



### **Prayer Before Studying Theology:**

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.

--Julian of Norwich

### **Week #12b: God's Hiddenness and Self-Revelation in the *Showings* (*Revelations of Divine Love*) of Julian of Norwich (b. 1342; d. 1420-1443)**

#### **Julian's Life and Works**

All we know of Julian was that she

- suffered a severe illness (a heart attack?) in May 1373 when she was 30 1/2 years old (probably while she was still in secular life and living with her family),
- was an anchoress (woman devoted to a life of solitary prayer) at the Church of Sts. Julian and Edward in Norwich in 1394 (hence "Julian" as her religious name)
- was alive to meet with another late medieval English mystic, Margery Kempe, sometime between 1413 and 1416.
- was still alive in 1416, when she is mentioned in a will as receiving a bequest of money.

Her *Showings* relate certain visionary experiences she had of the crucified Christ during her illness in 1373 and reflect upon their significance and meaning. Two different versions of the *Showings* exist—the short text (ST) and the long text (LT).

Her early short text of the revelations was completed a few years after the 1373 revelations, while the long text is more theologically developed and was completed only in 1393 (and may have even undergone one further revision after this).

The *Showings* describe Julian's prayer, while ill, for three things (ST 1 / p. 125:

- to know Christ's passion,
- to experience bodily sickness, and
- to receive three wounds from God:
  - contrition,
  - compassion [=a willing to suffer with Christ and to remain with Christ in his suffering],
  - longing of the will for God,

Note the prominence here of Julian's hope to participate in the Savior's passion by compassion (having a share in Christ's suffering). See esp. LT 2; pp. 177-178.

This prayer to share in Christ's sufferings is followed by a description and commentary upon sixteen visions she had received during her illness in response to this prayer. (For a description of the initial vision see ST 3; pp. 129-130.) These visions are clearly conceived as having a relevance for the edification of other Christians, so that Julian tends to conceive of her own experience as typical of the Christian life:

- "Everything I say about me I mean to apply to all my fellow Christians, for I am taught that this is what our Lord intends in this spiritual revelation" (ST 6 [ p. 133]; LT 8)
- "In all this I was greatly moved in love towards my fellow Christians, that they might all see and know the same as I saw, for I wished it to be a comfort to them, for all this vision was shown for all men" (LT 8).
- These revelations are intended to edify and encourage those who are advancing in the Christian life and will be saved (i.e. not for the unconverted or newly converted person who has not yet begun to advance in the Christian life)(ST 13; p. 149):
  - These revelations are for "such men and women as for the love of God hate sin and dispose themselves to do God's will" (LT 73).
  - "God showed me no one else" (ST 6 [p. 135]; LT 9).
  - Aims, by a consoling and encouraging message of God's love and faithfulness in Christ, to edify those who wrestle with *akedia* (=despondency and spiritual listlessness, particularly when it seems that our efforts to advance seemed stalled, futile and powerless and the force of present sinful impulses and accusations for our past sins seem to pain and overwhelm the soul with fear and discouragement=the "despair or doubtful fear" [cf. ST 10; p. 142] felt when God's love, omnipresence [ST 8; p. 137], omnipotence and faithfulness to carry us forward to salvation in accordance with his promises have fallen out of view). See further LT 10 and esp. her interpretation of the rapid alternation of consolations and desolations in the seventh revelation in ST 9 [p. 140]; LT 15 and of our simultaneous life in Christ and life in Adam in LT 52.
    - ♣ "Some of us believe that God is almighty and may do everything, and that he is all wisdom and can do everything, but that he is all love and wishes to do everything, there we fail" (LT 73)--this is why love is emphasized over power and other attributes in Julian (analogous to the way that God's self-binding is treated as the basis for assurance in Protestantism)
    - ♣ Compare "I can make all things well"-->"I will make all things well" in ST 25 (p. 151)
    - ♣ "showing no kind of blame to me or to anyone who will be saved" (ST 13, p. 149)

The short text (ST) is more useful for devotional meditation (which is one of the reasons why I have assigned it for the required reading), while chapters 44-63 and 71-86 of the long text (LT) show Julian's considered reflections upon the meaning of her visions and can be read with prudent caution.

The following structure can be observed in the short text (ST):

Revelations 1-3 introduce the basic concepts pertinent to her devotional vision.

Revelations 4-12 concern devotion to Christ's passion (Revelation 8 being the most important of these).

Revelation 13 concerns sin and grace.

Revelation 14 concerns prayer. Compare

- LT 42: "Prayer is a right understanding of that fullness of joy that is to come, with accordant longing and sure trust."
- LT 41: dryness/difficulty in prayer arises from lack of hope, for our prayers are most acceptable to God when uttered in difficulty and in spite of our inner barrenness, for "the greatest deeds are already done" (LT 42):
  - "Pray inwardly, though thou thinkest it savour thee not: for it is profitable, though thou feel not, though thou see nought; yea though thou think thou canst not. For in dryness and in barrenness, in sickness and in feebleness, then is thy prayer well-pleasant to me, though thou thinkest it savour thee nought but little" (LT 41).
  - "Full glad and merry is Our Lord of our prayer" (LT 41)
  - "For this is Our Lord's will, that our prayer and our trust be both alike large" (LT 42).

Revelations 15-16 concern the expression of adoration which follow upon prayer.

Julian is a representative of that affective devotion to Christ in his suffering humanity that the *Cloud* author had allowed as an initial stage but sought to transcend. In a sense, Julian is engaged in a similar project as the *Cloud* author, asking a similar question: How can one come to know God's nature when God and creatures are so different? But whereas the *Cloud* author seems to feel that one can find the answer by moving *beyond* Christ's humanity, for Julian the only answer we can have to the question concerning what God is like and how we can become intimate with him is to look to the bruised, bleeding humanity of Jesus as he suffered for our redemption. This alone can lead us upward to know the Holy Trinity (cf. LT 23 "All the Trinity worked in Christ's passion")

- This is why Julian resists the temptation to look up from the crucifix--"to look up to heaven to his Father"(ST 10, p. 143).
- Instead she resolves to choose Jesus for her heaven (ST 11; p. 143), "for I would rather have remained in that pain until Judgment Day than have come to heaven any other way than by him" (ST 10 [p. 143]; LT 19).

There in Christ's suffering, by a special gift of grace, one can see the heart of God's love for creatures openly and clearly displayed and this alone can be the door for us both to understand what God what God is like and to enter into his presence. This is why Julian desired from God "a bodily sight" of Christ's passion and, by this means, to be "noughted for love" (compare LT 5).

- Created reason has its source in God so its use in questioning and probing are legitimate for Julian in a way they are not for the author of the *Cloud*. This, however, leads not back to scholasticism but rather to an independent inquiry by the mystic regarding the significance of her experience.
- Julian is also more willing than the *Cloud* author to assume that created things can reveal God's otherwise hidden nature and character. Created loves are a part of the

- larger mystery of divine love and can reveal something concerning the operations of the latter, being a gift by which he shows his favor.
- Our humanity can be understood only through the humanity of Christ--our destiny, the purpose for which we were made, is show forth there, endlessly loving God and inseparably united to him.
  - The obstacle to the realization of this goal is sin (ST 13; p. 147), which has no substance or being of itself (ST 8,13; pp. 137,148; cf. LT 11 "sin is no deed") and therefore can be known through its effect--pain and suffering (ST 10,13; pp. 143,148). This is the disorder within us that defines what it is to be "under the wrath of God" (not that God is always changing and flying into a rage, but that we are divided against ourselves and lie under the penalty of pain and suffering).
    - This is supported by a sort of racial solidarity theory that has its background in the Augustinian doctrine of original sin (itself an interpretation of Rom.5:12-21): "For in the sight of God all man is one man, and one man is all man" (LT 51; cf. ST 4), so that Adam's sin leads to a deprivation of goodness and a subjection to suffering in which we ourselves also share.
  - When our souls in their pain are united with Christ in his pain, then it is possible for us to ascend and be restored to our proper place in accordance with the love of God (cf. LT 52 and the beginning of LT 39). This experience of ascent after a fall allows us to understand and grasp the grace and love of God and compassion for our fellow human beings in a way that would otherwise not be possible, so that the attainment of our final blessedness in a way depend upon being a passionate ("sensual") creature who has fallen, suffered and ascended.
    - This is why sin is said to be "necessary" in ST 13; p. 148
    - On new charity toward one's fellow Christians:
      - ♣ "each kind compassion that man hath to his even-Christian [i.e. fellow-Christian] with charity, it is Christ in him" (LT 28)
      - ♣ "every kind of compassion which one has for one's fellow Christians in love is Christ in us" (ST 13; p. 149)
  - Focusing upon the passion of Christ has one other benefit: When we attend to our own sin and pain, our perceptions are not accurate and fail to grasp what God is really doing in this situation. Only when we turn our focus upon Christ's suffering and embrace Christ in, through and in spite of his suffering can we truly come to understand our own position and condition.
    - "Then said our good Lord Jesus Christ: Art thou well pleased that I suffered for thee? I said: Yea, good Lord, I thank Thee; Yea, good Lord, blessed mayst Thou be. Then said Jesus, our kind Lord: If thou art pleased, I am pleased: it is a joy, a bliss, an endless satisfying to me that ever suffered I Passion for thee; and if I might suffer more, I would suffer more" (ST 12 [p. 144]; LT 22).
    - "And for the great endless love that God has for all mankind, he makes no distinction in love between the blessed soul of Christ and the least soul that will be saved" (LT 54)

## **Julian's Optimism in Regard to Divine Grace and Good Will and Our Final Salvation**

Against a pessimistic view of one's own or other's prospects based upon the doctrine of predestination (a doctrine which Julian nonetheless formally affirms; cf. LT 32-33), see last two paragraphs of LT 74; LT 51 in Nuth, p. 99 and ST 3 on Nuth, p. 103 (this incidentally is the point of the motherhood passages in LT 22, 59)

"He shall never have His full bliss in us till we have our full bliss in Him, verily seeing His full Blissful Cheer. For we are ordained thereunto in nature, and get thereto by grace" (LT 72).

Since divine love upholds and preserves all things, preventing them from falling into non-existence (ST 4-5 / pp. 130-131,133), whatever "mortal sin" and "the wrath of God" can mean, it is certain that "in the sight of God the soul that shall be saved was never dead, nor shall it ever be" (LT 50):

Yes, "we are sinners: wherefore we deserve pain and wrath...I saw soothfastly that our Lord was never wroth, nor ever shall be. For He is God: Good, Life, Truth, Love, Peace; His Charity and His Unity suffereth Him not to be wroth. For I truly saw that it is against the property of His Might to be wroth" (LT 46; compare LT 49). There is thus a "supreme point" in the depths of the soul or will that is the locus of divine grace and divine indwelling and remains free from sin (LT 37; cf. LT 68?), by which our nature may be united with Christ (chs. 52, 56, 37).

This is associated with a high view of the efficacy of grace and a sense that Christ is the Mother who bears and cares for the soul and will never abandon her for Christ and the Church are ever one:

"Our Father willeth, our Mother worketh, our good Lord the Holy Ghost confirmeth: and therefore it belongeth to us to love our God in whom we have our being: Him reverently thanking and praising for our making, mightily praying to our Mother for mercy and pity, and to our Lord the Holy Ghost for help and grace...I understood three manners of beholding of Motherhood in God: the first is grounded in our Nature's *making*; the second is *taking* of our nature,--and there beginneth the Motherhood of grace; the third is the Motherhood of *working*, --and therein is a forthspreading of the same Grace, of length and breadth and height and of deepness without end. And all is one Love" (LT 52; compare LT 60 and esp. the beginning of LT 35 on it being better to contemplate God in all things rather than in any one special thing and the beginning of LT 61 on how God "makes us to love everything which he loves for love of him, and to be well satisfied with him and with all his works.").

## **Evaluation**

Does Julian adequately account for the eternal law of God as existing alongside God's love as an expression of his purpose for the world? If not, does this resulting in an inadequate vision of sin as blameworthy? Should not the notion of sin as blameworthy be retained even while an assurance based upon naked faith in the promises of God and in his faithfulness and sovereign efficacious power be sought? Perhaps that can equally console us and represents a more concrete and accurate way of grasping divine love and our justification.

For further reading, see Tarjei Park, *The English Mystics: An Anthology* (London: SPCK, 1998) with the list of resources and organizations on pp. 124-125.