

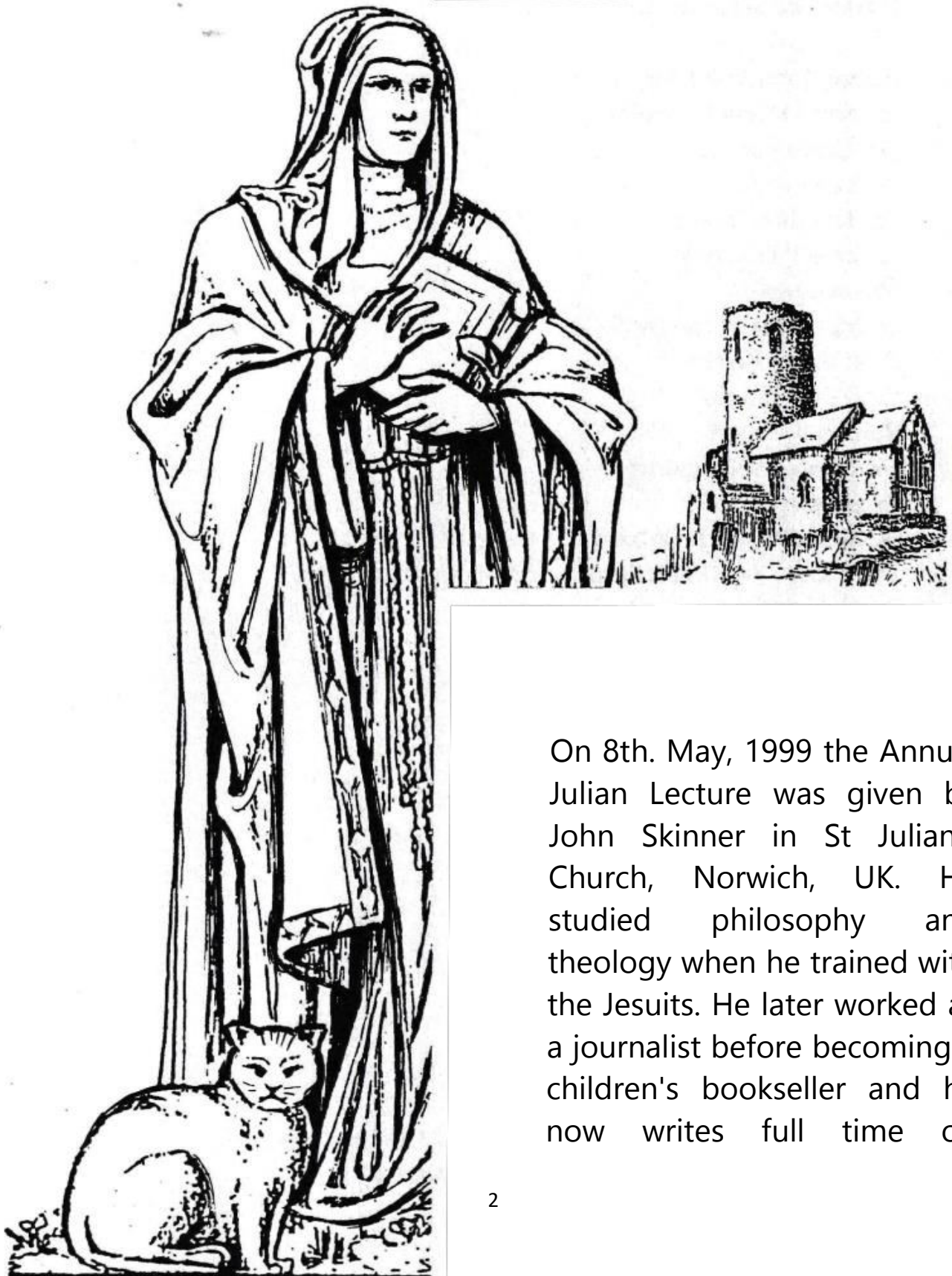
The Julian Lecture 1999

The Lord and His Servant



John Skinner





On 8th. May, 1999 the Annual Julian Lecture was given by John Skinner in St Julian's Church, Norwich, UK. He studied philosophy and theology when he trained with the Jesuits. He later worked as a journalist before becoming a children's bookseller and he now writes full time on

spiritual topics. In 1996 he published *Julian of Norwich, A Revelation of Love - A New Translation*. John has also written *The Book of Margery Kempe*, *The Confession of Patrick*, *Hear Our Silence*, a portrait of the Carthusians, *The Monastic Reader* and *An Augustinian Reader*.

In this Lecture, John Skinner explores Julian's Revelation 'The Lord and His Servant'.

[2] **The Lord and His Servant by John Skinner**

I would like you to receive this offering as an enactment rather than lecture. An invitation to story-telling: you should perhaps listen more with your heart than your ears, visualize in your inner imagination rather than seek to understand in your head. I think perhaps this was her way.

Although Julian's writings are presented to us in the shape of a book, *Revelation of Love* is not a book in the ordinary sense of the word. I believe most of our difficulties, and let us be honest among ourselves: we do find Julian difficult much of the time - stem from this misapprehension. From the very outset, we need to understand the way she wrote her 'book'. We need to approach it with a good deal more caution. Her writings were accumulated rather than written. Painstakingly and over years, Julian attended to her original experience her near death illness which she suffered on this very day in May 626 years ago. She found depths in them that she had never expected; and far from becoming more and more complex, as she lived her daily life in this cell their 'meaning' became ever simpler. Perhaps our approach to Julian's experience, which we must necessarily access by means of her writings, should be rather like an archaeological dig. Each successive layer should be noted, respected, labelled as we steadily build our understanding as she did herself and make our own that very same meaning.

It is tempting, isn't it, and I know we have all done it, to play the guessing game with Julian and go in search of historical facts. Who was she? What was she like? Was she married? Did she have children? Was her father ever mayor of Norwich? Where was she schooled? But all such questions are irrelevant. Julian in her compelling generosity left us a deeply personal account of her inner

journey, the true story of her soul. More than that: she offers us, her 'even Christians', an invitation to follow her in the unfolding meaning of her experience. Time and again she tells us, begs us even, to believe that her experience was not given to her alone but offered through her agency to every ^[3]human being of good will. So how best to begin to listen to Julian's message with our heart?

When Julian was a small girl living in Norwich, one of the most exciting weeks in the whole year must have been Whit Week when the story-carts belonging to the Guilds trundled round the streets performing their vivid stories of our salvation in living tableaux. She would have seen, for instance, enactments of 'the Creation of the World', the 'Hell cart', 'Noah's ship' and 'Paradise'. Now it seems to me highly likely that Julian's girlhood memories of such events coloured her account of the remarkable play within a play she offers us in chapter fifty one.

The enactment of the Lord and his Servant, this play within a play, is difficult to fit into the Sixteen Showings. At first sight, this chapter stands outside the main text, Julian's account and subsequent unfolding of what she finally declares to be 'his meaning'. But it is my conviction that precisely because it appears to stand apart, this most significant chapter is at the very heart of her quest for the overall meaning of the showings. Julian has a grave difficulty: God's meaning, his purpose for humanity, 'the most pleasing of all his works', seems utterly hindered by sin. And it is her preoccupation with this spanner in the works, namely sin, that at once appears so real by its damaging effects and yet so unreal - 'I saw no sin' since 'God does all that is done' - which causes her finally to pray for fresh enlightenment. She does so in the chapter (50) which precedes our present enactment account. This begins with one of those resounding statements so typical of Julian: yet another bold and

original statement clangs its message of comfort like bells peeling their joyful summons to a village wedding:

In this mortal life, mercy and forgiveness is the path that leads us steadily to grace. And because of the tempest and sorrow that fall across our way, we are often dead, according to mankind's judgement on earth; yet in the sight of God, the soul that shall be saved was never dead nor will it be.

[4] Fine for her to state that this is so: she has her God given reasons:

See I never lift my hands off my own works, nor ever shall, without end. See I lead all thing to the end I ordained for it from without beginning with the same might, wisdom and love that I made it. How should anything be amiss?

Yet the contradiction of opposites - God who is always active and sin that everywhere abounds - is beyond her. Which prompts her petition:

Good Lord, I see that You are very truth, and I well know that we sin grievously every day and are much to be blamed; and I can never avoid this truth, yet on your part, I can see no suggestion of blame. How may this be so?

Julian's prayer is answered in the extraordinary chapter which is her longest by far and stands apart from the rest of her book. When, however, we examine it in detail and stay with its meaning, just as Julian did, we find that it is the key to her message as a whole. Think of this parable as the hub of one of those great wheels of the story-carts long ago. The spokes are her Sixteen Showings, they radiate out from, and they point back into the central hub, a kind of continuous

dialogue. This great wooden hub lies at the centre of the wheel and it keys the whole together. Once the outer iron rim has been shrunk into place, the wheelwright plunging it into a trough of cold water, the wheel is ready to roll. It can be fixed onto the cart and commence its useful work. So let us begin to examine, with all Julian's deliberate diligence, her strange parable:

I was shown two persons in bodily likeness, namely a lord and a servant, and at the same time God gave me spiritual understanding. The lord sits solemnly in rest and in peace, while the servant stands by, reverently before his lord, ready to do his lord's will. The lord looks upon his servant with very sweet and loving gaze, and then meekly he sends him to a certain place to do his will. The servant not only goes, but he starts ^[5]suddenly and runs with great haste for the love he has to do his lord's will. And straightway he falls into a boggy dell and takes very great hurt. And then he groans and moans and wails and writhes, but neither can he rise up nor may he help himself in any way. And in of all this, the most mischief that I saw for him was his lack of comfort; for he could not turn his face and look towards his loving lord, who, still very close to him, was his only comfort. But like a man, for the time being, disabled and out of his wits, all he had feeling for was his own pain and the woes he suffered.

And in this servant's woe Julian describes 'seven great pains': as he fell he 'was sore bruised'; his body was heavy as well as feeble; he was also 'blinded in his reason and stunned in his mind' such that 'he almost forgot his great love'. Again, he was stuck where he was and

could not rise: worse still he lay alone-with no help in sight. Finally, 'the place he lay in was throughout its length both hard and grievous. I wondered how this servant might suffer all this woe so meekly.' Here we have the shapings of an answer to Julian's question: God is intimately involved in the workings of our human existence, yet that life is sin-laden: how may this be? But as yet, she herself still cannot see any meaningful shape. We are the servant fallen in the boggy dell. We cannot help our condition, which much of the time is mighty painful. Julian's sevenfold great pains. And all because we set out to do our Lord's bidding.

A wise Australian friend of mine has written: 'it is said that God loves the sinner and hates the sin. I wonder if God might not care less about the sin, except in its consequences for the sinner and for others.' An observation surely borne out by Christ's attitude and relationship with sinners and their alleged crimes; the Samaritan woman, the woman taken in adultery, his companion in death, crucified alongside him, a man who had been a lifelong thief.

At this point in our play, Julian continues, the courteous lord speaks his mind:

[6] Lo, lo, my beloved servant. What harm and disease he has taken in the service he undertook for my love, yes, and with such good will! Is it not right that I reward him for his terror and his fright, his hurt and his wounds and all his woe? And not only this, does it not fall to me to give him a gift that would be better and more reward to him than ever he was before? Or else it seems I give him no thanks at all.

And at once, 'this parable vanished' reports Julian, but not before a spiritual showing of the lord's meaning 'flooded my soul'. It simply

had to be 'that this most dear servant whom he so loved... should be rewarded truly and blissfully without end more than ever he had been before his fall. Yes, and to such a degree that his falling and all the woe he thereby suffered should become a high, surmounting honour and his endless bliss.'

O Felix Culpa:¹ what happy fall, Adam's sin was needed: by its means we gained our great Redeemer.

'The parable vanished... Yet its fascination never left me.' She knew that somewhere, somehow it contains the answer to her question about sin. She speaks of a 'three-in-one teaching'. First of all she has learned a good deal at the point of experiencing her revelation; but not everything, there follows further inner teaching as she keeps it in her heart. And thirdly comes the synthesis as she sees the showings as a whole, one mighty wheel whose spokes radiate their meanings outwards yet still pointing to the hub at its centre.

Patiently, she begins to tease out every least detail:

For in the servant that was shown for Adam, as I will say, were many different properties that simply could not all belong solely to Adam on ^[7]his own. And so at this time, I was very confused; and the full understanding of this marvellous parable was not given to me then.

The Lord sat solemnly at rest and at peace; and so I understood that he is God. The servant that stood before the lord, I understood that he was showed for Adam, that is to say one man alone was shown at that time, and his falling, to make us understand thereby how God beholds any man and his falling. For in the sight of God all men and women are as

one man: that one man is all women, all men. This man was hurt in his might and made full feeble; and he was stunned in his understanding, for he was turned away from beholding his lord. But his will was kept whole in God's sight; for I saw that our lord praised and approved his will, but in himself he was prevented and blinded from knowing this his true will; which was to him a great sorrow, a dire discomfort. For neither did he clearly see his loving lord, who is full meek and mild towards him, nor might he truly see how he himself is in the sight of his loving lord.

The predicament of the servant, fallen into the boggy dell, our own human condition which we know so well, can easily lead us to be self-absorbed. Julian's method is to be equally attentive to the Lord. The 'working' to which we are called in this life, moment by moment, is an intimate collaboration with the workings of the Trinity, 'our maker, our keeper, our everlasting Lover'.

And so began the teaching at that time:

The place where our lord sat was simple; he sat upon the barren earth, in a desert, alone in a wilderness. His clothing was wide and flowing, very seemly as befits a lord; the colour of his clothing was blue as azure, most solemn and fair. His mien was merciful, his face was bronzed of feature fair; his eyes were dark and lustrous and showed a loving pity: his watchful gaze extended far and wide, seeming to fill the endless heavens. And with this lovely look he watched his servant continually, especially as he saw his falling; I thought to myself it might melt our hearts for love and break them in two for joy.

[8]By regarding the lord, and seeing him in every detail, Julian is setting the only true priority. It is of prime importance to understand the constancy of the lord, waiting patiently, lovingly, before we go on to understand the meaning of the servant.

I thought to myself it might melt our hearts for love and break them in two for joy.

But there is still more to be seen: don't forget, Julian is not seeing this vision all at once. The first vision has faded. She is labouring hard, 'digging and delving', at all fresh meaning she can glean from its every remembered detail. And we are invited to do so with her:

This kindly looking showed a beautiful intermingling that was marvellous to behold: on one part it was compassion and pity, for the other joy and bliss... The compassion in the pity of the Father was for the falling of Adam, who is his most loved creature: the joy and the bliss belonged to his beloved Son who is always with the Father.

As the Lord Father looks upon his Servant his gaze intermingles compassion for Adam and bliss at beholding his obedient Son; and now the two are together as one Servant, faithful and pleasing:

Notwithstanding, I saw very clearly we should learn and come to know that the Father is not man. But his sitting on the barren earth in that desert has this meaning: He made the human soul to be his city, his own dwelling place, for it is to him the most pleasing of all his works. But since the time that Adam fell into sorrow and pain, he was not fit to serve that noble office; and yet our kind Father would prepare no other place, but he sits upon the earth abiding with mankind, that is

earthbound, until such time as his beloved Son by his grace has bought again his city into noble fairness by his hard travail.

So here is the Lord's plan which has always been in place, determined before ^[9]time, before creation, before Adam: always 'his holy purpose':

The blueness of his clothing signifies his steadfastness. The brown of his fair face, the winsome darkness of the eyes spoke only of his holy purpose. The generosity of his clothing, that was shining fair, is a sign that he encompasses within himself all heavens, all joy, all bliss.

The lord will wait patiently for his servant, how often Julian reminds us of God's courteous attitude towards us. He waits for as long as it takes to achieve his intended aim, to take possession of his city, the inner castle of our soul. So much for the Lord, our steadfast loving Father, but what of the servant. What may we learn of him?

Outwardly he was simply clad, like a labourer ready for work; and he stood very near his lord, though not directly in front but rather to one side, on the left. His clothing was a white smock, unpleated, old and fast- stained with the sweat of his body; strait it fitted him, falling short about a handspan below the knee, threadbare too, seeming that soon it would be quite worn through, and ready to be ragged and rent.

So who can this be? Is it Adam alone, or does Adam have an ally, a brother to his aid?

And at this I marvelled greatly, thinking to myself: 'Surely this is not the sort of clothing for a servant who is so loved to wear as he stands before his great lord.' And I saw inwardly, within him a ground of love, such a love he bore towards the lord that was even like the love his lord bore towards him.

Here is the chief clue so far: the love of the Servant 'was even like the love his Lord bore towards him'.

The servant, in his wisdom, saw inwardly that there was only one thing to be done that would prove honourable service for his lord. Then the ^[10]servant of his love, not for his own reward nor of any gain to himself, started off in haste and ran at the bidding of his lord to perform the one task which was his will and worship. Outwardly, it seemed as if he had been a labourer continuously over a long time; yet by the inward sight I had, both of the lord and his servant, it seemed he was fresh, that is to say, newly begun to work, a servant never before sent out.

And what is the nature of the task, this working, the servant is eager to perform? Julian gets carried away by her metaphor and begins to tell us of a treasure that lay in the earth which the Servant must recover. By his labours in the garden he will grow all manner of wonderful fruits which can then be brought before the Lord.

Julian seems swept up by gardening images which she elaborates in her vision; but this harvest is simply love, even like the love his Lord bore towards him. Of himself, Adam may not do this task, his face is turned away from the Lord, he is stuck in the boggy dell. But with

this new Servant 'fresh... newly begun to work' this loving task will be perfectly carried through. Christ within the old Adam can renew the loving relationship that has been fractured by sin and turning away.

And all this time, the lord should be sitting in the same place awaiting his servant whom he had sent out. And still I wondered from where the servant came; for I saw in the lord that he had within himself endless life and all manner of goodness, save only that treasure that was in the earth - yet this itself was grounded in the lord in a marvellous deep vein of endless love but it was not completely acceptable until this same servant had prepared it so nobly and set it all before him, presenting it of his own accord. Apart from the lord was nothing, all around but wilderness; and so I could not understand at all what this example might mean, and still I continued to puzzle whence the servant had come.

Now at last Julian is on the threshold, she begins to recognize the beauty and meaning of her parable: for it sums up the whole story of our commerce with ^[11]the Trinity. She has been diligent in uncovering her archaeological dig. She has revealed each layer with particular care; each detail has been labelled, its significance reborn in her heart. And we too can follow her example of twenty years labour. To say again: this is no intellectual task, we must work with our heart not our head, if we are to enjoy Julian's reward of meaning:

Now in the servant is comprehended the Second Person of the Trinity; and in the servant is comprehended Adam, that is to say, all mankind. And therefore when I say 'the Son', it means the Godhead which is equal with the Father, and when I say 'the servant', it means Christ's manhood which is the true Adam. By the nearness of the servant the Son is understood,

and by the standing to the left side is understood Adam.

So here we have, for the first time, Julian's positive identification of the servant as both Christ and Adam, God and man sharing the same task of service. Moreover it is not a menial task, although her imagery of the gardener- delving and digging, toiling and sweating-- would seem to indicate something mundane. Not at all, the task is sublime and of utmost importance:

The lord is the Father, God. The servant is the Son, Christ Jesus. The Holy Spirit is equal love who is in them both. When Adam fell, God's Son fell; because of the faithful oneing which was made in heaven, God's Son might not part from Adam - and in Adam is understood all mankind. Adam fell from life into death into the vale of this wretched world and after that into hell. God's Son fell with Adam into the valley of the Maiden's womb, she who was the fairest daughter of Adam, in order to excuse Adam from all his blame in heaven and in earth; and then mightily he fetched him out of hell. By the wisdom and goodness of the servant is to be understood God's Son. By the poor labourer's clothing and his standing near the left side is understood (Christ's) manhood and Adam, with all the mischief and feebleness that resulted; for in all this, our good Lord showed his own Son and Adam as but one man. The virtue and the goodness that we have is of Jesus Christ, the feebleness and blindness is of Adam; both of which were shown in the servant. And ^[12]so has our good lord Jesus taken upon himself all our blame; and therefore our Father may assign, neither will he, no more blame to us, than to His own Son, dearworthy Christ.

And there you have it in a nutshell! The whole history of God's commerce with humanity.

And so it was that he was the Servant even before his coming into the earth, who stood ready before the Father prepared against the time when he would send him to do that worshipful deed by which mankind would be brought once more into heaven; that is to say, notwithstanding that he is God, equal with the Father as regards the Godhead, he already foresaw his purpose to become Man so as to save mankind in fulfilment of his Father's will, so that he stood before his Father as a servant, willingly taking upon himself all our debts.

And it is this perfectly summed up in Chapter 58 where she will tell us presently 'I beheld the working of all the Trinity'. It is fresh and vivid insight due to her understanding the parable of the Lord and the Servant.

And then He set off promptly in answer to His Father's will, and at once He fell down low into the maiden's womb, regardless of himself or his hard pains. The white smock is his flesh; its plainness, that there is nothing between the Godhead and the manhood; its straitness, his poverty; its age comes from Adam's wearing; the staining with sweat from Adam's labours; while its shortness shows how the servant must labour.

Once more Julian finds familiar meaning: the twinning duplication of the Son and Adam, both servants before the Father. And she extrapolates the parable in a tender and touching fantasy which tells how the Son was ever eager to get started on his task. (Again, she will spell this out even more dramatically in chapter 58.)

[13] And so I saw the Son standing, and he spoke his purpose thus: 'Lo, my dear Father, I stand before you in Adam's smock all ready to start and run my course. I wish to be in the earth to do your service whenever it is your will to send me. How long must I wait?'

Yet this is no empty fantasy, something playful to amuse. This too has its learning purpose, we are taught once more how closely we are to identify with Christ:

Full well the Son knew when it was the Father's will and how long he would wait; that is to say with respect to the Godhead, for he is the Wisdom of the Father. So that this meaning was shown of the manhood of Christ; for all those that shall be saved by the sweet incarnation and blissful passion of Christ, they are all of the manhood of Christ: for he is the head and we are his members.

Also in this marvellous parable, I have teaching set before me, just like the beginning of an ABC, whereby I may have some understanding of our Lord's meaning. For all that is hidden about this revelation are contained therein, notwithstanding all the revelation is full of secrets.

Julian never boasts that she herself has understood the complete mystery of her message. Like the journey towards the Father, it is never accomplished in this life. Rather, the message becomes simpler all the while until it resolves itself in one single word: Love.

Yet she never gives up her task -delving and digging, toiling and sweating. So begins her final summing up:

The sitting of the Father is token of his Godhead, that is to say, it shows rest and peace; for in the Godhead there may be no labour. And he showed Himself as lord in token of our manhood. The standing of the servant betokens travail; being to one side and on the left is token of his unworthiness to stand an equal before his lord. His starting was the [14] Godhead and his running was the Manhead; for the Godhead starts from the Father into the maiden's womb, falling into the taking our kind; and in this falling He took great hurt; the hurt He took was the flesh in which he also had such feeling of deadly pains. In that He stood in dread before the lord, not straight in front of him, is token that his clothing was not honest to standing straight in front of the lord. Nor could that, nor might that be his place while he was still a servant; neither might he sit at rest and peace with the lord until he had won his peace by right with his hard travail. And by the lefthand side is meant that the Father allowed his Son, willingly, to suffer in his manhood many pains without sparing him. And by his smock being almost in rags and tatters is understood the rods and scourges, the thoms and nails, the drawing and the dragging, that rent his tender flesh.

Part of his suffering was physical, the extremities of Calvary; part too was his sharing in the fallen nature of ours that only he can uplift. The continual discomfort of being human:

And by the wallowing and writhing, groaning and moaning, it is understood that he might never rise almightily from the time he had fallen into the maiden's womb till his body was slain and dead; when he yielded his soul into the Father's hands with all

mankind for whom He had been sent.

This is a turning point in Julian's process: seven of the sixteen showings deal directly with Christ's passion. But, Julian herself notes, she never sees him dead. As if to emphasize how Christ still suffers with us and in us today. This is the first time she moves through his death to the risen Christ to learn the effect of his obedient submission to his suffering. After his triumph over death, now all is changed. The Paschal Christ manifests himself as supreme victor:

And at this point, He first began to show his might. For He went into hell, and when he was there He raised the great root out of the deep, depths which rightfully was knit to Him in high heaven. His body was ^{15]}in the grave until the Easter morrow, and from that time he never lay no more; for then truly was an end to the wallowing and writhing, the groaning and moaning; and our foul mortal flesh that God's Son took upon himself, which was Adam's old smock, strait, threadbare and short, then by our Saviour was made fair: now white, bright endless cleanness, wide and full, more fair more rich than the clothing which I saw on the Father. For that clothing was blue and Christ's clothing is now fine and dazzling, a many colour mix so marvellous it may not be described, it is so worshipful.

Julian has successfully extended the parable so to include every least detail of our again-making in Christ. She is now able to bring her story to a perfect conclusion, rich in symmetric imagery. The

unhappy tale of Adam at the start of the bible has been transformed by the second Adam, his fellow worker who has completed his great task:

Now the Lord no longer sits upon the earth in a wilderness, but he sits in his most noble throne which he made in heaven most to his liking. Now the Son no longer stands before the Father in awe like a servant, poorly clothed, part naked; but He stands before the Father an equal, richly clad in generous bliss, and with a crown upon his head of precious richness; for it was shown that we are his crown, which is the Father's joy, the Son's glory, and a liking to the Holy Spirit, and an endless marvellous bliss to all who are in heaven. Now the Son stands no more before the Father to his left side like a labourer, but He is seated on His Father's right hand in endless rest and peace. But this is not to mean that the Son sits on the right hand, side by side, as a man may sit beside his wife in this life: for there is no such sitting, as I see it, in the Trinity; but he sits on the Father's right hand, that is to say, in the highest nobility of the Father's joys. Now is the spouse, God's Son, in peace with his beloved wife who is the fair maiden of endless joy. And now the Son sits, true God and Man, in his city of rest and peace, which his Father has prepared for him in his endless purpose: and the Father in the Son and the Holy Spirit in the Father and the Son.

[16] In the 12th century, Saint Anselm, our gentle Archbishop of Canterbury from Lombardy, asked the leading question, Cur Deus Homo? Why did God become man? Julian's successful solution to the meaning of her parable of the Lord and his Servant, not only encapsulates the purpose of the Incarnation, God's meaning in becoming man among us, it includes us by actively inviting our

cooperation in this endless 'again-making' that is the meaning of our very existence. Liberated by the fresh revelation it offers her, Julian proceeds with her writings with renewed pace. There is a palpable sense of release. And in one of her most blissful chapters which follows, she is able to offer us a stupendous summary of God's work in making and taking mankind to himself. Let this be her final words today:

God, the blissful Trinity, is everlasting Being; as surely as he is endless and without beginning, so surely was it his endless purpose to make mankind. Yet man's fair nature was first prepared for his own Son, the second Person: then, when the chosen time came, by full accord of all the Trinity, he made us all at once; and in our making, he knitted us and oned us to himself. And in this bond we are kept as clean and noble as at the time of our making. And, by the power of this same precious bond, we love our Maker and like him, praise him and thank him with a joy in him that has no end. This then is the task which he works continually in every soul that shall be saved all according to this said plan of God. And so it is that in our making God almighty is Father of our substance; and God all wisdom is Mother of our substance; with the love and the goodness of the Holy Spirit; which is all one God, one Lord. In the knitting and the oneing He is our very own spouse, as we are his beloved wife and fair maiden; with his own wife He may never be displeased. For he says as much: 'I am loving you, and you are loving me: and our loving shall never be parted in two.'

John Skinner

References

Page 8: [O Felix Culpa is] from the Exsulter, the Easter proclamation on Holy Saturday Night Liturgy.