

A COMMENTARY ON JULIAN OF NORWICH'S *THE REVELATIONS OF DIVINE LOVE* The Third Showing • Chapter 11

INTRODUCTION

By the Third and Fourth Showings in Julian's Revelations, we are well into the series of six short, single-chapter showings that connect the majestic First with the critical Eighth Showing. These small showings are like individually framed curios lined up on a wall, one after another, their themes and images sometimes contrasting strongly with each other, causing sudden breaks in Julian's line of thought. This is markedly true of Showings Three and Four. The Third Showing harkens back to Julian's vision, in the First Showing, of all of creation as something as small as a hazelnut, held into its being only by the love of God. This metaphysical relationship between the Creator and the created is again explored in the Third Showing, though from a different point of view and with different results. The Fourth Showing, with its graphic sight of the bleeding of Jesus from his beating, is a direct continuation from the First and Second Showings of Julian's experience of the mystery of Christ's suffering humanity, his bleeding, and his physical dying. The Third Showing is thus metaphysical, and philosophical in tone, while the Fourth Showing is devotional, poetic, visionary, and biblical. Part of the richness of Julian is her ability to hold both these dimensions of Christian mysticism, theology, and spirituality together, sounding very much like Meister Eckhart on one hand, and like a Franciscan devotional, or Richard Rolle on the other. This is what Martin Thornton¹ praised in Julian as quintessentially Anglican: her balance of intellect and affect, speculation and devotion, mysticism and common sense.

THE THIRD SHOWING: GOD IN A POINT

The Third Showing involves Julian's immediate sight, as she put it, of 'God in a point.' This means, as she tells us, that she saw God in all things and also God doing all deeds, the total indwelling of God in all being and doing. To have any reality at all is thus to be in-dwelt and animated by God. The showing thus unfolds as a short, direct meditation on God's providential ordering – God's actual effecting and eventual fulfillment– of all creation in wisdom and love. Just as created being lost for Julian its illusion of being sound and substantial in itself in the hazelnut vision, so here history loses its illusion of being a godless working out of autonomous creaturely activity. Just as created being, the size of a hazelnut, has no reality except in the love of God, so creaturely history has reality only because of the loving and wise, providential activity of God in all things and in all deeds. Created being and history have, in other words, no reality apart from God, they are utterly translucent windows for Julian through which God shines. All that is, exists because God loves and keeps it; and all that is done, is done because God does it. These ideas are summed up in the concluding passage of this showing where God says to Julian:

See, I am God.

See, I am in everything.

See, I do everything.

See, I never lift my hands from my works, nor ever shall, without end.

See, I lead everything to the end I ordained for it from without beginning by the same Power, Wisdom, and Love with which I made it.

¹ Thornton, Martin. *English Spirituality: An Outline of Ascetical Theology According to the English Pastoral Tradition.* (London: SPCK, 1963.) Pp. 203.

And God adds the testing question: *How would anything be amiss?"*

The reason why this question, and the whole showing of God's providential indwelling and ordering and doing of all, are a test, or examination, for the soul is that we normally live in the assumption that things are in fact quite amiss, quite bungled, quite wrong. This is Julian's concern in the middle of the showing where she contrasts human judgment with God's judgment. Where we see some things as providential and others as done by chance, where we see some things as important (thus demanding God's care) and others as trivial, where we see some deeds as well done and others are evil, God does not. Julian insists that God sees everything, no matter how trivial or how apparently evil, as part of God's providential ordering, as important, and as well done. In other words, God, who is seeing creation not as a work-in-progress but as a completed, finished reality that has been drawn through the redemptive death of Jesus, holds all of creation in one immense, unqualified and unconditioned 'Yes!'...one infinite and total affirmation, blessing, and joy. There is no mixture of 'Yes' and 'No' in God...God is all 'Yes.' And God invites Julian to share with him in this affirmation of all that exists as of God, in God, and indwelt by God with joy and love. God invites Julian out of the human muddle of 'yes' mixed with 'no,' into God's beatific joy of being all 'Yes.'

Without doubt, this raises enormous questions. How can we affirm a world where there is evil? Julian herself is aware that this showing begs the question of the reality of sin, and so of suffering and evil. 'If God does all that is done...what is sin?' she asks. For the moment, however, these questions are not dealt with. It will not be until the Thirteenth Showing that they resurface, and when they do so, they become for Julian matter for painful, urgent questioning, preparing her for the parable of the Lord and the Servant that is to come in Chapter 51. The Third Showing is thus the first foreshadowing of the main inner, intellectual and spiritual struggle the drives the Revelations through its middle section into its profoundest meditations in the 20 or so chapters following chapter 51.

Two things are however to be noted here. The first is that this showing invites us into the conviction that our heavenly bliss, our union with God, our sharing in God's life and love and truth, will involve just this total affirmation and blessing. In heaven, in our union with God, there will be no conditions or qualifications on our affirmation of creation. As Julian tells us near the end of the showings,

...when the judgement is given and we are all brought up above, then shall we clearly see in God the secrets which are now hidden from us. Then shall none of us be moved to say in any way: "Lord, if it had been thus-and-so, then it would have been all well"; but we shall say all in one voice: "Lord, blessed mayest Thou be! Because it is as it is; it is well. And now we see truly that everything is done as was Thine ordinance before anything was made." [LOL 85]

Moreover, as Julian will tell us in the Fourteenth Showing, our ability to live one-d with God in this life will involve the slaking of our wrath, our bitterness, or dissatisfaction and discontent, passing over into a state where we are at peace with all that it, exactly as it is, in our love for God.

But we are not blissfully safe in possessing our endless joy until we are wholly in peace and in love — that is to say, fully gratified with God and with all His works and with all His judgements, and loving and peaceable with ourselves and with our fellow Christians and with all that God loves, as love pleases. And this God's goodness carries out in us. [LOL 49]

The question which the Third Showing presents to us, its examination and testing of us as Julian nuns and monks, is what are we to do with God's invitation to join God in his unconditioned and absolute blessing and affirmation of all creation, all history, all being, even in the midst of our experience of sin, suffering, and evil?

AFFIRMATION IN DARKNESS: THE LIFE OF INTERCESSION

The first thing which we must admit is that we do not see directly the reason why God has allowed evil, sin, suffering. We do not directly understand why God has allowed what makes for wrath in us, for apparent disunion from God, why God has allowed all that makes it difficult for us to join in God's unconditioned blessing of creation. We do not have God's sight, we do not now, as Julian would say, know God's secrets, and God has very purposefully hidden these secrets from us until we are ready for them, until 'judgement day' when everything shall be seen with total clarity and utter finality and we will not try to tell God that it would have better if...

Not seeing as God does, not knowing God's secrets, we are thus in the dark. The mystery of evil is still a mystery: we don't see how it is resolved into unconditioned beatific bliss. Given all the evil, human cruelty, gratuitous suffering and pointless agony in our world, we do not directly see how God could embrace it all in total blessing, how God sees all this as being 'well,' as Julian assures us God does. And, as Julian adds later, the more we busy ourselves trying to figure it out, the farther we often are from God. [LOL 30, 33]

Given our ignorance, our lack of comprehension, the good news is that God does not expect or even want us to understand the reasons for evil, nor does God expect or want us to live all our lives at the exact mystical peak where Julian momentarily was in the Third Showing and which allowed her to join with God in total blessing. What God asks us instead is to join him in God's life of total acceptance and blessing through naked faith in God's wisdom, power, and love. This is classical spirituality: we are to live not by what we see but what we do not see, not what we experience or understand but by what we do not experience or understand. John of the Cross understood this as the life of faith (Spiritual Canticle I.19), and God invites us, through Julian, into exactly this life of naked trust and faith which shows itself in the ability to join God in God's act of unconditioned affirmation and joy in all, shows itself, that is, in our living 'gladly and merrily.' (It is sobering to think that the measure of our actual faith in God, and our habitual recollection in that faith, is our ability to live gladly and merrily in daily life.) A brief, inward reflection on this total affirmation of reality with its evil, suffering, and sin, an affirmation not by sight but by dark faith, reveals surprisingly the depth meaning of intercessory prayer.

Imagine that we have a friend who is the victim of some evil, who is suffering terribly, gratuitously and meaninglessly. Perhaps we know of a child who has suffered horribly for no apparent reason. Or we can imagine the political and social horrors happening in our world everyday. Or we encounter none too pleasant aspects of our community or of ourselves. The immediate reaction is to label these things as evil. But if we think about this, what we are doing by labeling them as evil —often with a show of righteous indignation, distress, condemnation— is keeping them at arm's length, keeping them away from ourselves. When we refuse to affirm, when we condemn, when we label something as evil in this way, we are distancing ourselves from it and refusing it as a part of our life. (We are also, Julian would add, playing into the fallen world of wrath, of embittering competition, condemnation, and finally sacrifice, as Girard in his turn might say.) What happens, however, if we take this same reality which we cannot understand, which horrifies and distresses us, presenting us with the face of evil (a face which appears to negate the very value of our being in the world at all) what happens if we take this and refuse to condemn, to judge, to cast a 'no' in its direction, but making the entire judging faculty silent, simply hold this horrible reality in silence within ourselves? If we dare to do this, what we discover is that we have let our guard down, let the horrendous reality (whatever it might be) in some measure into ourselves, and we thus experience in ourselves the spiritual pain, or death, of that reality. Since, as Julian says, sin is a non-reality known only by the pain it causes, we are experiencing the non-reality of that 'evil' within ourselves, and we are doing so out of loving obedience to God.

Here a paradox can be noted: when we condemn things, judge and negate them, and thus hold them at arm's length, we are oddly enough being drawn into the very evil of wrath and negation which created these horrible

realities. But, oppositely, when we make our judging faculty silent, when we refuse to condemn out of love for God, and thus let the 'evil' reality into ourselves, we are not only entirely liberated from the cycle of sin-condemnation-wrath-sin, but we are redeeming that reality in a way that is structurally identical to the redemptive work of Jesus on the Cross. We are, in other words, suffering others' 'evil' in ourselves and with Jesus. We are redeeming the world out of loving obedience to God with Jesus, who suffered, as it is in Philippians, out of obedience to God all the way to death on a cross.

This to my mind is what we, as Julian monks and nuns, already practice, at least partially, in our lives of intercessory prayer. It is not a matter of asking God to fix what is wrong. But it is the willingness, first of all, to join God in his beatific life of total blessing and absolute, unconditioned affirmation of all creation and history. When this willingness to be with God in this manner encounters evil, the critical thing is that we disengage the judging faculty which we use to keep the evil at arm's length. But because we do not see the reason, God's hidden secret, behind God's allowance of this 'evil', all we can do is sit in the absolute, dark silence of faith, out of love for God, holding the negative reality in ourselves, in our affirmation of creation and of God. We already do this with our beloved friends. When they are caught in some horrendous evil we do not hold them at arm's length, but precisely because we love them we suffer it with them. The Third Showing, however, is an invitation to take this reality of intercessory co-suffering, com-passion, and extend it as far as God wants it extended in our lives. None of us can see the whole world in a glimpse or even endure the entire reality of sin and suffering that is part of this world. We are fragile and broken as well. But where the Third Showing makes a specific demand on us who live in the wisdom of Mother Julian is to take what we do experience of sin and suffering (and it will be quite enough) in the spirit of this Third Showing, in an attitude of completely open arms that are willing to hold and bless everything, even if all we can manage now is the dark silence of faith before the reality of our world, the silence of Jesus on the cross.

THE FOURTH SHOWING: THE SHEDDING OF JESUS' BLOOD

The fourth showing is one of the most delightfully poetic, visionary, and most brief showings in all of Julian's Revelations. After the metaphysical meditations in the Third Showing, it returns us to the theme of the suffering humanity of Jesus in his Passion. Here the focus is not on the face and head bleeding from the crown of thorns but the whole body of Jesus bleeding profusely from the beating given to him by the soldiers. The best description is Julian's own.

I saw the body plenteously bleeding (as could be expected from the scourging) in this way: the fair skin was split very deeply into the tender flesh by the harsh beating all over the dear body; so plenteously did the hot blood run out that one could see neither skin nor wound, but, as it were, all blood. And when it came to the place where it should have fallen down, there it vanished. [LOL 12]

Julian adds that she was given adequate time to fix her concentration on this physical showing and the particular aspect of the bleeding which catches her attention is its plenteousness. From this fact, Julian develops a reflection on the largesse of God's love, pouring God's own blood out in order to heal us. She remarks that just as the blood is most precious, so it is most plentiful, an obvious inversion of the worldly order of values in which the most precious is the most rare. Once again, we catch sight of Julian's unique vision of things: just as God who is highest and mightiest is also the most lowly, familiar and humble, so too the blood of Jesus which is the more valuable and essential to us even than water (because it washes us from sin and thus is part of our being given true life) is even more common, more ubiquitous than water. What is most high is most low, what is most precious is most plentiful, what is most of need to us is most common and most readily received.

From this insight Julian launches into a beautiful, poetic elaboration of the reality of Christ's blood. Starting with the actual, physical bleeding of Christ in his passion as she sees it in this showing, she imagines this blood as becoming a cosmic redemptive flow from which no part of creation, no place or time, not even hell, is isolated. This cosmic flow of Christ's blood descends into hell, liberating those who were in bondage there, it washes through all of creation in order to cleanse humanity from sin, and it returns to the heavens, still 'bleeding and praying for us to the Father' in the ascendant Christ, and rejoicing in our salvation.

From this stunning, imaginative vision which suggests that our redemption is effected through the divine pouring out of self through Jesus into all of creation, Julian draws no practical conclusions. Unlike the other showings, she does not tell us what this vision means in a practical way or how God would have us behave because of what is revealed in this showing. She seems so entranced by the beauty and the power of the imagery that she does not draw back enough to reflect and comment on it. We can compare this to the 'hazelnut vision' where Julian heads immediately into a discussion of the need for ascetical detachment given what she has seen about creation. As a consequence, there is perhaps no necessary and essential meaning for Julian monks and nuns in this showing... nothing necessarily must be realized in our vocations from our seeing of this reality with Julian (as in contrast again to the hazelnut vision.) It is almost as if this vision of Christ's blood exists for its own sake and the only thing it asks of us is that we join Julian in the loving and grateful rumination on this reality of God's pouring out of Godself in love for us.

All the same, perhaps it not too presumptuous to hazard a few comments about this showing. To begin with, the Fourth Showing invites us to see our Julian monasteries as places where every brick and stone, where every person, where every reality is alive with this infused flow of Christ's blood. The pulse of God's love moves through every atom of our being. This is of course true of all creation —as Julian says, it is true even of hell— but in the monastery we are asked to live in an intentional and explicit recollection of ourselves in this reality. Not only are we always and everywhere being washed in the redemptive flow of blood from the cross, but we know in an articulate way that we are and, because of this articulate knowing, we are called into a conscious relationship with God through this reality. Not only, it may be said, are we washed in Christ's blood, but we directly and explicitly partake of its full redemptive force in the sacrament of the altar, as we drink from the chalice. Not only are we washed in Christ's blood, but, because we know it, we are called to co-operate in the redemptive working of this flow of God's self-less loving through all that we are, individually and communally.

To use another image from this showing, this may mean that we need to recognize that our monasteries are places where we must open our own inner, individual hells to the flow of this redemptive love, open as well the hells that are created between people in the community. Not only is part of monastic life coming to a direct experience of the many little "hells" in our life, but we do not run from this, since we are aware that the purpose of our experiencing of a little, personal or communal 'hell' is that we may sit still and silent and open that negative, wrathful, embittered and despairing reality to God's gift of love in Jesus. All that we do as Julian monks or nuns — our liturgy, our contemplative prayer, our evening recreations, our study and devotions and work — can thus be seen as a way of consciously opening the negative places in ourselves and the community to the flow of Christ's blood. That fact that our day is very rhythmic only makes it easier to imagine all that we are and do as being carried along in this living flow. The rhythm of the day is determined by the pulsing flow of God's self-abandonment, washing over and through us.

Finally, the fact that Julian speaks of this flow of blood as not only pouring always and everywhere through all creation, but as still praying in the heavenly Christ to the Father helps us to connect this showing back with the intercessory meaning of the Third Showing, and to open up a deeper dimension in that understanding of our intercessory prayer. It was said that our lives of contemplative intercession begin with our acceptance of God's

invitation to hold all of created reality in unconditioned, total blessing, in absolute affirmation, in all 'Yes.' Because we do not yet directly see how the many negative and horrendous aspects of creation —sin, suffering, and evil— can be affirmed as part of God's providential wisdom and love, we are called to silence the judging faculty of our minds, and to accept these negative and painful realities into our general affirmation of creation by the stark virtue of faith. The allowance of these negative realities into ourselves may hurt inwardly, but this is certainly our share in the redemptive work of Christ. What the Fourth Showing adds to this is the sense that when we are engaged in this work of intercessory obedience and love, we are serving as clear, conscious channels through which the blood of Christ may flow to the sinful, suffering, and pained realities which we have allowed into our hearts. We join God in God's total affirmation and blessing of the all creation and history, despite the sin and pain we find there. But in opening ourselves to the negative realities of our world in naked faith in God's wisdom, love, and promises, we are joined in special intimacy to Christ on the cross. This is intercessory prayer. And through this, the redemptive, joyful blood of Christ is able to flow through us into the areas of the deepest pain and negation that we encounter in our lives, where it washes, makes new, and carries even sin and death captive up into heaven.

CONCLUSION

The Third and the Fourth Showing thus hang together. They both offer us visions of cosmic reality. The Third Showing reveals to us God in all things and doing all things and allowing all sins in utterly blissful, joyful providential wisdom and love. The Fourth Showing reveals to us in part the mystery of how sin and evil is made a part of eternal, beatific, divine joy... by being washed and transformed through the gift of Christ's Passion. Both point us directly to our lives of intercessory and redemptive prayer, our call as Julians to consciously open the depths of sin and suffering in ourselves, in our community, and in the world as a whole, to the constant ebb and flow of Jesus' blood as it pours through our world. How could anything be amiss?