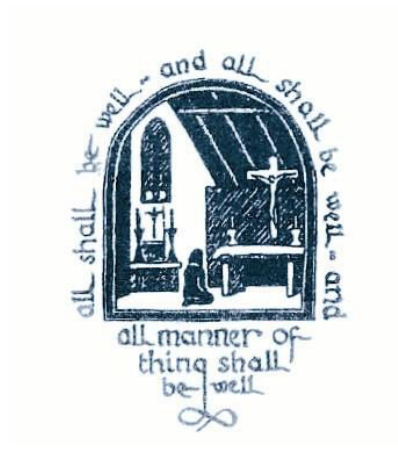


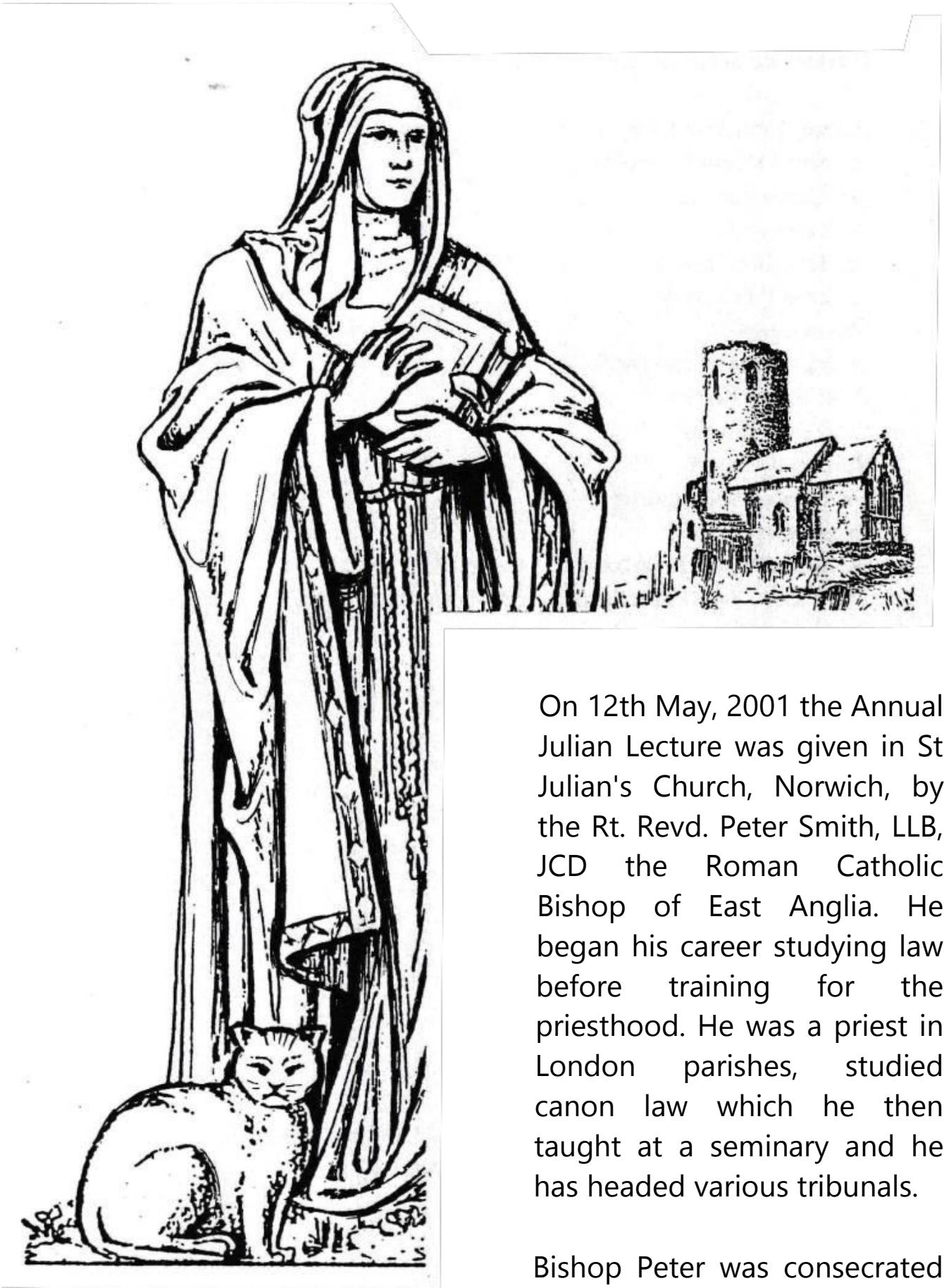
The Julian Lecture 2001

Julian of Norwich: Trust and Hope in the Face of Suffering and Discouragement



Right Reverend Peter Smith
The Roman Catholic Bishop of East Anglia





On 12th May, 2001 the Annual Julian Lecture was given in St Julian's Church, Norwich, by the Rt. Revd. Peter Smith, LLB, JCD the Roman Catholic Bishop of East Anglia. He began his career studying law before training for the priesthood. He was a priest in London parishes, studied canon law which he then taught at a seminary and he has headed various tribunals.

Bishop Peter was consecrated

on 27th May, 1995. He came to 'know' Julian when a student and not only is his Cathedral in Norwich but so is the Julian Shrine, which he visits for peaceful prayer and reflection.

[1] **Julian of Norwich: Trust and Hope in the Face of Suffering and Discouragement**

I think I should say at the very outset of this lecture that I should make a disclaimer! I am not a great expert in the theology and teachings of Julian of Norwich. Having said that, I have for many years been fascinated and drawn to her work, as I have to *The Cloud of Unknowing*. My interest began when I was in the Seminary in the middle sixties training for the priesthood. It was for me a time of great hope and great enthusiasm. In particular I believed that a priest amongst all his other duties, roles and functions, needed to be a man of prayer, drawing ever closer to the Lord and Master he was called to serve. It followed that if he was to serve God's people, he must be well versed in the ways of God if he was to lead and guide others along that same path. How could I help others to come closer to the one who said: 'I am the Way, the Life and the Truth.'

For some inexplicable reason I was drawn to Julian. At that point in my life I had only been to Norfolk once, when I was a young lad and we had a family holiday in Caistor. Strange that after all those years I should become the Bishop of East Anglia with my cathedral in Norwich itself. Since coming here six years ago, from time to time I come here to Julian's shrine. I have found it to be a place of peace in which to reflect on the paradoxes of life, to reflect on difficult questions, and through quiet prayer to try and discern some answers, to seek consolation and encouragement, and to sink down my spiritual roots a little further.

Part of that reflection inevitably has involved pondering a question. What can a fourteenth century mystic possibly have to say to us who live in such a very different world? When we look back on the fourteenth century and compare it with the Third Millennium, it is, as

del Mastro points out, particularly the differences which strike us. 'We children of the twentieth century are 'liberated', in charge of our own lives, choosers of our own mates, careers, labours and circumstances; Dame Julian lived in a place and at a time when women submitted to men - fathers, brothers, sons, adult male relatives, even in-laws who took full responsibility for them in all ^[2]these areas.' She goes on to say: 'On the physical level, we live with machines that reduce our labours; we travel through the air from continent to continent, and from city to city on land, at will, in hours; we purchase luxuries of food and clothing unheard of in Juliana's era. We cool our summer living and warm our winters with the flick of a switch; we turn night into day with artificial lighting; we assume our plumbing will be indoors and will work; we cook our food with gas, electricity or microwaves, and as we eat it, we watch and hear events happening around the world as they occur.'¹

Despite these very obvious and crucial differences in lifestyle, availability of resources and communication, my question is, is it really so different when we venture beneath the surface, beneath the obvious differences and contrasts? Are there not as many unsolved questions now as there were for Julian and her contemporaries? Certainly there are questions we have to resolve now which Julian and her age never did: deep and complex questions in the realm of biotechnology and health care ethics; the ethics of the internet, its values and dangers; increasingly complex ecological questions relating to the earth's dwindling resource; the whole area of climatology and the reasons for and the effects of global warming.

Yet it seems to me that there remain many deep questions which continue to puzzle us and the people of our time just as much as they did in the very different culture and circumstances of Julian and the people of fourteenth century England. These are the perennial

questions of the existence of God, our relationship to that God and the meaning and purpose of human life. And what of those day to day questions of how we reconcile the notion of a loving and compassionate God with the presence in our world of evil and suffering? What do we mean when we say, as Christians, that Christ in his Paschal Mystery has once and for all conquered sin and death, when all around me, within my own family, and within my circle of friends and acquaintances, I see suffering, sin and death day by day? Faced with innumerable questions and difficulties, how do I cope with persistent sin, persistent suffering and persistent failure? What hope is there for a better 'me', a better society, a better world? How, then, can I resist the slippery slope which leads to despondency, and perhaps finally to despair?

[3] What Julian has to tell us is perennially relevant precisely because she speaks of the 'Ground of our existence', the unconditional love of the living God, and the response that this divine love seeks to elicit from us. Only if we allow divine love to purify and transform us can we have that deep confidence and hope that will fill our hearts with joy and peace and gradually transform us, and the society and world in which we live. Divine love meets with the same difficulties now as in Julian's day: reluctance to believe in such utterly good news, news too good to be true. It meets the blindness which is a consequence of sin and unbelief. It meets the resistance of frail human beings, wounded by sin and unwilling to let go of our natural view of things rather than living each day by the vision of faith in an infinitely loving and compassionate God revealed in the person and life of Jesus Christ, the crucified.

Our search for that God is our most important task in life, now in the Third Millennium as it was in the fourteenth century world of Julian.

How do we find this God? Julian's answer is through contemplating the person of the crucified Christ:

At this time I wanted to look away from the cross, and I dared not do so, for well I knew that while I gazed upon the cross I was secure and safe.²

Through fidelity to Jesus, Julian presents us with a flawless representation of the gospel which springs fresh, warm and strong from the experience of her own contemplation over many years. Julian addresses a bewildered, suffering society with the one certain answer. God is unchanging love, and that love is revealed in the figure of the suffering servant, the person of the crucified and risen Jesus:

Do you want to understand your Lord's meaning in this experience? Understand it well: love was his meaning. Who showed it to you? Love. What did He show you? Love. Why did He show it? For love. Hold yourself in this truth Thus I was taught that love is our Lord's meaning.³

... suddenly the Trinity completely filled my heart with the greatest Joy. And so, I understood, it will be in heaven, without an end, for those who come there. For the Trinity is God; God is the Trinity. The Trinity is our Maker. The Trinity is our Keeper. The Trinity is our everlasting Lover. The Trinity is our endless joy and our bliss, through our Lord Jesus Christ and in our Lord Jesus Christ. This truth was shown in the first^[4] showing and in all the showings, for where Jesus appears, the blessed Trinity is understood, as I see it.⁴

Julian, of course, is not writing for complete beginners in the Christian life. She is speaking to those who have perhaps struggled for years to live the life of Christian discipleship, but who are beginning now to become weary of the journey, so to speak. For these the temptation is to give up, to lose hope, to suffer discouragement and to lose heart. Julian herself was well versed in this. At times she was filled with 'a most intense spiritual delight' and 'I was completely filled with everlasting certitude, firmly sustained, without any painful dread. This feeling was so glad and so spiritual that I was entirely at peace, at ease and at rest, so there was nothing on earth that could have disturbed me.'⁵

But then she says:

*This lasted only for a while. Then I was transformed and left to myself in depression, weary of my life and irked with myself, so that I kept the patience to go on living only with difficulty. There was no comfort and no ease for me, except faith, hope and charity, and these I had in reality, though I had very little feeling of them.'*⁶

Why do we fluctuate so much between joy and sorrow, between serene faith and uncertainty bordering at times on despair? Part of the reason for this, in Julian's thinking, is that as we progress in the Christian life, we become more aware of our sinfulness which she describes as 'the sharpest scourge with which any chosen soul can be struck.'⁷ Yet the more aware we become of our sinfulness is, in Julian's thinking, a sign that we are making progress. Paradoxically this is when doubts assail us and we begin to lose heart, and lose hope. Our efforts seem in vain and we become impatient at our lack of progress, and so discouraged.

In Chapter 73 she speaks of this discouragement: 'For when we begin to hate sin and amend our lives by the ordinance of Holy Church, there still dwells in us a dread that holds us back, because of our seeing ourselves and the sins we have previously committed. And some of us are in fear because of our daily sins, for we do not hold to our promises or keep the cleanness that our Lord has set us in, but frequently fall into so much wretchedness that it is shameful to say it. And the contemplation of these ^[5]things makes us so sorry and so depressed that only with difficulty can we see any comfort.'⁸

It is significant that Julian, whilst referring to sins in general, only mentions two particular sins, but two sins which lie, one at the heart, and the other at the end of such temptation. Julian speaks of the sins of sloth and despair which she describes in Chapter 73 as 'spiritual sicknesses':

*God showed two kinds of sickness we have. The first is impatience or sloth, because of which we bear our hard labour and our pain with depression. The second is despair, or dread full of doubt, which I shall speak of later.'*⁹

These two sins undermine our faith, particularly under the aspect of trust in God's love for us, and trust in his mercy and readiness to forgive. When we reflect on the great evils in the world, and the stubborn persistence of our personal sins, how can we maintain hope and trust in God?

This difficulty was not just a problem in the fourteenth century. It is a perennial problem and one which in my experience is frequently mentioned by people who celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation. Father, it's always the same old things. I try and try, I have the best of intentions to improve and do better, but every time I come to

confession I'm repeating the same old things. I never seem to improve, never get any better, I feel I'm stuck in a rut. I must be a very bad person and I'm beginning to doubt if God really does love me. I wonder whether I shouldn't just give up trying. What's the point?'

Julian is clearly very familiar with the sort of experience I've just mentioned, and she would have been very familiar too with the celebration of this sacrament. It is a very real difficulty for many good people. I think it has a great deal to do both with our lack of knowledge of the gospels and our lack of understanding of the reality of the paschal mystery in our lives. It also betrays, perhaps, our lack of trust and hope in God's promises, seen, in this context *sub specie aeternitatis*. It is a problem which I have discussed over the years with a very dear Carmelite friend of mine. How are we to address this problem? How did Julian herself address this problem?

[6]The Church teaches now, as it did in Julian's day, that every sacrament offers us a direct encounter with the risen Christ. There are many incidents in the gospel narratives which show us Jesus' loving acceptance of those who are aware of their sinfulness and see in him the Father's merciful help. More than that, Jesus actually seeks out sinners and eats with them. In a real sense he becomes one with them. So could it be argued that when we encounter Jesus, whether in prayer, or the sacrament of reconciliation, as well as in the sacrament of the anointing of the sick which resembles it, our encounter with him is not simply with Jesus as forgiver, but with Jesus as 'the forgiven'; not Jesus simply as priest, but Jesus as victim.

Scripture says that God condemned sin in Christ crucified. The sacrificial Lamb bears and takes away the sin of the world; he bore our sins in his body on the tree that we might die to sin and live to

holiness. The passion and death of Jesus reveal as nothing else can, just what sin is, just what sinful human beings will do: reject perfect goodness and absolutely selfless, unconditional love. At its root, sin is the rejection of God, and all of us without exception sin to some degree because our experience is that selfishness and pride win out even if only in very small ways!

Self-love and pride lead us to doubt and discouragement, to abuse other people and material things, as well as truth. There is much in ourselves and in our behaviour that we do not even see because sin blinds and confuses. All of us are blind to some extent and only Jesus appreciated the full reality of sin, the rejection of divine love and mercy. The crucifixion of Jesus was the most terrible sin ever committed, and Jesus on the cross epitomises not only what sin will do but the disastrous condition to which it reduces human beings.

So what is God's response? A judgement of mercy, of forgiveness, of total healing ultimately, resurrection. God's 'condemnation' of sin in Jesus identified with us sinners, was resurrection, the destruction of sin and its mortal effects. The bruised and broken man is lifted up to glory in the strong and tender arms of God his Father. This is the Father's remedy for our pitiable state, this is how he puts things right. This, surely, is what scripture means by God's righteousness, his justice righting the terrible wrongs that we could never deal with ourselves. Thus the barriers between ^[7]God and ourselves are broken down not by ourselves or our own efforts, but by himself.

When we look again at Jesus in his life in Palestine, as it is recorded for us in the scriptures, is not this precisely what we see? His attitude, his unconditional, his total embracing of the sinner who looks to him for help, is simply that of his Father. He is what his Father is, Emmanuel, God with us, Jesus is the loving, selfless servant, who

serves to the point of standing in our shoes, taking us on whole and entire. So in our prayer, or when we celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation, we encounter Jesus as the one who forgives, but also as the suffering Son, the victim. We enter into his surrendered, contrite heart so as to die with him to all that is sin to die into resurrection.

So, with Paul, we can say 'with Christ I hang upon the cross. Only in this way, but how surely, we encounter the loving and forgiving Father. Saying 'amen' to Jesus' surrender, we claim as our own his contrition, his full atonement, which far outweigh our casual indifference, meanness, lack of generosity, trust and love. So the Father lifts us up in Jesus, clothes us with his holiness, and enables us to share more and more the risen life of Jesus. Our obedient fulfilment of the sacramental penance is, so to speak, 'sacramental' of our pitiful contrition and desire to atone. Its apparently trifling nature in fact expresses our helplessness to do so. But it also expresses our faith that Jesus has done it all for us. Humbly performing our penance, we are peacefully certain that love has been and remains forever repaid with loved that its wound, as it were, is kissed better as a mother kisses better the wounds of her children.

It seems to me that Julian herself is saying something similar in Chapter 51, the longest chapter in the whole book. Here we have the parable of the Lord and the Servant. What makes it quite difficult to interpret is the fact that it is a parable, an allegory, and not a systematic theological treatise! Some interpret this parable as a version of the story of the Fall. There are certainly elements of this in the allegory, but interpreted solely in this way would lead to some questioning of its theological orthodoxy when set against traditional Christian belief, as Julia Gatta points ^[8]out in the chapter on Julian in her book entitled *Three Spiritual Directors of our Time*.¹⁰

She proposes an interpretation of the parable which brings to light some of the elements which flow from my own reflections and those of my Carmelite friend. The crux of her interpretation is this: 'What the allegory of the Lord and the Servant presents is not so much a retelling of the Fall of Adam as the story of the Fall of Christ; the story of one fall is superimposed upon the other in narration. The descent of Christ from heaven to earth and the fall of Adam from paradise to misery are somehow the same story. As a rendering of the Fall of Christ, the Parable represents an imaginative reconstruction of the self-emptying described in Philippians 2, the systematic divestment by Christ of his divine prerogatives and even his human dignity: 'He... did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant.'¹¹

The heart of the matter is that through the gift of the Spirit in baptism, we become identified with Christ and he is identified with us. It's St Paul's theme: 'I live now but Christ lives in me.' When God the Father looks at me, he sees not only me but Christ his Son living in me. The Paschal mystery and the sending of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost brought about a real solidarity between Christ and ourselves. So, in terms of the Parable, Julia Gatta argues: 'Jesus stands with the human race in a miserable ditch, from which we cannot pull ourselves out. At the same time we see ourselves participating in the righteousness of Christ so there is assigned to us, as the visions testify, 'no blame' for our sins... For if in seeing us, God sees only his beloved Son, the grounds for fearing God's wrath disappear. God looks at us as we are in Christ and sees us in our final integrity: sanctified, glorified, sinless. As Julian says, 'And for the great endless love that God has for all mankind, he makes no distinction in love between the blessed soul of Christ and the least soul that will be saved.' (chapter 54)¹²

'... he makes no distinction in love between the blessed soul of Christ and the least soul that will be saved.' Here, surely is the ground of our faith, our hope and our trust in God. Despite our faults and failings, despite our sins which are so oft repeated, God loves us as much as he loves ^[9]his Son. That Son, Jesus Christ, has conquered sin and death once and for all. He has completed the journey his Father sent him on. We are still on our journey, and one which is, so to speak more extended in time than Christ's journey on earth. But we follow in the footsteps of Christ. We are following him here and now up the hill of Calvary. We suffer because of our own sinfulness and selfishness. He suffered because he took upon himself our sins. But if we persevere, if we resist the temptation to sloth and despair, then we too shall come through death and rise again, because we are one with Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.

The conviction of faith, the expression of that firmly founded hope, that deep trust that God will fulfil his promise in those who long for it and desire it with all their hearts is summed up in Julian's own words: 'All of mankind that shall be saved by the sweet Incarnation and the blissful passion of Christ is the manhood of Christ, for He is the head and we are His members. To these members, the time when passing woe and sorrow shall have an end and everlasting joy and bliss shall be fulfilled is unknown. All the company of heaven longs for and desires to see that day and time.

For all who are under heaven [and] who shall come to it, their way is by longing and desire. This desiring and longing were showed in the servant standing before the Father in Adam's tunic. The longing and desire of all mankind that shall be saved appeared in Jesus. For Jesus is all that shall be saved. And all that shall be saved is Jesus, as is all of the charity of God, with the obedience, meekness, patience and the virtues that belong to us.¹³

My reading of Julian of Norwich is that her own experience, and the message which springs from that reflected experience, is one of unfailing trust and hope. It is a message of great consolation in the midst of everyday suffering and our struggle to live truly human lives modelled on the life of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour. Her focus on the crucified and risen Christ is totally in line with traditional Christian thinking and experience. We, united through baptism with Christ our Saviour, must live out his suffering, passion and death in our own lives because we are truly 'at one' with him, and he with us.

[10] Our problem is, perhaps, that we can assent to this with our heads, but our hearts revolt against it. We can agree with it in theory, so to speak, but how hard it is to live out in practice when we experience persistent sin, suffering and injustice in our own lives. Then we balk, then we squirm and cry out at the unfairness of life and the deafness of God to our pleas for help and consolation. 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'¹⁴

The remedy for all this, in my reading of Julian, lies in our wholehearted contemplation of the crucified and risen Christ. Without that deep and intense desire to unite ourselves with the person of Jesus Christ, our poor efforts will all be in vain. We will remain blinded to the truth about God, about Jesus Christ, and about ourselves and our purpose in life. Our difficulties so often arise because we look in the wrong direction, we seek comfort in trivialities rather than in seeking the source of all love, goodness, truth and beauty. 'This is the reason why we have no ease of heart or soul, for we are seeking our rest in trivial things which cannot satisfy, and not seeking to know God, almighty, all wise, all good. He is true rest...' ¹⁵ Or as St Augustine put it: 'Our hearts are restless till they rest in thee.'

Julian speaks from profound personal experience, experience with which many people can identify. In our struggle to grow in love I hope that we can all identify too with her conclusion: 'Thus was I taught that love is our Lord's meaning. And I saw most certainly in this and in everything that before God made us He loved us, and this love never slackened and never shall. In this love He has done all his works, in this love He has made all things profitable for us, and in this love our life is everlasting.'¹⁶

If we can begin to grasp this good news, if we can open our hearts to receive it and allow it to grow in us by God's grace, then we too will be able to say with the joy of Julian: '... all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.'¹⁷

Peter Smith

References

1. del Mastro, M.L. (1994). *Julian of Norwich - The Revelation of Divine Love*. Burnes & Oates: Tunbridge Wells, UK. pp. 1-2.
2. Ibid., Ch. 19, p. 91.
3. Ibid., Ch. 86, p. 209.
4. Ibid., Ch. 5, p. 67.
5. Ibid., Ch. 15, p. 85.
6. Ibid., Ch. 15, p. 85.
7. Ibid., Ch. 39, p. 118.
8. Ibid., Ch. 73, pp. 190-191.
9. Ibid., Ch. 73, p. 190.
10. Gatta, Julia (1986). *Three Spiritual Directors of our Time*. Cowley Publications, Cambridge, Massachusetts.
11. Ibid., p. 66.
12. Ibid., p. 67.
13. del Mastro, op. cit., Ch. 51, pp. 147-148.
14. Psalm 22.
15. del Mastro, op. cit..
16. Ibid., Ch. 86, pp. 209-210.
17. Ibid., Ch. 27, p. 102.