieves on Calvary. Luke tells us that ^[18]one of them hurled insults at Jesus:

Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us'. But the other said, 'We deserve our fate, but he has done nothing wrong. Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom.

And Jesus assured him that that day he would be with him in Paradise.

This man had no opportunity to live out a changed life or to make reparation. He was judged purely on his response to God's mercy.

His companion could receive no promise because he was unable to respond to the mercy which was equally available to them both.

Sharing in the heavenly banquet

Julian would, of course, have followed us in all that has just been said. The underlying theme of her book is a witness to that. Let us put the Bible aside and try to see this in contemporary terms. I ask you to imagine a member of your church, a person of upright character and well respected in the congregation (as Jonah would have been in the synagogue) dying and presenting themselves for admission at the doorway of heaven.

But before the door opens our church member becomes aware of another figure awaiting admission, a figure from the distant past, perhaps, recognised as one who had been of 'unsavoury' character, or, perhaps, a figure known indirectly through the mass media, maybe someone held up before the public eye as an icon of evil. And instead of rejoicing with the angels of God that this person has found repentance and forgiveness, our parish member draws back and the portals open and the penitent passes through. Like the elder brother of the parable our parish member is unwilling to share the heavenly banquet with company such as this. He is judged by the manner in which he responds, or in this case fails to respond, to God's mercy to the one who has been welcomed within. An unforgiving soul can never be in heaven, not because of any arbitrary decision on God's part (God continues to love an unforgiving soul) but simply because heaven would cease to be heaven if an unforgiving soul were somehow to slip in. That church member could, of course, be any of us. Even so we would know that there

would be those who would be praying here below that the good work God had begun in us might be perfected in the day of Jesus Christ. That perfection would consist in the cleansing away of the elements ^[19]of self-righteousness which remained. Only then can 'those who will be saved' be one and all 'right merry in heaven' for they will be rejoicing not only in their own salvation but in the salvation of all who share their bliss.

I am not saying it is easy to forgive. It may be that forgiveness needs more grace than anything else we are ever asked to do. Forgiveness presents a great challenge to us all especially where the injury has been done against ourselves or those whom we dearly love. Perfection in forgiveness goes hand in hand with perfection in humility. We should not therefore be surprised if we cannot forgive as generously as we would wish. Forgiveness has to be worked at like everything else in the Christian life. So long as we are willing to forgive and our hearts are opened in prayer for the other person, God will work upon that until full forgiveness is possible. The more we are able to enter into the reality of all that God has forgiven us the more possible it will be for us to forgive others.

And here we come back to Julian for I do not know that anyone has spoken more tenderly in relationship to the sins of others.

The soul which would remain at peace when another's sins come to mind, must fly as from the pains of hell asking God's protection and help. Looking at another's sin clouds the eyes of the soul hiding for the time being the fair beauty of God - unless we look upon this sinner with contrition with him, compassion on him, and a holy longing to God for him. Otherwise it must harm and disquiet and hinder the soul that looks on these sins. (chapter76)

Sometimes in India I would walk round the garth of the Cowley fathers and Wantage sisters, the cemetery of those who had lived their lives in the joys and sorrows of India. And on each grave was a simple wooden cross with just two words written on it: 'Jesus, mercy'. You cannot get deeper than that. And that is where Julian was and where we all have to be. Julian writes:

He who is highest and closest to God may see himself - and needs to do so - as a sinner like me; and I who am the least and lowest who shall be saved may be comforted with him who is the highest (chapter 78). And now, by way of closing, I would like to read a remarkable prayer. It is a poem prayer, written by Lord Hailsham as the epilogue to his autobiographical book, *A Sparrow's Flight*. As the prologue to his book, ^[20]Lord Hailsham has quoted a well-known passage from the Venerable Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*. At an assembly near York in the year 627, before Eadwine, the pagan king of Northumbria, an unknown member has spoken. "Such", he said, "O king, seems to me the present life on earth, as if... on a winter's night a sparrow should swiftly fly into the hall and, coming in one door, instantly fly out through another... Somewhat like this appears the life of man. But of what follows or what went before we are utterly ignorant."

Taking up this theme, Lord Hailsham calls his poem 'The Sparrow's Prayer':

Father, before this sparrow's earthly flight Ends in the darkness of a winter's night; Father, without whose word no sparrow falls, Hear this, Thy weary sparrow, when he calls. Mercy, not justice, is his contrite prayer, Cancel his guilt and drive away despair; Speak but the word, and make his spirit whole, Cleanse the dark places of his heart and soul. Speak but the

*word, and set his spirit free; Mercy, not justice, still his
constant plea. So shall Thy sparrow, crumpled wings restored,
Soar like a lark, and glorify his Lord.*

Robert Llewelyn

