

Julian of Norwich
A Preparation Guide for Discussion of Select Texts
June 14, 2011
Presbytery of Lake Michigan

I. Julian of Norwich

It is impossible to undertake a serious study of Church history without at some point in time addressing "Julian of Norwich". The study of Julian is informative on several levels - it shows us the context of Church life and function in the medieval /middle age period in England, it lifts up the role of women in the Church (at a time that many texts will tell you that women had been excluded from the Church), and it addresses a very personal and vivid experience of God in a person's life. These personal experiences reflect "mysticism". In relation to religion and spirituality, mysticism can be defined as, "a doctrine of an immediate spiritual intuition of truths believed to transcend ordinary understanding, or of a direct, intimate union of the soul with God through contemplation or ecstasy."¹

We actually have a relatively large amount of background information on Julian. This is in itself unique for the timeframe involved. There does exist some differences of opinion on Julian's early life - some say she was a nun, others say she was an inquirer to be a nun, while some maintain she had no religious calling at all before her mystical experience. What we do know is that she lived in the area of Norwich, England and at the age of 30 in 1373 she prayed for an experience of God. At a point in time after this she twice wrote of her experience - a short version (believed to be earlier) and then a longer more theologically argumentative version later (which some say is not by her hand). Following this vision she became an "anchorite" in the Church in Norwich.

II. Mysticism

Mysticism is a fairly constant phenomena in religious history. It is by nature highly individual and we see it become more prominent and frequent when religious structures become more institutional and doctrinal in emphasis. In our Christian history we can point to the practice of monastic life and even modern Pentecostalism as examples. In the Judaic tradition we have "Kabbalah" and Islam has "Sufism". All involve a powerful Spirit based experiential religious focus.

III. Julian's Revelations

Following is a biography of Julian from the current website of the Church in Norwich:

Julian's Revelations²

It was in 1373, when Julian was just over 30 years old and living with her mother that she received her visions. In her book she tells that she had desired 3 graces from God (i) to have the consistent recollection of Christ's Passion, (ii) to experience bodily sickness when she was 30 years old (the same age as Jesus when he began his ministry) and (iii) to have 3 wounds; true contrition, loving compassion and a longing for God. In her 30th year she became sick to the point of death. The priest came and prepared her for death and gave her the last rites. A few

¹ This definition of mysticism is from the online resource www.dictionary.com and is taken from the "Random House Dictionary", Unabridged edition, Random House, 2011

² This information was obtained at <http://www.julianofnorwich.org/visions.shtml>. It is the website maintained by the current Church in Norwich, England.

days later on the Third Sunday after Easter, May 8th, having again been visited by her priest, the pain suddenly left her and a series of wonderful 'Revelations' or 'Showings' began. During the next 12 or so hours she received 15 revelations of God's love centering on the cross of our Lord; then a 16th early on the Monday morning. It was this experience that convinced her that she had to devote her life totally to God. She decided not to go off and live in a convent as a nun, but to become an Anchoress. And it just so happened that the anchoress cell attached to S. Julian's Church on King Street was unoccupied at that time. So she became the Anchoress at S. Julian's and eventually wrote down two versions of her Revelations, in the Middle English of her day. The first was written soon after her arrival and a much longer text some years later after much prayer, contemplation and meditation. Her book is called **THE REVELATIONS OF DIVINE LOVE**: the first book to be written in English by a woman.

The subject of *The Revelations* is love - God's love for human beings shown in the Passion, suffering and death of Jesus Christ, and the response of humanity towards God, our Maker, Keeper and Preserver. This love creates all that exists; it sustains all and redeems all; it is unfailing even in times of sorrow or trial; it is unconditional; it is a love plenteous beyond imagining; it is all powerful and all embracing; and in this love there is no place for anger or wrath. God's whole purpose is to bring all into the bliss of heaven, so that '**All shall be well!**'

IV. Some Quotations from *The Revelations*³

- He loves us and enjoys us, and so he wills that we love him and enjoy him, and firmly trust him; and all shall be well.
- Our soul rests in God its true peace, our soul stands in God its true strength, and is deep-rooted in God for endless love.
- He is our clothing. In his love he wraps and holds us. He enfolds us for love and will never let us go.
- He did not say 'You shall not be tempest-tossed, you shall not be work-weary, you shall not be discomforted'. But he did say, 'You shall not be overcome.' God wants us to heed these words so that we shall always be strong in trust, both in sorrow and in joy.
- Flee to our Lord and we shall be comforted. Touch him and we shall be made clean. Cling to him and we shall be safe and sound from every kind of danger. For our courteous Lord wills that we should be at home with him as heart may think or soul may desire
- Prayer fastens the soul to God, making it one with his will through the deep inward working of the Holy Spirit. So he says this, 'Pray inwardly, even though you feel no joy in it. For it does good, though you feel nothing, see nothing, yes, even though you think you cannot pray. For when you are dry and empty, sick and weak, your prayers please me, though there be little enough to please you. All believing prayer is precious in my sight.' God accepts the good-will and work of his servants, no matter how we feel.
- There were times when I wanted to look away from the Cross, but I dared not. For I knew that while I gazed on the Cross I was safe and sound, and I was not willingly going to imperil my soul.
- I was filled full of everlasting assurance, powerfully secured without any pain or fear. This experience was so happy spiritually that I felt completely at peace and relaxed; there was nothing on earth that could have disturbed me. But this lasted only for a short time, and then I was changed and I began to act with a sense of loneliness and depression and the futility of life itself, so that I hardly had the patience to continue living.

³ *Ibid*

No comfort or relaxation now, just 'faith, hope and love', and truly I felt very little of this. And yet soon after this our blessed Lord gave me once again that comfort, so pleasant and sure, so delightful and powerful, that there was no fear, no sorrow, no pain, physical and spiritual that could bother me. And then again I felt the pain; then the joy and pleasure; now the one and now the other, again and again, I suppose about 20 times. In the time of joy I could have said with S. Paul: Nothing shall separate me from the love of Christ; and in my pain I could have said with S. Peter: Save me Lord, I am perishing. This vision was shown to teach me to understand that some souls profit by experiencing this, to be comforted at one time, and at another to be left to themselves. God wishes us to know however that he keeps us safe at all times, in sorrow and in joy.

- *In the last chapter of her book Julian writes about her Revelations:*

I desired in many ways to know what was our Lord's meaning. And fifteen years after and more, I was answered in spiritual understanding, and it was said: What, do you wish to know your Lord's meaning in this thing? Know it well, love was his meaning. Who reveals it to you? Love. What did he reveal to you? Love. Why does he reveal it to you? For love. Remain in this, and you will know more of the same. But you will never know different, without end.

V. The Fifth Revelation - Our discussion focus for today

It would be quite an impossible task to undertake a full examination of Julian's Revelations in our short lunch time today. As such we will concentrate on her "Fifth Revelation" which involves evil and God's response to it. Below you will find a reproduction of the text. You will note it is in middle English - which can cause some translational and interpretational difficulties! There are notes in the text which contain variants and explanations of some phrases:

CHAPTER XIII⁴

“The Enemy is overcome by the blessed Passion and Death of our Lord Jesus Christ ”

AND after this, ere God shewed any words, He suffered me for a convenient time to give heed unto Him and all that I had seen, and all intellect⁵ that was therein, as the simplicity of the soul might take it.⁶ Then He, without voice and opening of lips, formed in my soul these words: *Herewith is the Fiend overcome*. These words said our Lord, meaning His blessed Passion as He shewed it afore.

On this shewed our Lord that the Passion of Him is the overcoming of the Fiend. God shewed that the Fiend hath now the same malice that he had afore the Incarnation. And as sore he travaileth, and as continually he seeth that all souls of salvation escape him, worshipfully, by

⁴ Text is from the 'Christian Classics Ethereal Library and permission is given for reproduction for study purposes. The full text can be found at: <http://www.ccel.org/print/julian/revelations/vi.i>

⁵ i.e. significance, teaching.

⁶ i.e. in so far as the simplicity of my soul was able to understand it. -- See xxiv.

the virtue of Christ's precious Passion. And that is his sorrow, and full evil is he ashamed: for all that God suffereth him to do turneth [for] us to joy and [for] him to shame and woe. And he hath as much sorrow when God giveth him leave to work, as when he worketh not: and that is for that he may never do as ill as he would: for his might is all taken.⁷

But in God there may be no wrath, as to my sight: for our good Lord endlessly hath regard to His own worship and to the profit of all that shall be saved. With might and right He withstandeth the Reproved, the which of malice and wickedness busy them to contrive and to do against God's will. Also I saw our Lord scorn his malice and set at nought his unmight; and He willeth that we do so. For this sight I laughed mightily, and that made them to laugh that were about me, and their laughing was a pleasure to me. I thought that I would that all mine even-Christians had seen as I saw, and then would they all laugh with me. But I saw not Christ laugh. For I understood that we may laugh in comforting of ourselves and joying in God for that the devil is overcome. And when I saw Him scorn his malice, it was by leading of mine understanding into our Lord: that is to say, it was an inward shewing of verity, without changing of look.⁸ For, as to my sight, it is a worshipful property of God's that [He] is ever the same.

And after this I fell into a graveness,⁹ and said: *I see three things: I see game, scorn, and earnest. I see [a] game, in that the Fiend is overcome; I see scorn, in that God scorneth him, and he shall be scorned; and I see earnest, in that he is overcome by the blissful Passion and Death of our Lord Jesus Christ that was done in full earnest and with sober travail.*

When I said, *he is scorned*,—I meant that God scorneth him, that is to say, because He seeth him now as he shall do without end. For in this [word] God shewed that the Fiend is condemned. And this meant I when I said: *he shall be scorned*: [he shall be scorned] at Doomsday, generally of all that shall be saved, to whose consolation he hath great ill-will.¹⁰

For then he shall see that all the woe and tribulation that he hath done to them shall be

⁷ S. de Cressy has "locked " instead of "taken." into God's hand.

⁸ "chere" = expression of countenance.

⁹ "sadhede."

¹⁰ "invye."

turned to increase of their joy, without end; and all the pain and tribulation that he would have brought them to shall endlessly go with him to hell.

VI. Questions to Encourage Discussion

1. Julian's revelation speaks about a power in opposition to God (called the "Enemy"). What does this tell us theologically? How does Julian see this opposition overcome?
2. Julian reports that God revealed Himself to her in a special way "at a convenient time." Reflect on your own experiences of God. Have there been times and seasons in your life which were "more convenient" than others to be grasped by holiness?
3. Who or what is "the Fiend"? Who or what was it for Julian? Who or what is it for you? Who or what is it for the church?
4. If the Fiend has been conquered, i.e. if the devil has been overturned, then why is there still evil and suffering in the world?
5. We typically relate Christ's victory to the resurrection, but there's no mention here of the resurrection. Rather, Julian relates Christ's victory to his "passion and death." What does she mean? How exactly do we understand the saving work of Jesus Christ?
6. What is "Doomsday"? Is this a Biblical idea?
7. Julian explores some differences between laughter and graveness. What do you think of her ideas in this regard?
8. What are your feelings on the value and authority of mystical experiences? How are they best utilized and recognized?
9. Our Reformed tradition places Scripture as the sole source of authority for the Church. Does this view in effect make us assume that we have a "closed" source of authority? If so (or not), how can we recognize and move with the Holy Spirit?