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Julian's Desire for Three Gifts from God

Who Was Julian of Norwich?

We know very little for certain about Julian of Norwich herself. Scholars have debated inconclusively for decades about her background, while historical sleuths have offered various hypotheses about her identity and early life. Some believe that she came from a wealthy family, others suggest that she had been a Benedictine nun living in a convent in Norwich. Several authors suggest that Julian had been a wife and mother, who lost her husband and children early in life, perhaps in one of the waves of the Black Death that swept through Europe in the fourteenth century.

One thing we do know is that, some time in her adulthood, probably after she was 30 years old, Julian became an *anchorite* at St Julian's Church in Norwich. An anchorite was a person, common in medieval England, who took vows that consecrated them to a life of austerity, prayer and offering spiritual counsel. They were thus like monks and nuns, except that they lived not in convents or monasteries but alone, in solitude, in small apartments attached usually to a parish church.

A great deal of the problem in tracking who Julian was goes back to the likelihood that when she became an anchorite at St Julian's Church, she stopped using her baptismal and family name and took as her own that of the patron saint of the parish church where she became an anchorite. The church where Julian lived as an anchorite was thus not named after her, but after St Julian of Le Mans or perhaps St Julian Hospitaller, centuries

before Julian herself got there. When she took the name ‘Julian’ from the church, as it is almost certain that she did, she effectively shrouded her earlier life in anonymity. As a result, we know nothing for certain about Julian other than what she relates in her *Revelations*, and from a handful of other sources, such as existing wills that leave money for her maintenance as an anchoress.

From these sources we can gather that Julian was born around 1342. We know also that she lived at least until 1416, perhaps longer. We know that she had at least two lay-sisters who took care of her needs. We also know, because Julian herself tells us, that when she was 30 years old, in May 1373, she underwent a series of experiences that she understood as direct experiences of God, commonly called *mystical experiences*, which became the source of all her later writing. These mystical experiences happened over a couple of days and nights and Julian organized them into sixteen different *Showings*. We can surmise from Julian’s own description that she became an anchoress some time after this.

As to her writings, we currently possess both a ‘Short Text’ and versions of a ‘Long Text’ of what is now commonly known as *The Revelations of Divine Love*. Most Julian scholars agree that the Short Text was written shortly after Julian’s mystical experiences, as it is a brief, autobiographical account of her experience of God. Around six times longer, the Long Text appears to have been written between 15 and 20 years later, and includes most of the Short Text, with significant amounts of theological reflection and pastoral counsel woven in. The Long Text is what people commonly read when they read Julian of Norwich’s *Revelations of Divine Love*.

Julian’s Youthful Desire for Three Gifts

As we turn to Julian’s *Revelations*, we find that Chapter 1 is a table of contents, probably written by a scribe, which provides a short description of each of the 16 Showings.

In Chapter 2 we encounter Julian herself, beginning to share her experience of God. Here Julian describes herself as desiring,

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in her youth, three particular gifts of God. She tells us quickly what these three gifts were:

These revelations were shown to a simple, uneducated creature in the year of our Lord 1373, on the eighth day of May. This person had already asked for three gifts by the grace of God. The first was to relive his Passion in her mind; the second was bodily sickness; the third was that God would give her three wounds. (BW, LT 2)

A visionary experience of the Passion of Christ? A bodily sickness? Three wounds? Reading just this much, we are thrust into a devotional and spiritual landscape that seems alien to most of us. The young Julian is asking God actually to *re-live* Jesus' Passion, for a sickness taking her to the point of death, and for three 'spiritual wounds'.

Helpfully, Julian explains her desire for the each of the gifts:

As for the first gift [Julian says], it seemed to me that I had some feeling for the Passion of Christ but I still wanted more ... I wished I had been there at that time with Mary Magdalene and with others who loved Christ, so that I might have seen with my own eyes the Passion which our Lord suffered for me, and so that I might have suffered with him as others did who loved him. And so I longed for a vision of him in the flesh, by which I might have more knowledge of the bodily sufferings of our Saviour and of the fellow-suffering ... of all those who truly loved him ... I wanted to have afterwards a truer perception of Christ's Passion. (BW, LT 2)

Such a request for a vision of the Passion of Christ is perhaps not so strange after all. The Church regards meditation on the Passion of Christ as standard Christian practice, particularly during Lent and Holy Week. In order to come to grips with the mystery of Jesus and his death, we might, for instance, read the Gospel accounts of the Passion, or listen to music inspired by it, or contemplate artwork and iconography depicting Jesus'

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death. In her first desire, Julian wants the same kind of contact with the reality of Christ's death that we might have in ordinary devotion, but she wants to have it as directly and as keenly as possible; through an extraordinary religious experience she wants to re-live it. Julian feels that such an experience would allow her to be faithful and loving.

The second gift that Julian seeks, she says, is a sickness, 'severe enough as to seem mortal, so that in that illness I might receive all the rites of Holy Church, myself believing that I was to die' (BW, LT 2). Julian is not seeking a near-death experience in the modern sense of the term, as an experience of going beyond the grave in order to touch something of heaven. Rather, Julian wants to go right up to the brink of death and expect to die, yet still live. She tells us that she wanted this so as to be 'purged by the mercy of God, and afterwards live more to the glory of God'.

Like her first request, this seems extreme at first, but on reflection it is not so removed from contemporary experience. It is almost a commonplace for people to say that their lives have been transformed by a brush with death, becoming more compassionate, for instance, following a nearly fatal car accident. Having an awareness of death often allows us to engage life more thoughtfully and consciously, more in touch with ourselves and deeper values. In the same way, Julian is seeking to be 'purged' of vain preoccupations to live more truly, more to 'the glory of God'.

Julian's third request is for three spiritual gifts or graces, which she characterizes as *wounds*: 'the wound of true contrition, the wound of kind compassion, and the wound of purposeful longing for God' (BW, LT 2). In these wounds Julian is seeking to be more transparent with herself before God, to be more compassionately in touch with God and others and to have a greater desire for and sense of belonging to God.

But why does Julian use the metaphor of 'wounds' to speak of these things? In the Short Text, Julian tells us that she was inspired by the example of an early Christian martyr, St Cecilia, who suffered three neck wounds before she died (BW, ST §1). Even with this devotional precedent in her mind, it is still curious

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that Julian conceived of contrition, compassion and longing as coming to her as wounds, opened up by blows from the outside, rather than as qualities that might emerge from within her. This tells us something perhaps about Julian's youthful spirituality: while she desired intensely to live in loving faithfulness to God, she was frustrated in her desire to do so. Unable to live as she deeply desired, stuck and unable to make the spiritual progress she wanted, she felt as though violence had to be done to her from outside, in an extraordinary divine intervention, in order for her to live more in touch with her own truth and God's reality. The sense of being stuck spiritually, of being unable to live as we'd like, is common in Christian experience from St Paul onwards.

Interestingly, Julian tells us that while the desire for the first two gifts 'passed from my mind ... the third [that is, the desire for the three wounds] remained with me continually' (BW, LT 2).

Intimations of the Journey We Have Already Begun

Julian does in fact receive all three of these gifts in the course of the mystical experiences recorded in the *Revelations*: the 16 Showings happen for Julian in the context of a near-death; they are centred initially on the suffering of Jesus in his Passion; and, finally, the Showings allowed contrition, compassion and purposeful longing for God to emerge as powerful and orientating forces in Julian's life. We might say that because of her mystical experiences, Julian became more truthful and self-acceptant, more empathically in touch with herself, others and God, and that her desiring was more gathered into a desire for God.

As we begin our walk with Julian, her three youthful desires show us something about the kind of journey that we are about to undertake with Julian as our guide.

First, we are going to spend some time with the physical suffering and death of Jesus of Nazareth as revealing something about ourselves and God's presence and action in our lives. Julian's experience of Jesus' Passion, and our experience with her, will

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be fundamentally a prolonged journey into the mystery of compassion: God's compassion for us, and ours for God and one another.

Second, just as Julian gained perspective on life, and wisdom, by suffering a sickness in which she thought she was going to die, in the journey of this book we are going to step back from everyday concerns in order to attempt to see life more holistically, and to ask the biggest possible questions about our lives, our faith, our hope. What we are after is clarity about the most basic purpose and direction of our lives.

Third, Julian's use of the metaphor of 'wounds' reminds us that when qualities of soul such as truthfulness, or compassion, or love begin to emerge in us, we might well experience these as a wounding of our otherwise 'strong' selves. We might well experience such new spiritual qualities at first as a hurt vulnerability that yet allows, over time, a more substantial contact with ourselves, others and God.

The seventeenth-century poet John Donne famously asked God to break open his soul to God's presence and rule:

Batter my heart, three-personed God, for you
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;
That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend
Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new.

For some of us, to know that we are beginning a journey with Julian that is going to 'break, blow, burn, and make us new' might feel like a relief. Finally, our small, closed-in hearts are going to be broken open to something larger. Our self-centredness and self-delusion are finally going to be pierced and undone. We might even surmise that the spiritual wounds we already have in our souls – the trauma, loss and pain we have already suffered in life – can become, through this journey of faith, the very experiences that allow for a more transparent, truthful and compassionate life, and a life more gathered into the desire for God.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

At the end of each chapter in this book, I will offer questions for reflection and discussion, sometimes with suggestions for spiritual practice. The reader might want to find a small notebook in which she or he can write down notes about our reflections, as a record of our journey with Julian.

- 1 As you begin this journey with Julian through her *Revelations*, what are you seeking? What do you desire? Why have you picked up this book?
- 2 What do you think of, what images come to mind, when you imagine the Passion of Jesus? Can you imagine yourself standing with all of 'Christ's lovers' just as Julian did, at the foot of the cross? Do you in any way want to accompany Jesus in his death, to know what this was like for him? Why or why not?
- 3 Julian has shared with us her youthful desire for three gifts, which, through the *Revelations*, became the basis for her whole life's spiritual development and response to God. In the same way, our own youthful spiritual desires and religious experiences may tell us something of the essence of our spiritual truth and relationship with God. Can you remember your own youthful spiritual, religious or idealistic desires? How have these been frustrated or realized? How have they grown, or changed? How do you understand them now?
- 4 Julian imagines compassion as a spiritual wound. Take a moment to imagine compassion in your heart – compassion for yourself, compassion for a friend, compassion for a stranger, compassion even for an enemy. What does it feel like to offer another compassion?

Before the Beginning: Julian's Sickness and Questioning

A Near-Death Illness

In the third chapter of Julian's *Revelations*, one of the most overlooked chapters in the book, Julian describes the onset of her near-death sickness that becomes the context for her mystical experiences.

It is worth stopping a moment to dwell on this chapter, because the near-death illness forces Julian, as only a near-death illness can, to struggle with the most fundamental questions about life and death, and what our basic orientation should be if we are to continue living.

She begins her third chapter by telling us about her bodily sickness.

And when I was thirty and a half years old, God sent me a bodily sickness in which I lay for three days and three nights; and on the fourth night I received all the rites of Holy Church and did not expect to live until morning. (BW, LT 3)

She fully expects to die, and she receives the Last Rites of the Church, then understood as a final preparation for death. However, Julian thinks it sad to die so young:

Being still young, I thought it was a great pity to die, but this was not because of anything on earth that I wanted to live for, nor because I was afraid of any pain, for I trusted in God's

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mercy. But it was because I wanted to live so as to have loved God better and for longer, in order that I might, through the grace of that living, have more knowledge and love of God in the bliss of heaven. (BW, LT 3)

Julian's Desire for More Life

For Julian, the purpose of human life is to develop our capacity for knowing and loving God; we might say our capacity for relationship in general. Such development was charged with special meaning for Julian because the degree to which we grow into knowing and loving God in this life apparently determined for her our capacity to do so for all eternity. It's as if our eternal capacity for personhood, for love and truth and relationship, is determined by what we manage to grow into (or not) in this life.

Ruth Burrows, a contemporary spiritual writer from the Carmelite tradition, shares such a developmental view of the human person:

A great insight of our times is that of man [and we might say, woman] becoming. Earlier generations conceived of the world and man as static. Man was there waiting to be explored ... Think of your soul as a castle, St. Teresa tells us, God dwells in the innermost room ... the rooms are there, it is just that you haven't learned to enter them. But nowadays we see things differently. The rooms are not there! We grasp that we are gradually coming into being; the potentiality that we are unique in each instance is slowly 'realized.' How can God dwell in depths that are not there as yet? (*Guidelines for Mystical Prayer*, pp. 9-10.)

Julian wants to live longer because she will have more chance of coming into what Burrows calls her 'potentiality'. Being faced with death as unavoidable, Julian, however, tells us that she surrenders to God this fate of dying young. Julian releases herself entirely to God's will and to her own death, even if this limits her *eternal* reality!

Compassion with Jesus in Ordinary Life

With this surrender, all seems settled – until Julian begins to feel better, and realizes that she is actually going to continue living. Thus, having already made a total surrender of herself to God, and disposed herself for death, feeling that she was going to live longer did not comfort her:

[N]or did feeling more comfortable in this way fully comfort me, for it seemed to me I would rather have been released from this world, because my heart was willingly set upon that. (BW, LT 3)

In a way that many of us never experience, Julian had made a total surrender of herself to God at what she thought was the point of death, and thus released all ties with earthly life. Feeling better, however, she is aware of herself, hovering right on the edge of this life and about to re-enter it.

And it's here, right at this point of re-entering ordinary earthly life, that Julian remembers her youthful desire for the spiritual wound of compassion, and for a special experience of the Passion of Christ. These, she says, suddenly came to her mind:

Then it suddenly came to mind that I ought to wish for the second wound [of compassion] as a gift and a grace from our Lord, so that my body might be filled with recollection and feeling of his blessed Passion, as I had prayed before; for I wanted his pains to be my pains, with compassion, and then longing for God. (BW, LT 3)

What happens next is wondrous. Julian realizes that she does not need an *extraordinary mystical or visionary experience* at all to realize compassionate intimacy with Jesus or to re-live his Passion. From the perspective of near-death, Julian sees that ordinary human life itself, living in 'a mortal body', if lived in surrender, is a way of being intimately one with Jesus and even of dying with him.

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It seemed to me that, through his grace, I might have the wounds which I had wanted before. But in this I never asked for any bodily vision or any kind of revelation from God, but for compassion, such as it seemed to me a naturally sympathetic soul might feel for our Lord Jesus, who for love was willing to become a mortal man. And I longed to suffer with him, while living in my mortal body, as God would give me grace. (BW, LT 3)

Julian realizes that ordinary life could be experienced as compassionate union with Jesus, because Jesus out of love has already taken our experience of ordinary life into himself. It's as if the bridge into Jesus' reality is already there: it is our ordinary life.

A First Glimpse of Julian's Faith in Action

This sudden realization of Julian's – that she could have her long-sought intimacy and knowledge of God not through special visionary experience, but in living open and surrendered to God in ordinary life – is a first glimpse of what faith does: it takes human experience and makes that experience open to God, and an experience of increasing intimacy with God, and knowledge of God, who chooses to share our experience with us in Jesus.

The faith that Julian presents us with, on this very first glimpse, is thus not primarily about subscribing to certain beliefs, or having a vague trust in a 'God'. Still less does it mean being carried away into spiritual worlds or having special experiences. Yes, faith does involve believing things, faith does involve trust and faith does allow for certain experiences of God. But at its most essential level the practice of faith, as Julian understood it, means being open to the experiences we have had and the experience we are having in each moment as, at some level, already our openness to God: God sometimes suffering deep pain with us, and God sometimes transfigured with glory in our joy and delight.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

- 1 Have you experienced anything like a near-death illness? Or have you experienced this in a lesser way, being with the death of another, for example, or being in hospital for weeks on end? What was it like to slip out of the normal pattern of life? What was it like to come back to ordinary life? Did you learn anything? Did your values change?
- 2 Julian conceives of compassion with Christ as occurring through her openness to ordinary human experience. Have you experienced moments where you have been able to be open to the present moment without any resistance at all, such as in moments of transcendent beauty, love or loss? Some people experience this before works of art, or in church, or in prayer. What has this been like for you?
- 3 Julian seems to assume that the purpose of life is to grow in our capacity for truth and love, for understanding and intimacy. Is this enough? Do you see this kind of growth as the purpose of your life? Or do we need to add something about actively and intentionally helping others?