

The Julian Lecture 2015

Inclusive, Ecstatic, and Loving

the three-fold character of Julian's theology



Dr. Malcolm Guite

[1] Inclusive, Ecstatic, and Loving; the three-fold character of Julian's theology

Dr Malcolm Guite

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He is the author of *What do Christians Believe?* Granta (2006), *Faith Hope and Poetry* (Ashgate 2010, paperback 2012), *Sounding the Seasons; Seventy Sonnets for the Christian Year* (Canterbury 2012) and *The Singing Bowl; Collected Poems* (Canterbury 2013). He contributed the chapter on Lewis as a poet to the Cambridge Companion to C.S. Lewis (Cambridge University Press 2010).

He works as a poet and librettist for composer Kevin Flanagan and his Riprap Jazz Quartet, and has also worked in collaboration with American composer J.A.C. Redford, whose setting of his Antiphon sonnets had its premiere last December. He worked with Canadian singer-songwriter Steve Bell on his 2012 CD *Keening For the Dawn*.

He was the inaugural Artist in Residence at Duke Divinity School in the USA in September 2014.

[2] **Inclusive, Ecstatic, and Loving; the three-fold character of Julian's theology**

Mother Julian was one of the greatest of English mystics. She was local to us - an East Anglian like St Etheldreda. We know very little about Julian's life; we can't even be sure of her name, since she may have taken Julian from the church in Norwich where she was an anchoress. She was known as variously as Mother Julian, Dame Julian or Lady Julian. What we do know is that she was the author of the first book written by a woman in the English language, *The Revelations of Divine Love*. It is a description of a series of visions Julian had when she was in her early thirties, suffering from an illness and at the point of death. She recovered and spent the rest of her life meditating on the meaning of her visions, which she called Showings. She always preferred the homely word and wrote her book in simple, vigorous English.

Her teachings were relevant for her own time, but even more relevant for ours.

An anchoress

Julian was an anchoress. Anchoresses and anchorites - the masculine form of the word - have a true vocation, a vocation both needed and renewed in our day. They root themselves, they are anchor-held in the sea-bed of God's love, holding steadfast as the winds blow every way. Julian was a profound Christian thinker who re-rooted herself deep in the love of God-in-Christ and by so doing was able to re-orient the Church of her day. In the fourteenth century anchoresses and anchorites were held in great respect by ordinary people -

[3] something that probably enabled Julian to write as she did. She held in tension two ideas:

- her desire to be a good daughter of the Church
- her visions and experience of God's love which led her to a very different understanding of God from the Church's bleak theology of punishment and damnation

At a time when heretics were being burnt, she knew how dangerous it was to broadcast her alternative teachings, but her status as an anchoress seems to have protected her.

The building which Julian chose for her incarceration was nothing like the remote, stranded place we might imagine. It was a church in Norwich. Today Norwich is rather out of the way, but in the fourteenth century it was a major port, a city where goods and ideas flowed into England from Europe and the rest of the world.

Julian was walled up in her church. She had a window into the chancel from which she could see the mass celebrated, and a window on the world. This window looked out on to a busy commercial street in Norwich and it was part of her vocation to speak to people who came to her for spiritual guidance and comfort. We know that one person who came was another female mystic, Margery Kempe; Margery wrote about the meeting in her spiritual autobiography.

Julian's teachings

Julian had a marvellous understanding of 'atonement', very different from how we usually speak of it. She thought of it as 'at-one-ment' with God and spoke of being 'oned' with God.

Her most famous saying is 'All shall be well and all manner of things shall be well'. But we need to be wary of how we understand this. From the comfort and affluence of Cambridge in the twenty-first century there's a danger that 'All shall be well,' will be heard as something facile, a shallow ^[4]philosophy of an easy life, easily gained. So it's worth looking at the sort of experiences Julian would have gone through, the physical pain and intellectual struggle that this saying was born out of. It's worth beginning by looking at Julian's world, the world of fourteenth century.

The Black Death and a theology of blame and evasion

It was one of the worst times to live in Europe; and in England life was particularly catastrophic. It was the time of the Black Death-- which may very well have arrived in England through the port of Norwich. Bad summers had produced poor harvests, starvation and unrest. The Lollards - the proto-Protestants of the time - were being burnt by Church authorities. Indeed they were burnt in Norwich during Julian's time. So how did the Church respond to this world of suffering and pain? Very badly. The Church authorities had developed a theology of blame and evasion. The Church taught that the disasters were God's punishment for sin; the Black Death served both as a sign of a sinful life, and a punishment for it. The sick deserved no pity. They were doubly damned and doubly outcast,

avoided by friends and neighbours, who were afraid of the contamination of horrific physical illness and the contamination of sin that would condemn them to Hell. It was a time when preachers put great effort into painting vivid pictures of Hell with their words; they wanted to frighten people into deathbed repentance. The tortures of the Black Death were seen as the antechamber of Hell. If sickness and death were dreadful, then think how much worse Hell was going to be.

Julian's teaching on suffering and sin

Julian stands all this teaching on its head. She embraces illness. Before her illness in her early thirties - the illness during which she had her visions - she had prayed to experience ^[5]severe illness and be near to death. Praying to be ill was as counter-cultural then as it is now. But Julian sees it as a way to understand more intimately Christ's sufferings on the cross. Julian sees God-in-Christ identifying with us through his own suffering, Far from suffering being a sign that God is condemning us, making us outcast for our sin, Christ's own suffering is a sign of how he identifies with us completely.

One of Julian's greatest insights is to see sin as wounds that provoke God's compassion. She says 'He looks with pity, not with blame.' One Showing, the Story of the Lord and the Servant, speaks to this. The Lord sends the Servant on an errand and the Servant goes eagerly but on his way he falls into a ditch and is horribly wounded. He cannot move. He cannot call out. No one comes to help him. He cannot even turn his face towards his Lord, whom he loves and who loves him. The Lord meditates on the Servant's horrible predicament

and how he has been brought to it only by his longing to serve the Lord.

Julian says, 'To me was shown no harder Hell than sin.'

One of the questions that haunted her was this: how can there be bliss if there is even one soul in torment? She is told that all things are possible with God and it is in this context that she receives the assurance: 'All shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well.'

Three salient features of Julian's teaching

I want to conclude with some quotations that show three features of Julian's writings.

1. it is inclusive
2. it is relational and ecstatic
3. it begins and ends in love

1. Julian's teaching is inclusive

[6] Also in this he showed a little thing the quantity of a hazel nut lying in the palm of my hand, as it had seemed to me. This little thing that is made that is beneath our Lady Saint Mary, God showed me as little as it had been a hazel nut, and to my understanding, and it was as round as a ball. I looked thereupon with the eye of my understanding and thought,

'What may this be?' And it was generally answered thus, 'It is all that is made'. I marvelled how it might last, for I thought it might suddenly have fallen to nought for littleness. And I was answered in my understanding, 'It lasts and ever shall, for God loves it'. And so all things have their beginning, being by the love of God. In this little thing I saw three properties: The first is that God made it; The second that God loves it; The third that God keeps it.

What strikes me about this famous passage is that the little thing like a hazelnut, which God made and loves and keeps is 'all that is made'. It is not just all Christians; it is not just all humans; it is not just all creatures; it is 'all that is made'. We are only now beginning to understand that this is what the inclusiveness of God's love really means.

My memory of this passage was that Julian sees the little round thing tenderly held out to her in the palm of God's hand. But reading it again I realised that it is in Julian's hand that the little round thing is held. ('...in the palm of my hand...') This is the paradox; the little thing which is all that is made includes us, but the little thing is put into our hands. Here is a two-fold revelation, on the one hand God made and sustains all this beautiful world on the other he puts it into our hands to love and care for. On the one hand we are part of this ^[7]world, tiny in comparison with God's eternity on the other we transcend this world with God and share his care for it.

2. Julian's teaching is relational and ecstatic

Here are three quotations that talk about the paradox of our relationship to God.

But what is this to me? Beheld I, truly, the Maker, the Keeper and the Lover? I cannot tell. For, till I am substantially oned to him I may never have full rest, nor true bliss; that is to say until I be so fastened to him, that there be right nought that is made between my God and me.

Glad and merry and sweet is the blessed and lovely demeanour of our Lord towards our souls, for he saw us always living in love-longing, and he wants our souls to be gladly disposed toward him... by his grace he lifts up and will draw our outer disposition to our inward, and will make us all at unity with him, and each of us with others in the true, lasting joy which is Jesus.

It is a lofty understanding inwardly to see and to know that God, who is our maker, dwells in our soul, and it is a still loftier and greater understanding inwardly to see and to know that our soul, which is created, dwells in God's substance. From this substance we are what we are, by God.

I saw no difference between God and our substance, but saw it as if it were all God. And yet my understanding accepted the fact that our substance is in God; that is to say that God is God and our substance is a creature in God. For the Almighty Truth of the Trinity is our Father, for he made us and preserves us in^[8] himself; the deep wisdom of the Trinity is our mother, in whom we are enclosed; the lofty goodness of the Trinity is our

Lord, and in him we are enclosed and he in us.

See what wonderful language Julian uses to describe God's vision of us. God sees us 'living in love-longing' and wants us 'to be gladly disposed towards him.'

Julian sees herself in a loving relationship with God as between two separate and independent beings, and yet, at the same time she experiences moments of ecstasy in which she understands there is 'no difference between God and our substance'. She holds these two things in tension.

3. Julian's teaching begins and ends in love

And this is the final revelation of meaning:

And from the time that [the vision] was shown, I desired often to know what our Lord's meaning was. And fifteen years and more afterward I was answered in my spiritual understanding, thus: 'Would you know your Lord's meaning in this thing? Know 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. Keep yourself therein and you shall know and understand more in the same. But you shall never know nor understand any other thing, forever.'

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