



# Julian of Norwich

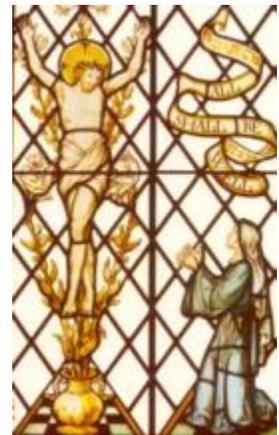
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## ***Brief biographical data:***

***Fourteenth century - English anchorite and mystic; revelations based on 16 "showings", related to the Passion of Christ, received at the age of 30; long text of the revelations compiled twenty years following the revelations shares the spiritual knowledge she developed as their outcome. The showings, which occurred when Julian genuinely believed she was about to die, were an answer to her prayer to develop true contrition (perfect love - intimacy with God.) Commemorated as a saint by the Church of England in 1980.***

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**This essay is intended to lead the reader to explore Julian's work for himself, and the links are a sampler of quotations and a means to obtain books by and about this wonderful mystic.**



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**It can be most tempting to be selective, when we read the works of medieval mysticism. Julian's message can elude us if viewed through a 21st century haze. Since the current trend is to evaluate the needs and popular thought of society, then mould our religious practise to the "acceptable", we may remove Julian's**

writings from their context. We may enjoy "all shall be well", and the idea that sin is not "real", yet ignore the essential Christian faith which is the essence of her message.

Saints, of any era, are both products of their time and holy *despite* the prevalent conditions. Sanctity has never been in vogue, and the holy fulfilled needs that were neglected rather than conformed to a popular standard. Julian affirms eternal truth with an approach that is in marked contrast to the popular piety of the late Middle Ages. She describes herself as "unlettered", yet her theological sophistication testifies to the validity of her religious experience, and to her being a woman of burning love for her Creator.

True contemplatives do not seek unusual experiences, much less personal power. Their consuming goal is intimacy with God. Apparently, the singular incident of the 16 showings provided the insight which influenced Julian's entire spirituality. It is telling that her "long text", which amplified the awareness she had received from these revelations, was composed 20 years later (when she'd reached what was, for the era, the "advanced" age of 50). Given that an anchoress lacked neither time nor motivation for recording such reflections, it is a fair assumption that her understanding of the full scope of her revelations developed over many years. In the era of the microwave and T-1 carrier, we must recall that quick mega-doses of the divine grace are not likely to come from the Master's hands ... even if the process can be completed in eternity!

Christian mysticism is based on grace: the indwelling of the Trinity in the souls of mankind, and a divine call to holiness. Julian emphasises this, and various other points of doctrine, with an exquisite joy, focussing on bliss and glory rather than the idea of earth's being a battleground for good and evil. During the Middle Ages, the latter was the prevalent view - Satan sought to trip and trap us, and heaven was a promise difficult to hope for. Julian stresses the life of striving for virtue, but not in the highly negative manner common in her day, wherein rigid penance was the means to "atonement" for one's sin.

In her *Revelations*, Julian shows great charm in the childlike, tender quality of her expression. She sees God as one who delights in his creation - and who is thankful to *us* for our happiness in heaven. Though our medieval friends (no holier than mankind has been before or since!) were far more aware of God and of eternity than we could imagine, it was hardly characteristic of the time that "the king" would delight in the servant.

Julian's attitude that "all shall be well" largely depends on acceptance of the limitations of our own vision, and the knowledge that the vastness of divine providence is mysterious. (Theologians of the Middle Ages would not



have denied this, but nonetheless attempted to explain the inexplicable with scientific accuracy!) Hers is not an optimism (such as that which briefly flourished in the late nineteenth century) which denies the malice of either the evil one or the individual! Rather, it is an awareness that divine love can bring good from any circumstance. Recalling that Julian's era was that of the Black Death, great corruption amongst the Church hierarchy, the peasant's revolt, and other assorted tribulations, we see that hers is no naive idealism, but a trust divinely inspired and responded to with love.

There are areas in which Julian was quite *untypical*:

- The fourteenth century was a period when the Inquisition was at full force, and the emphases of many theologians and religious Orders was the refutation of heresy. (Heretics were thought to be in league with the devil.) Julian is entirely positive - focussing on divine grace and not on the errors of his creatures.
- Julian saw the suffering of the world not as a punishment (the common approach during the time of the Plague!) but as a channel through which God could draw us closer to Himself. The idea of purification of sin was hardly new, but her seeing rejoicing in it is quite in contrast to the "fire" which one would pay the Pardoner to avoid. (One wishes a meeting between Julian and contemporary Dante could have been recorded.) This is a joyous purification - not the lash.
- Julian expresses both that the pain was the consequence of sin and that there is a mystery (not a clear cut cause and effect) which made this offering glorious. Theologians of the period (who tended to see the world as having belonged to Satan since the time when Adam fell), though they would have muttered "*felix culpa*", were at their wit's end to define exactly how the world was lost and "re-purchased". Julian glories in redemption, but shows unusual insight in admitting we cannot know precisely how this was accomplished.
- Julian interestingly does not emphasise "using intercessors", but is keenly aware of the rejoicing of saints in heaven. Her kinship with the saints is profound, but she advocates approaching God directly as what best pleases Him. The "direct approach" to the King is hardly typical of the predominantly feudal society, with its "necessity" of intercessors. (This was the time when the saints were so stressed that pilgrimages during which one could view such curious relics as the head of the child John the Baptist or the palace of Dives were in much demand.)
- Her references to the mystical nature of the Eucharist, during her revelations about "Christ our mother", show unusual depth. The common approaches to the Eucharist ranged from the superstitious to the scientific (and the faithful attended, but rarely participated in, the banquet.)
- Julian gives us a picture of the devil as eternally frustrated. Sin was not "real" for Julian in that it was neither created nor eternal - she never denied

sin, its pains, or the need for repentance and purification. The images of the sinner's redemption as leading to greater joy in heaven (and virtue on earth) makes even the evil one an unwilling co-operator with divine providence. All of creation serves its purpose in the divine will's being fulfilled.

- The idea of the Church as a vehicle of divine revelation is essential to understanding Julian. Her supposed deference to holy Church is not a fearsome obedience (very understandable during the Inquisition period, even if England was not under fire at the moment) but a thankful awareness for a divine gift (and of our own eternal capacity for self-deception). It is stronger because it does not assume that the hierarchy exceeded anyone else in personal holiness, nor that any role in the Church (whether shoemaker, gatekeeper, or just penitent) was less vital to its members as a whole.

### *Twenty-first century hazards to understanding Julian's essential messages*

- Julian's concept of "God as Mother" has a richness which is lost if we ignore its elements:
  - The Trinity - perfect love and delight in creation, expressed in a family relationship
  - The Incarnation - with a strong medieval tradition of life's beginning with the father "providing" the soul and the mother the physical essence, Jesus' human nature (a part of the divine plan from the beginning, not demanded by mankind's rejection of God) makes his contribution as mother far more vivid and understandable
  - The Eucharist - her reference to Jesus as feeding his children with himself
- Mystery
  - Julian, while acknowledging the generosity of divine grace in revelation, repeatedly stresses that there is much we cannot understand in this life. Our "age of reason" inclination is to shrink from what we cannot understand - even an infinite and perfect God.
  - Julian sees the incomprehensible greatness of God as a reason for trust and for anticipation of a (blissful) understanding in heaven. Today, we are too conscious that promises of heaven often were used to content the oppressed with their lot on earth - and, with our erroneous assumption that there can be total bliss on earth, we'll pursue that futile search while concurrently clinging to notions of our own immortality.
  - We tend to confuse spiritual growth with achievement. Julian's stress on divine providence is difficult to grasp. (Not that the idea of achievement in this context is new - in fact, it is rather typically English - as Pelagius illustrated many centuries before Julian!) The contribution each of us could make to the Church at large (which usually is unknown to us, let alone a matter of recognised

accomplishment!) could drown in the "healthy psychology" wherein only fruitful personal relationships are pursued; guilt (however real) is to be eliminated at all costs; sin is an oppressive concept illustrating poor self-esteem; religion is basically healthy and useful to society but whether there is an objective God is in question.

- **The Church**

- Julian's references to "turning to holy Church" and to the sacraments is especially effective, considering her era was unequalled for corruption amongst the clergy, and she clearly is referring to the divine establishment of the Church as a continuance of Jesus' own ministry. With the excesses of the Reformation leaving us both with a disliking for "mediation" and a contrary view which tends to be highly judicial and authoritative, we are more likely to see the Church as a hindrance to personal spiritual growth. (If "we are the Church" is a popular statement - and a true one - it more often is a statement of independence from the "establishment"!)
- We are uneasy with the idea of objective truth, and would be hard put to see how God would reveal this through his Church (though we may have an idea that we ourselves grasp a variety of truth.)
- This being a time when the popular view is that "health" or "maturity" depend on having neither a sense of responsibility for others nor any dependence on anyone else, Julian's stress on the Mystical Body will be quite foreign.
- The consecrated life, such as that of the anchoress, is easily misunderstood today as "selfish" - focussing only on the individual's relationship with God. In truth, such a vocation has no meaning without its being a contribution to the Church. Julian, dependent totally on others for her upkeep, had at least as strong an element of humble aspects as that of being the wise advisor. No contribution was greater or less than the other, because all are connected with the role the Church plays in leading us closer to God. This beautiful idea of vocation is easily lost now.
- Remembering the stake and block can lead to love for diversity and tolerance, but equally can foster indifference - as if believing there is an objective and revealed truth oppresses those who have a different concept of what this truth is.

- **Heaven**

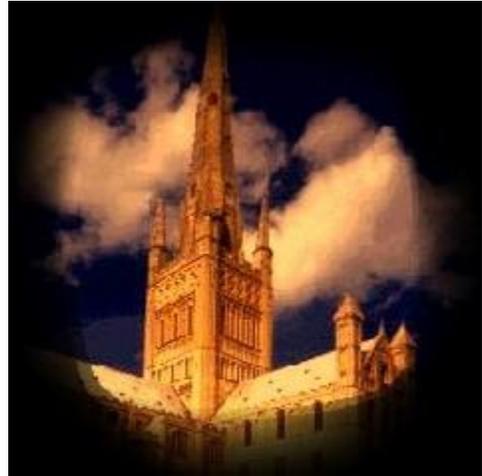
- The idea of failings today leading to greater glory in heaven is hard to grasp. This being an age where death is a "failure" (...avoidable with sufficient jogging), we cannot comprehend that there is anything beyond what we accomplish here.
- We are not comfortable with the idea of "here" being the preparation for "there", because we tend to confuse religion with fellowship and the needs of society, not with genuine worship.
- The delightful picture of the saints rejoicing is hard to grasp in a time when heaven is reduced to an intellectual abstraction.

- **Sin and Weakness**

- Julian believes that "all shall be well" because divine providence brings good even from sin. Our tendency to reduce sin to "bad self-esteem" - again, coupled with a vagueness about whether we can know what is sinful or not! - can make us shy from this important aspect of her revelations.
- We are not likely to face the limitation of our own perception and vision. Julian sees our weakness as a point where God's grace leads to purification, and our essential "blindness" as being removed in the next life.
- The trust in God which Julian stresses is rooted in our awareness of our limitations. We undoubtedly would fear this as a lack of responsibility.

God is Truth, and truth eternal. It remains for those who love Him best to stimulate our own, weary minds and hearts to seek that same Truth, in love. The question remains: how do we incorporate the richness of Julian's message into our own lives?

Julian's near contemporary and near neighbour, the Franciscan John Duns Scotus, saw love as sanctifying grace, that is, the indwelling of the Trinity in our own souls. Love for God was the return of this wonderful and free gift of His, and love of neighbour a cherishing of another whom God created, and for whom His Son acquired Redemption. Thus, all love reflects that joy and delight of the Trinity, which Julian so eloquently described.



To paraphrase another theologian of the late Middle Ages, Thomas Aquinas, the gift comes according to the manner of the recipient. The "accidental" of Julian's message - how God reveals Himself through His Church, for example - may be puzzling, but the essence we can embrace in faith, while asking that our own revelation of God's will (one likely to be much less dramatic, but no less affective), lead us as well to a loving response.

Peace and all good - Serve the Lord with gladness - and, to quote Julian's words, "Blessed May He Be!"  
Gloriana