

Monday

This week's reflections are offered by the Rev'd Dominic Holroyd-Thomas, Curate in the Welwyn Team. Over the next six days, Dominic will be exploring the life and writings of Julian of Norwich.

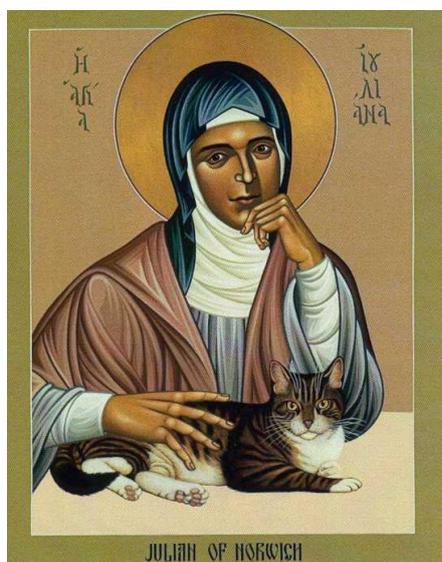
"For God is everything that is good, as I see; and God has made everything that is made, and God loves everything that he has made." – Mother Julian

Who was Julian?

Little is known about the person of Julian (in fact we do not even know her 'real' name) albeit from a few basic facts which can be gleaned almost entirely from her book *Revelations of Divine Love*. She is thought to be the first woman to write a book in English which has survived. We do, however, know that she lived – unsurprisingly – in Norwich in the 14th century: a busy town which had its fair share of problems, which is perhaps to be expected in this period of history. Julian was a recluse, living in a cell next to St Julian's Church and was frequently visited by people yearning for her wisdom and insight.

Julian's book, *Revelations*, is based on a series of visions she had in May 1373; we know at this time she was 30 years old. It is thought that Julian was unwell, and those near to her expected her death to be imminent, so a priest was sent for to administer the Last Rites. But it was when her parish priest held up a crucifix to her face that all her pain ceased: "and at this moment all my suffering suddenly left me, and I was completely well..." The crucifix held before her eyes then began to change: she saw red blood trickling down from under the crown of thorns. Christ was bleeding in front of her, and it is Jesus' crucifixion which informs her understanding of God, through which she is able to perfectly see God's love for us.

Revelations of Divine Love comes to us in two versions: the first (the short text) written shortly after the revelation given to Julian, and the second (the long text) written twenty years later. The long text is greatly expanded to include her meditations on what she had been shown. Over these next few days we will be thinking of the importance of Julian's insight into God for the world today and some of the contextual issues her text highlights.

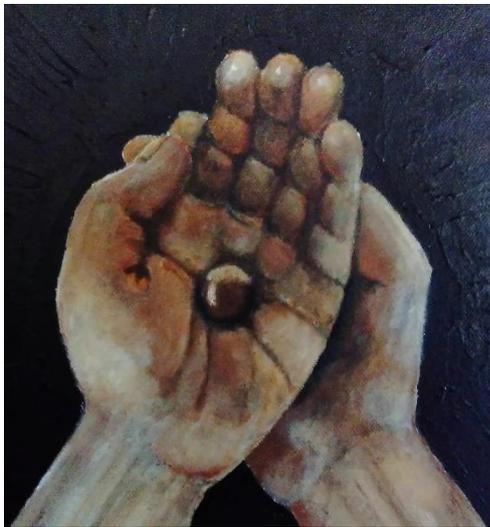


Tuesday

A Hazelnut

Perhaps what Julian is most well-known for, she uses the metaphor of a hazelnut as an expression of God's love found in the beauty of creation. In chapter five of the long text, Julian gives a clear and striking lesson: "And in this he showed me something small, no bigger than a hazelnut, lying in the palm of my hand... I was amazed that it could last, for I thought that because of its littleness it would have suddenly fallen into nothing... It lasts and always will, because God loves it; and thus everything has being through the love of God." Julian's contemplation on this small and fragile hazelnut informs her that it represents the whole universe, creation in its entirety, and without God, it would be nothing. Creation, traditionally, lies beautifully poetic in the hands of God, but here it is shown in the hand of Julian; she is shown creation *sub specie aeternitatis*, from God's point of view.

Julian explored the theological significance of this later on which leads to our understanding of her perception of God's high regard for the delicateness of his creation, and her awareness of the goodness of God in everything: "for his goodness fills all his creatures and all his blessed works full, and endlessly overflows in them." Similarly, to the parable of the Master and Servant (Luke 17: 7-10), here Julian recognises the goodness of God and his care for all of humankind. It is on the cross where the true Adam reconciles the world to God, and Julian understands the relationship between the crucified Christ, and God and the world. It is in this metaphor that the motherly (to be explored further on Thursday) characteristics of God are best displayed by Julian; the tenderness, gentleness and homeliness of God are perfectly brought together in this image of the small and fragile hazelnut.



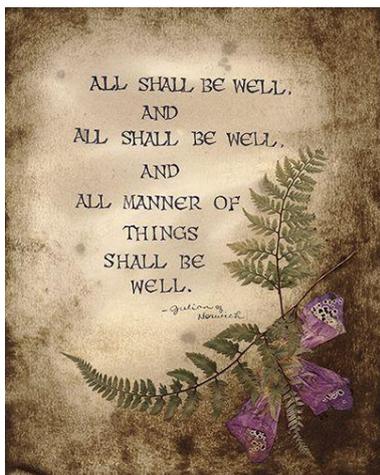
Wednesday

All Shall be Well

What we are able to deduce from Julian is her joyful portrayal of Christ: even through the pains of his passion, it is because of God's unwavering love for his children that his son died on the cross. Julian's theological optimism is a stark contrast to the pessimistic theology of much of the Middle Ages, and in spite of living in the midst of significant social turbulence with a long drawn out war with France, cattle disease, and the black death, Julian's optimism is unwavering. The plague reached Norwich in January 1349 and returned again in 1362 when Julian would have been 19. Julian would have been painfully aware of the physicality of death, for "the passing bell rang throughout the day and at nightfall the death carts were pushed through the streets with the cry of 'bring out your dead.'"

Bodies of loved ones would have been brought out of homes and unscrupulously buried in mass graves. The churchyards were full, and the earth was piling higher and higher – a stark reminder of the (literal and metaphorical) depth of uncertainty and sorrow Norwich was in. The result of this suffering was the Peasants' Revolt. Norwich once again was in the grips of war. The rebels took over Norwich until finally the rebel leader, Geoffrey Litster, was caught, tied to a horse, and dragged through the cobbled streets of Norwich. He was tried before the battle-happy Bishop of Norwich, Henry le Despenser, and sentenced to death. He was publicly hung, drawn, and quartered. Centuries old institutions and patterns of social life were in the midst of decay and collapse. In light of this immense uncertainty, misery and violence, it is remarkable that Julian was able to stand forward as a primary voice of clarity and hope in a troubled world with her famous quote: "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well."

However, Julian does not try to fictionalise the events of the fourteenth century, but she recognises that on that Great Day when we shall meet our God, God's will shall ultimately be worked out in the midst of all creation. Her unwavering optimism continues to teach and inspire Christians today, who, like her, find themselves in a troubled world, muddled with violence, fear and disease.



Thursday

Gender Trouble

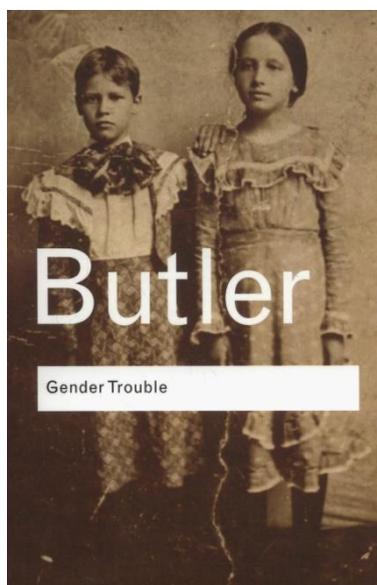
'Just because I am a woman, must I therefore believe that I must not tell you about the goodness of God?' – Mother Julian

One of Julian's great achievements is how she managed to permeate the male-dominated theological sphere in a time when women were othered even more so than in the present day. Yet, despite what we may see as her literary (and theological) 'success', we do not know her real name. Instead, she took the name of a *male* saint – the patron of the church her cell adjoined. She was a pioneer and a radical, and did not fear to write to the Pope in such strong terms as 'I want' and 'I demand'. Even by today's standards, this might be judged as a poor and rude way to address the pontiff, let alone by a woman in the 14th century.

Julian had to be careful. The attitude towards women exercising 'apostolic authority' were even more likely to be seen as suspect and potentially heretical. This resulted in Julian's realisation that she had to portray herself very carefully. Her modest self-presentation can be found in chapter six of her short text, where she writes: "But God forbid that you should say or assume that I am a teacher, for that is not what I mean, nor did I ever mean it; for I am a woman, ignorant, weak and frail."

Julian understood God as 'Mother'. But, perhaps unlike some theologians of today, Julian does not use the imagery of God as mother solely to invoke a response, nor to simply engage with the personhood of Jesus. For Julian, it is much deeper than this. Julian juxtaposes the popular masculine understanding of God to further reveal the true nature and purpose of God, especially in relation to the Trinity. In doing this, Julian is rubbing up against the very Church which sought (seeks) to subjugate the role of women, and, therefore, our understanding as to the personhood of God is coloured by the language we use.

The modern-day works of theorists such as Judith Butler perpetuate the view that gender is performative, and that social constructs all work to produce masculine and feminine identities. Through her writings, we witness Julian breaking down these societal constructs, proving herself, and other women, as able to teach about the quality of God through her desire to encourage a new understanding of God's character.



Friday

Hearing the voice of God

Whenever we turn on the news (when coronavirus isn't a thing) we can be sure that there will likely be a report on mental health, whether that be the underfunding of mental health services or the increase in use of anti-depressants. We can be in no doubt that this is a global health emergency. But I often wonder if this is anything new. Surely people have always suffered from anxiety, depression and psychosis?

When reflecting on Julian, it is difficult to understand the disparity between the impact of her text in the 14th century, and her as the revered theologian we regard her as today. Our scientific insight into the working of the mind is quick to dismiss the hearing of voices as hallucinations which ought to be treated as a mental health difficulty – often treated by medication. If Julian were alive today, would she be able to hear and see God beyond the drugs which suppress her ability to see the outworking of the divine? People claiming to hear or see things from God today are often perceived as being in the midst of a mental health crisis, rather than having a privileged insight into the person of God.

Now it is important to state that not all people suffering from psychosis will be hearing or seeing God, but the correlation between psychosis and Christian mysticism is striking.

We know that Julian was physically ill the time she had received her visions, and we know that physical illness can affect our cognitive ability, so of course it is entirely plausible that Julian's grave physical sickness caused some form of psychosis, and her visions are not the outworking of God but her own imagination. However, this only became popular opinion in the middle of the 17th century: until then the sensation of hearing or seeing things was widely understood as having a special, or sacred, form of knowledge.

One of the setbacks of the twenty-first century is that we find it increasingly difficult to handle anything except quantifiable, or scientific, evidence. Yet, auditory and visual experiences (hallucinations) have played a pivotal part in religion for millennia. Indeed, we learn of numerous occasions in the bible when God speaks to people through a voice or appearance from heaven.

Despite the modern backdrop of viewing mysticism as suspicious, Julian's writings have enlightened our understanding of the loving qualities of God and continue to be a source of hope for Christians today, and Julian finds herself in a long line of biblical and mystical figures.



Saturday

Julian in our time

We find ourselves isolated. We are told to keep six feet away from any human being who we do not live with. For the introverts, this might be a comforting time in our history, at least where social distancing is concerned, but for many, our requirement to withhold a handshake or a hug from friends and family is painful.

In an article for BBC News in March, Dr Janina Ramirez said that Julian, who spent her life in prayer and isolation, has never been more relevant. As we have read over the course of this week, Julian found herself in a busy and populated town, living constantly in the reality of plagues and death. In a way, Julian was self-isolating, just like so many of us are having to do right now. Removing herself from the busyness of life may have been a great spiritual discipline, but it would have given her a chance at preserving her own physical life too.

In the midst of all the uncertainty of the Middle Ages, Julian was able to discern God saying 'all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.' It is my prayer that in these days when our lives might be that little 'simpler', and perhaps more representative of the monastic life, we might take comfort in the writings of Julian, reflecting on the hope and love she saw in Christ hanging on the cross.

