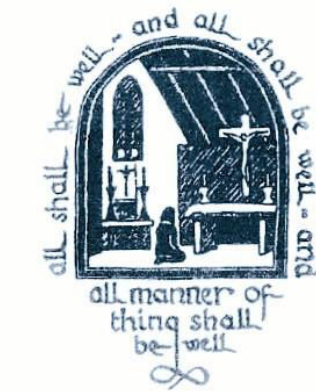


The Julian Lecture 2002

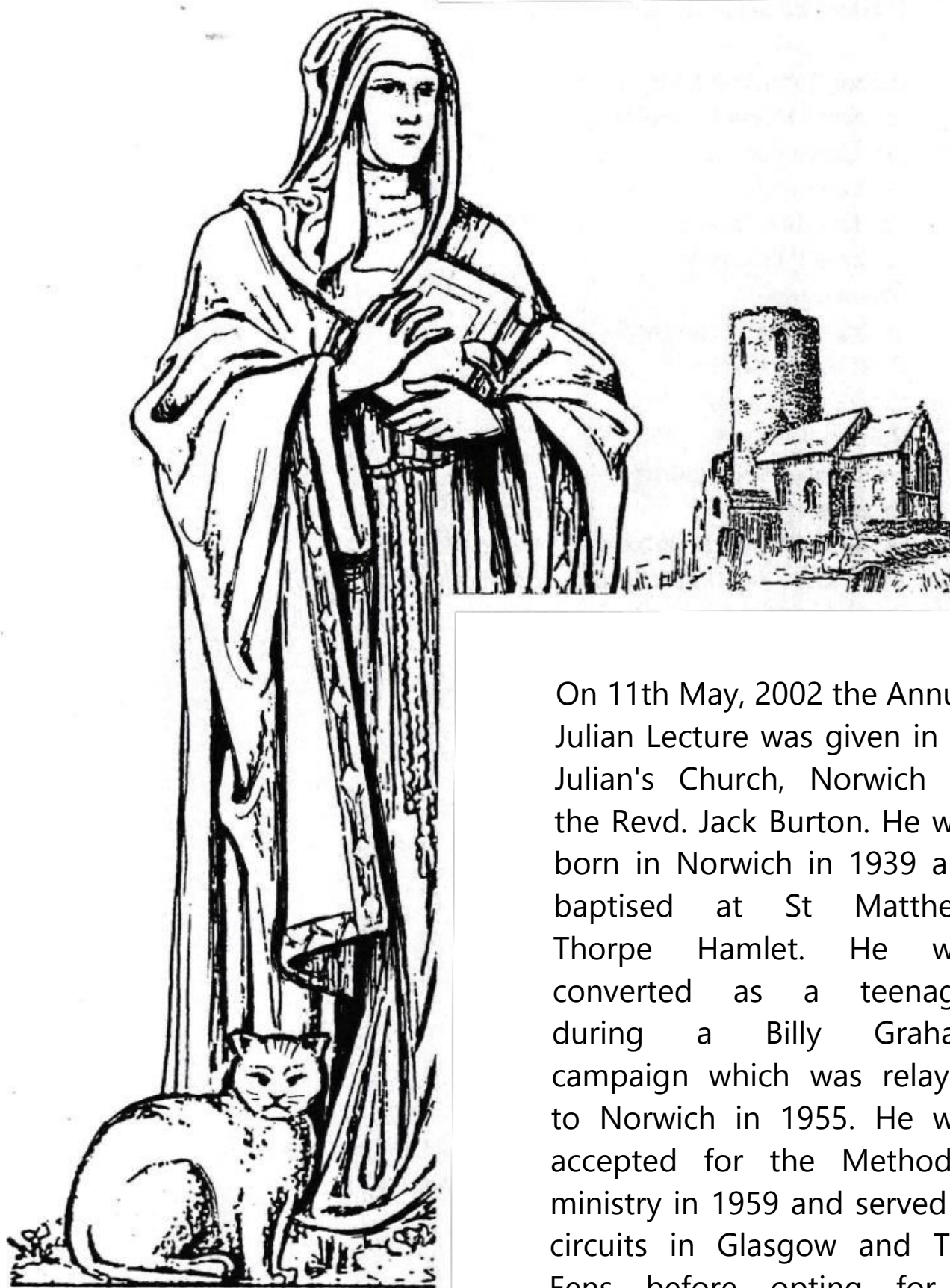
All Loves Excelling

**A devotional address combining the insights of
Mother Julian & Charles Wesley**



Reverend Jack Burton





On 11th May, 2002 the Annual Julian Lecture was given in St. Julian's Church, Norwich by the Revd. Jack Burton. He was born in Norwich in 1939 and baptised at St Matthew, Thorpe Hamlet. He was converted as a teenager during a Billy Graham campaign which was relayed to Norwich in 1955. He was accepted for the Methodist ministry in 1959 and served in circuits in Glasgow and The Fens before opting for a

worker-priest pattern of ministry. He has earned his living as a Norwich bus driver since 1968. He was Sheriff of Norwich in 1988, and has written a number of books. He served on the Julian 600th Anniversary Committee in 1973.

[1] All Loves Excelling: a devotional address combining the insights of Mother Julian & Charles Wesley

Whether you catch me in a cassock, a bus uniform, or my old sports jacket, you are unlikely to catch me without a hazel nut in my pocket! Since the celebrations of 1973, Mother Julian has been for me a source of inspiration and assurance.

Her appeal leaps across denominational boundaries. God chose the Methodist Church to be the instrument of my salvation and I was nurtured in the Faith on the hymns of Charles Wesley. Yet to dip, even at random, into *A Revelation of Love* fills me a Methodist with a rich blend of emotions, which range from surprise and delight at the freshness of her style and the contemporary feel of her theology, to a profound sense of unity and oneness: a thrilling, intuitive recognition that she is describing the realities that found out me.

I began to compare and contrast the devotional and literary contributions of these notable servants of God - one the product of my native city, the other co-founder of my denomination. Julian we associate pre-eminently with this holy site. But Charles Wesley has local connections, too: he it was - with his indisposed brother John standing beside him - who first preached the 'official' Methodist gospel (as distinct from an unauthorised version!) on Orford Hill beside the Bell Hotel at 7am on Sunday 14 July 1754. For me, that site is special, too.

There are no prizes today for listing differences between Mother Julian and Charles Wesley. They could scarcely be more pronounced. One a woman; the other a man. One, a recluse; the other, a clergyman and travelling preacher. One, pre-Reformation; the other, post. Four hundred years separate them. ^[2]True, they would have

recognised each other's worlds more easily than we would recognise either of theirs, so fast has the rate of change accelerated in every area of life. But, as J. Ernest Rattenbury observed of Charles Wesley:

Although no one sought more to conduct his people to the springs of life, and no one ever sang more sweetly the joys of communion with God, he was under no delusions: daily life was to him the battlefield of the soul. Christianity was not a religion for solitaries or for exclusive communities, but for the world.

So, yes - perhaps we are not comparing like with like. And yet...! When every allowance is made, those who themselves love Jesus can find suggestive and stimulating parallels between the two. One fact eclipses all others: and using one of his lines only slightly out of context, Charles could have spoken on behalf of them both: 'Our subject is the same'.

That is my submission today. The sweet mystery of Divine Love was the theme both of Mother Julian and Charles Wesley, which each explored with reverence, wonder, humility, and joy. Love was his meaning' - the 'Love Divine, all loves excelling'.

We may assume safely that both knew a good deal about love. Charles' marriage was a love-match; he had children; he had the love of his brother John; he had the love of the preachers, and of the Methodist people; he loved the Church of England. Of Mother Julian we possess fewer details - but it is likely she had known the love of a family, and maybe the love of sisterly nuns; certain it is she was loved and revered by those who sought her counsel. Love has many faces; but the theme of Julian and Charles was of a love which surpasses all

- a love in which all other loves have their source and origin, and in which ultimately they find their completeness and fulfilment.

The list of similarities between Julian and Charles is, in fact, surprisingly long.

[3] The work of both the 'Revelation' and the hymns - is grounded in Scripture

Charles' hymns are not only scriptural in doctrine; they are packed with scriptural references. One very good example is the hymn 'O thou who camest from above': based upon Lev.6 v.13, its sixteen lines contain at least seventeen textual references. With Julian it is different. The memorable cadences of seventeenth-century English which make the Authorised Version an outstanding literary work in its own right still lay in the future. However, when she warns us not to pick and choose from her book, she adds: 'But take everything with other and truly understand all is according to holy scripture and grounded in the same.

Charles and Julian were both artists, and masters of the use of language.

Mystical experience, understood traditionally, is a way of knowing which transcends sense and intellect.

Marion Glasscoe wrote (in her 1976 edition¹, to which I am much indebted):

The literature of Christian mysticism which precedes, or is contemporary with Julian, is that of counsel on the contemplative discipline as preparation for such an experience. But the experience itself is recognised as being essentially non-verbal, expressible only in negatives or metaphors.... But Julian used language with the quickening power of the artist through whom human experience is both interpreted and shared.

Similarly, with Charles. Dr. Luke Wiseman remarked that he perceived with his ears:

Rhythm and melody were his means of apprehension of the external world. Song was his natural expression. His ear for sound at once brought to him - from his large vocabulary - the inevitable word: and, more particularly, it determined the metre in which the sentiment should be conveyed... It was the melody possessing his mind that called up - or called out - the train of thought and feeling suitable to make it intelligible; or, at least, gave form and colour to the thoughts which were waiting for expression.

^[4] **And both Julian and Charles balanced reason and emotion**

Julian to quote Marion Glasscoe again - employed language 'which expressed the emotions of faith but had a tough rational substructure to convey the illumination of understanding of that faith; both were a revelation of love.'

In the case of Charles, Dr. E.H. Sugden spoke of 'hymns which appeal to the intelligence and the heart of all who read the English language'.

The lives both of Julian and Charles were transformed upon a specific day

And for each it was a day in May! 'These revelations were showed to a simple creature... the year of our lord 1373, the 8th day of May'. That day we hold sacred.

The decisive and dominating event in Charles Wesley's ministry was his conversion on May 21 1738. We might want to discuss the meaning of the word 'conversion' in a case like his - but Charles undoubtedly considered his spiritual life to have been clean cut in two parts by that event. After the dark, legal night of the former, the morning broke, bringing light and liberation. And within hours he had begun the hymn which gives a most vivid and moving impression of his state of mind: overwhelmed, maybe even a little confused by his new emotion, dazed as he thinks on the amazing wonders of Divine grace - 'Where shall my wondering soul begin ...?'

The Revelation and the hymns, therefore, both flow from personal experience

'He loved me and gave Himself for me'. Paul's word to the Galatians impressed itself powerfully on the mind of Charles Wesley. That special apprehension of Christ's love to each man and woman,

personally to be realized by each, was to become a conspicuous note in the great evangelical revival. Charles wrote, soon after his conversion:

O filial Deity,
Accept my new-born cry:
See the travail of Thy soul,
Saviour, and be satisfied;
Take me now, possess me whole,
Who for me, for me, hast died

^[5]And Julian?

For he saith: "I love thee and thou lovest me, and our love shall never be departed unto."

Dr. Rattenbury described Charles as a well-instructed scholar who was also a humble, penitent man, happy in what he had discovered of God's mercy, but always seeking a clearer vision of God:

He blended competent theological knowledge with the deepest religious experience - and expressed it in sacred song. His hymns are not museum pieces. They spring from actual experiences and were expressed in personal language.

He could have been describing Mother Julian.

Julian and Charles were both loyal lovers of the Church

Julian wrote:

In althing I believe as holy church believeth, preacheth, and teacheth, for the faith of holy church... stood continually in my sight, willing and meaning never to receive anything that might be contrary thereunto.

Charles' love for the Church of England was his deepest human loyalty. He regarded it as a divinely instituted organisation, endowed with a sacerdotal ministry, which received its authority by direct succession from the Apostles.

Dr. Rattenbury reflected: 'If his churchmanship had no effect on the evangelical character of his doctrines, it was for the simple reason that those doctrines were the formulated beliefs of the Established Church.'

The similarities continue

I sense in Julian no great feeling for the natural world. Likewise, the thought of nature as revealing God, or of God as expressing Himself in nature, finds little or no recognition in Charles' poetry. Julian was no St Francis, nor Charles an Isaac Watts.

For Julian, images relating to Christ's passion were the mainspring of her revelation. For Charles, too, religion was utterly Christo-centric. Christ ^[6]was Alpha and Omega, and in His passion the immensity of the Divine Love was revealed:

Never love nor sorrow was
Like that my Saviour showed:
See Him stretched on yonder Cross,
And crushed beneath our load!
Now discern the Deity,
Now His heavenly birth declare!
Faith cries out: 'Tis He, 'tis He,
My God, that suffers there!

Julian described moments of doubt and failure. Dr. Alan Webster wrote in the 1973 Handbook: 'Her road to vision ran through the valley of sin, suffering, and despair'. Charles trod the same road.

There, to be getting on with, are ten or more parallels! I am anxious not to spoil the case by making contrived comparisons, and I have neither the ability nor indeed the desire to subject their work to philosophical, linguistic, psychological, or any other kind of analysis. My concern is only to taste and see.

Mother Julian's book is a sustained meditation on her understanding of God's love. Charles' hymns, four centuries later, were dedicated to the renewal of the church and the conversion of England. As he put it, to:

Restore the piety of ancient days
And fill the earth with our Redeemer's praise.

Both were 'mystics' - though the word is used with various shades of meaning. Charles and John Wesley originally held 'the mystic divines' in great veneration. Yet, later, Charles referred to 'the snare of mysticism'. (He was condemning 'stillness' - disparagement of the means of grace, and of good works). However, if mysticism is the

soul's direct awareness of God, or immediate consciousness of God's presence, then - to quote Dr. Wiseman again 'Methodism has more than a touch of mysticism'. Charles Wesley had a great deal.

[7]Which brings me to my great confession! I must admit that whenever - as a Methodist I read Mother Julian's work, I find constantly lines from Charles Wesley's hymns flooding into my mind. You may dismiss this as mere word-association - and of a rather simplistic kind! But that is not for you to say. To me, the original insight, thus confirmed, becomes doubly precious. I offer, now, some examples - though not without fear and trepidation, lest what is so meaningful and dear to me, should leave you unmoved and unaffected. That's a risk I must take.

The vivid, unsparing realism of Julian's revelation:

*I saw the red blood trickling down from under the garland,
hot, freely, and right plenteously*

is echoed in the beautiful hymn inspired partly by the Litany: 'Would Jesus have the sinner die?'

Thou loving, all-atoning Lamb,
Thee by Thy painful agony,
Thy sweat of blood, Thy grief and shame,
Thy Cross and passion on the tree,
Thy precious death and life - I pray:
Take all, take all my sins away!

O let me kiss Thy bleeding feet,
And bathe and wash them with my tears....

Julian again:

I was filled with compassion of all my even Christians...

Those cordial and frequent references to her fellow-Christians breathe the same air as

Love, like death, hath all destroyed,
Rendered all distinctions void;
Names, and sects, and parties fall:
Thou, O Christ, art all in all.

Consider Julian's chapter 78: and Charles' 'responses'

He is the ground of our life and our being...

Father, in whom we live,
In whom we are, and move....

^[8] *He keepeth us mightily and mercifully in the time we are in sin...*

Long my imprisoned spirit lay
Fast bound in sin and nature's night;
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray...

He maketh us to know that we have gone amiss...

Show me, as my soul can bear
The depth of inbred sin;

All the unbelief declare,
The pride that lurks within ...

How steadfastly he abideth us and is unchangeable...

Israel, what hast thou to dread?
Safe from all impending harms,
Round thee and beneath are spread
The everlasting arms.

*For He wills that we be turned and united to Him in love, as He is
in us...*

All the struggle then is o'er,
And wars and fightings cease;
Israel then shall sin no more
But dwell in perfect peace:
All his enemies are gone;
Sin shall have in him no part;
Israel now shall dwell alone
With Jesus in his heart.

Or look at chapter 68

*Our good Lord said full sweetly: Take it and believe it, and
keep thee therein, and comfort thee therewith, and trust
thee thereto, and thou shalt not be overcome...*

Believe, believe the record true
Thou hidden Source of calm repose,
Thou all-sufficient Love divine,

^[9] My help and refuge from my foes,
Secure I am, if Thou art mine....

'Herewith is the devil overcome. He said not 'Thou shalt not be tempested (buffeted).

Surrounded by a host of foes,
Stormed by a host of foes within

By me, O my Saviour, stand
In sore temptation's hour:
Save me with Thine outstretched hand,
And show forth all Thy power.

'He said not 'Thou shalt not be travailed' (given an easy ride - not sent painful, arduous labour).

Forth in Thy name, O Lord, I go,
My daily labour to pursue...

To serve the present age,
My calling to fulfil:
O may it all my powers engage
To do my Master's will!

He said not 'Thou shalt not be diseased'.

Saviour from sin, I wait to prove

That Jesus is Thy healing name...

The seed of sin's disease,
Spirit of health, remove,
Spirit of finished holiness,
Spirit of perfect love.

He said: 'Thou shalt not be overcome'.

Stand then in His great might,
With all His strength endued...

That, having all things done,
[10] And all your conflicts passed,
Ye may o'ercome through Christ alone,
And stand entire at last.

*God wills that we be ever strong in sure trust, in good and ill; for
He loveth and enjoyeth us, and wills that we love him and enjoy
him and trust mightily in him, and all shall be well...*

I rest in Thine almighty power;
The name of Jesus is a tower,
That hides my life above:
Thou canst, Thou wilt my Helper be;
My confidence is all in Thee,
The faithful God of love.

In chapter 49

Julian writes:

Life is all grounded and rooted in love, and without love we may not live. Wrath and friendship be two contraries. He be ever one in love, meek and mild, which is contrary to wrath...

Depth of mercy! Can there be
Mercy still reserved for me?
Can my God His wrath forbear?
Me, the chief of sinners, spare?

Whence to me this waste of love?
Jesus, answer from above:
Is not all Thy nature love?
Gentle Jesus, meek and mild.

Perhaps either you see it and feel it, or you don't! When Mother Julian refers to 'Our precious lover' I think: 'Jesu, Lover of my soul'. When she says 'Endless love made him to suffer', I hear

Love moved Him to die,
And on this we rely ...

^[11]Her emphasis upon *the endless goodness of God* recalls lines like:

Good Thou art, and good Thou dost
Thy mercies reach to all...

A few illustrations more may be permitted; for what amazing versicles and responses Julian and Charles create!

'Then are we stirred by the same grace to seek with great desire to see him'

Drawn by the lure of strong desire...

'Then thinketh this poor creature: Ah! What might this noble lord do more... than to show me, that am so simple, this marvellous homeliness?...

The genuine, meek humility,
The wonder- Why such love to me?

These secrets He wills we know, hid into the time that He will clearly show them to us...

Our life is hid with God in Christ

In which endless love we be led and kept of God, and never shall be lost.

By Thine unerring Spirit led,
We shall not in the desert stray;
As far from danger as from fear,
While love, almighty love, is near.

'That which is impossible to thee is not impossible to Me'. Thus was I taught by the grace of God that I should steadfastly hold me in the faith.

All things are possible to him
That can in Jesu's name believe...

The most impossible of all
Is, that I e'er from sin should cease;
Yet shall it be, I know it shall:
Jesus, look to Thy faithfulness!

[12] *'I keep thee full securely'. This word was said with more love than I can tell.*

How do Thy mercies close me round!

While Thou art intimately nigh,
Who, who shall violate my rest?

Me for thine own Thou lov'st to take,
In time and in eternity;
Thou never, never wilt forsake
A helpless soul that trusts in Thee.

The place that Jesus taketh in our soul he shall never remove.

Never let me leave Thy breast,
From Thee, my Saviour, stray...
Keep me, keep me, gracious Lord,
And never let me go!

And then shall all be brought to righteousness, and therein stand, without end... and in his blissful love, with his might and his wisdom, we are kept; and by mercy and grace we are raised to many more joys...

Behold the servant of the Lord!

Joyful from my own works to cease,
Glad to fulfil all righteousness.

There are five high joys, in which he wills that we enjoy, him praising, him thanking, him loving, him endlessly blessing'

Joy of heaven, to earth come down...

Thee we would be always blessing,
Serve Thee as Thy hosts above,
Pray, and praise Thee, without ceasing,
Glory in Thy perfect love.

Where truth and wisdom is verily, there is love verily common of them ^[13]both, and all of God's making; for he is endless sovereign truth, endless sovereign wisdom, endless sovereign love.'

The wisdom coming from above,
The faith that sweetly works by love.

Thy sovereign grace to all extends,
Immense and unconfined...

Happy the man who wisdom gains,
Thrice happy who his guest retains;
He owns, and shall for ever own:
Wisdom, and Christ, and Heaven are one.

Mother Julian and Charles, echoing the Psalmist, both used the word 'worm' to describe themselves. Such expressions grate on the modern ear - so we lose gems like Charles' beautiful death-bed

poem, dictated to his dear wife, and to which Julian would have breathed a heart-felt 'Amen':

In age and feebleness extreme,
Who shall a helpless worm redeem?
Jesus! My only hope Thou art,
Strength of my failing flesh and heart;
O could I catch one smile from Thee,
And drop into eternity!

My task and my time are all but done! I have brought my own denominational tradition to the Julian experience to see if they illuminate and complement each other - and I believe they do. This is not word association: this is a shared experience. They wrestled with the same ineffable mysteries. 'Talk with us Lord, Thyself reveal' was their prayer.

To Mother and to Charles, religion was a pleasant, not a grievous thing. Both plumbed the depths and scaled the heights of religious experience. In Charles' case, this is nowhere more evident than in the endearing, mystical language of

Thou Shepherd of Israel, and mine,
The joy and desire of my heart,

^[14]and

For closer communion I pine,
I long to reside where Thou art...
Open, Lord, my inward ear,
And bid my heart rejoice;
Bid my quiet spirit hear

Thy comfortable voice...

At the time of his conversion experience Charles wrote: 'I found myself at peace with God and rejoiced in hope of loving Christ'. And towards the end of his life his poetry was still full of soul-searching:

I cannot, Lord, from sinning cease,
Till I begin to love...

Dr. Rattenbury remarked that 'Begin to love' was a strange phrase for this loving old man to use! Charles was expressing his life-long longing for closer communion, for the restoration of the Divine image, for a reconstructed nature where love leaves no room for sin.

That was Julian's hope, too. To her, God is our Maker, our Lover, our Keeper. Like a father, mother, lover, brother, and Saviour, God loves us, reasons with us, pleads with us, suffers for us. We are cleansed by His holy love, which is made vivid and effective by the death of Christ. We are enfolded in love. Our end is love.

I have left till last the most striking and significant of all the parallels. Whoever concluded that 'every article of the Christian Faith depends on the Catholic doctrine of the Trinity' was certainly expressing the confident faith both of Charles Wesley and Julian of Norwich.

Julian:

The Trinity is God, God is the Trinity; the Trinity is our maker and keeper, the Trinity is our everlasting lover, everlasting joy and bliss... And again: ... That high, marvellous wisdom, the might and the goodness of the blissful Trinity.

To which Charles replies:

That great mysterious Deity
We soon with open face shall see;
[15]The beatific sight
Shall fill heaven's sounding courts with praise,
And wide diffuse the golden blaze
Of everlasting light.

The Father shining on His throne,
The glorious co-eternal Son,
The Spirit, one and seven,
Conspire our rapture to complete;
And lo! We fall before His feet,
And silence heightens heaven.

Silence heightens heaven! Take that phrase away with you today, if you take nothing else! Luke Wiseman wrote: 'It wants the courage of a Charles Wesley to break that silence'. But Charles presumed to add a verse:

In hope of that ecstatic pause,
Jesus, we now sustain the cross,
And at Thy footstool fall;
Till Thou our hidden life reveal,
Till Thou our ravished spirits fill,
And God is all in all.

The revelation of that hidden life - our real life, hid with God in Christ - and the nourishing of those ravished spirits, is the eternal work of our eternal lover. Christ invites us to discover, enjoy, and celebrate the love all loves excelling. Julian and Charles confirm that the

invitation and the gift are valid in every age, and are offered to each generation. The interpretation of that experience to a world which doesn't believe in God is, perhaps, the greatest challenge to discipleship today.

Jack Burton



References

Page 6: Glasscoe, Marion (ed.) (1976). *Julian of Norwich: A Revelation of Love*. Exeter, UK: University of Exeter Press.