

## Session 4: 'All Shall be Well': Julian of Norwich

- Born in 1342, probably in Norwich. As a young woman of 30 she had 16 'shewings' or revelations which she describes and reflects on in her book '*Revelations of Divine Love*'. First woman to have a book published in English.
- After her revelations she retired to a life of prayer as an anchoress, attached to the church of St Julian and St Edward, Conisford. Hence she is called Mother Julian. Anchorage like a bungalow. Window into church, and onto the street.
- She acted as a spiritual director to people through her world-side window, but she never left the anchorage once she entered it. Most of her time was devoted to prayer.
- Even though she wrote in the midst of great insecurity (the Black Death, 100 Years War, Peasants' Revolt) her favourite words relate to security: *seker*, *seker trust*, *sekerness*. (secure, secure trust, security)
- Great desire for God and confidence in God and his love.

### Her Revelations or 'shewings'

As a young woman, Julian asked God for 3 graces –1) a personal experience of Christ's passion, 2) bodily sickness and 3) the three spiritual gifts of contrition, compassion and sincere longing for God. Praying to be seriously ill may all seem very odd to us and a bit morbid. But we do need to realise Julian never desired to suffer for suffering's sake but only so she could enter into a deeper understanding of Christ's passion and God's love.

Perhaps we might want to pray that we will enter into the story of Jesus' passion more fully especially during Passiontide and Holy Week, immersing ourselves in the passion narratives on the gospels have a deeper understanding of Jesus' suffering love and what that means for us.

In 1373, Julian became very ill and was given the last rites. The curate was called to her death and the crucifix he brought became the focus of her visions. She had sixteen visions over twelve hours. Her writing relates to these visions and her insights over them over the next twenty years. She wrote a short account of her revelations soon after they occurred – 'The Short Text' and in 1393 she re-wrote the account of her visions with theological reflection on them – 'The Long Text.'

### Visions not to be desired for themselves

Julian's desire was to be drawn to love God more. This was what was most important to her, not the visions themselves. She also saw her revelations and reflections on them to be of benefit to others, her '*evencristens*' (fellow Christians). Her visions are for 'all and sundry' not just for herself (chapter 8) 'The fact that I have had this revelation does not mean that I am good. I am good only in so far as I love God the better; if you love God more than I do then you are by that much better than I.' (chapter 9)

### Desire For God

Julian had a deep longing for God: 'God, of your goodness, give me yourself, for you are sufficient for me. I cannot properly ask anything less to be worthy of you. If I were to ask less, I should always be in want. In you alone do I have all...He has made us for himself alone, has restored us by his passion, and keeps us in his blessed love.' (chapter 5) cf Augustine's 'restless heart': 'You have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in You.' Julian points out that Christ longs for us as we long for him. He longs 'for us to be joined to him for ever.' (chapter 31)

## The Love of God

- She stresses his love of creation: all that is made is compared to a 'little thing the size of a hazelnut' which exists because God loves it. (chapter 5)
- His love for each person: 'In his love, he clothes us, enfolds us and embraces us; that tender love completely surrounds us, never to leave us.' (chapter 5)
- God's love most clearly shown in the passion of Christ.
- We need to be confident that God keeps us in his love, whatever we feel like: 'he keeps us alike in weal and woe' (chapter 15) Our confidence needs to be in God and his love and not in our own feelings.
- Love is the meaning of everything – see last chapter, (chapter 86)

## The Passion of Christ and the Trinity

The suffering of Christ on the cross is central to the 'shewings', but at the same time there is a focus on the Trinity throughout. This is made clear in the first revelation when she sees Christ wearing the crown of thorns. Sees Christ suffering yet filled with joy of the Trinity.

'At the same moment the Trinity filled me full of heartfelt joy, and I knew that all eternity was like this for those who attain heaven. For the Trinity is God, and God the Trinity; the Trinity is our Maker and keeper, our eternal lover, joy and bliss – all through our Lord Jesus Christ. This was shown me in this first revelation, and indeed, in them all; for where Jesus is spoken of, the blessed Trinity is always to be understood as I see it.'

## Motherhood of Christ

Chapters 58-64.. Julian describes Jesus' love for us as like that of a mother. (Not first person to have done this, eg St Anselm). Wonderful picture of a child going to its mother in a terrible mess; that we need to go to Jesus when we are in a mess rather than turning away from him in shame (read from chapter 61)

## The Optimism of Grace

Great confidence in the goodness and love of God. God's love is stronger than our sin, so we should not despair over our failings. She writes of 'rejoicing in the completeness of his love, rather than sorrowing over our frequent falls.' (chapter 81). We should never give in to despair. 'For just as by his courtesy God forgives our sin when we repent, so he wills that we forgive our sin too, and as a consequence our foolish despondency and doubting fears.' (chapter 73) When we fall we simply need to get up again, trusting in God's love and forgiveness. Her writing is therefore full of joy and confident hope. She believes 'all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well.' (chapter 32) *NB, this phrase can be trivialized: not a promise all will be well tomorrow, or next week, or even in our lifetime. It is an ultimate 'all shall be well' not a temporary one.*

## The Problem of Sin

- Julian's confidence in the goodness and love of God leads her to puzzle over sin and God's response to it. Has problems with God's wrath and questions God and wrestles with God over this.
- She believes 'just as the blessed Trinity made everything out of nothing, in the same way shall he make all that is wrong to turn out for the best' (chapter 32)
- One of her solutions to the problem of sin is to suggest that 'there is in every soul that is saved a godly will that never assented to sin, nor ever shall' She goes beyond the orthodox teaching of the church in this.
- At centre of her ponderings about sin and God's response to it is her parable of the Lord and his servant (ch 51) This is very complex and puzzled her over many years, but it is also very powerful. It involves a Lord and a servant who falls in a muddy ditch. At first she thinks the servant is Adam but can't understand the Lord's pleasure and delight in him, despite his fall and failure. She comes to interpret it that the

servant is *both Adam and Christ*. God sees us his servants with the eyes of love, compassion and delight, *because* he sees his Son in us.

Prayer: Chapters 41-43 focus on prayer:

- God wants us to pray and gives us the gift of prayer. 'I am the foundation of your praying...' (chapter 41)
- We should pray whatever we feel like: 'Pray inwardly, even if you do not enjoy it. It does good, though you feel nothing, see nothing. Yes, even though you think you're doing nothing. For when you are dry, empty, sick, or weak, at such a time is your prayer most pleasing to me though you find little enough to enjoy in it. This is true of all believing prayer.' (chapter 41)
- Prayer unites us with God: 'the outcome and purpose of our prayers...is that we should be united with our Lord and like him in everything.' (chapter 42)

## **All Shall be Well': The Optimism of Grace** **Mother Julian**

### **For discussion and Sharing**

1. What do you find most helpful/most challenging in Mother Julian's writing?  
(*Focus on Christ's passion; confidence in the love of God; motherhood of Christ; her teaching on prayer; 'all shall be well'....*)
2. Julian advises that we live 'rejoicing in the completeness of his love, rather than sorrowing over our frequent falls....' 'For just as by his courtesy God forgives our sin when we repent, so he wills that we forgive our sin too, and as a consequence our foolish despondency and doubting fears.'

Do we sometimes focus on our struggles and failings rather than God's love and forgiveness? How might such confidence in the love of God affect the way we react to our own mistakes and failures and those of others?

### **For Further Reflection**

3. 'Pray inwardly, even if you do not enjoy it. It does good, though you feel nothing, see nothing. Yes, even though you think you're doing nothing. For when you are dry, empty, sick, or weak, at such a time is your prayer most pleasing to me though you find little enough to enjoy in it. This is true of all believing prayer.'

'God, of your goodness, give me yourself, for you are sufficient for me. I cannot properly ask anything less to be worthy of you. If I were to ask less, I should always be in want. In you alone do I have all...He has made us for himself alone, has restored us by his passion, and keeps us in his blessed love.'

'The outcome and purpose of our prayers...is that we should be united with our Lord and like him in everything.'

How do these words comfort/challenge you in your prayer life?

4. Julian is optimistic; not because she is optimistic about human nature, but because she has a joyful confidence in God that 'all will be well.'  
What do these words say to you in relation to your life, your concerns for others, and your prayers for the world?