

# Anglican Lenten Spirituality

A Retreat given to the Clergy  
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Meditation One:  
Divine Mercy as our Lenten Theological Focus

*O God whose glory it is always to have mercy: be gracious to all who have gone astray from your ways, and bring them again with penitent hearts and steadfast faith to embrace and hold fast the unchangeable truth of your Word, Jesus Christ your Son; who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.*

Introduction

In his pastoral address to our Diocesan Convention this past fall, Bishop Jacobus spoke at length about our membership in “this wonderful and diverse Anglican communion,” about our need to “remember and act like we are Anglicans.” He expressed his pride in being Anglican, his desire to focus Christian education and formation on what it means to be Anglican, and finally charged us “as we approach the new millennium ...[to] resolve to become more Anglican – faithful to our heritage, yet open to innovation and revision; based on the Word of God, but proclaiming it with the love of our Lord.” In other words, coming out of the divisive turmoil of the past summer’s Lambeth, he focused his address on our need to cultivate a specifically Anglican identity from the vast riches of Scripture and of our specifically Anglican heritage as these are interpreted according to a basic hermeneutic not of suspicion but of communion, a context of charity, respect, and even brotherly and sisterly affection.

With this episcopal charge in mind, and as we are gathered here on the very threshold of Lent, what I would like to explore in my meditations is what a specifically Anglican approach to Lent looks like. What is an Anglican Lenten spirituality?

At once, I feel that asking such a question, proposing such a theme, puts me in a difficult position. Clear across the board, traditional church language is quickly losing whatever remains of its spiritual authority. It sounds more often than not like babbled jargon, the utterance of which, vehement or not, is unable to pierce and remake the lived reality of people’s lives. Church language is in grave danger today of becoming a dead language, dead words rattling around in empty churches, a pleasing rattle for some, but a death rattle all the same.<sup>1</sup> This is especially true, to my mind, of the language traditionally employed in Lent: ‘contrition’ ‘repentance’ ‘fasting’ ‘mercy’ ‘sin’ ‘self-denial,’ let alone ‘guilt’ and ‘mortification.’ Spiritual authority has been drained from these words; to a great degree they have become old, punctured vessels which have long since leaked out their wine. If they do retain meaning for some, it is often of an antipathetic character; they are words signifying psychological abuse at the hands of an aggressive, punishing Church. Simply put, our language has lost its spiritual authority because, to my mind, it has not been used with honesty nor as a sacred means of grace, as sacred vessels which can potentially bear the wine of God’s direct word to the soul. Over these words, to quote Gerard Manley Hopkins,

Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;  
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;  
And wears man’s smudge and shares man’s smell: the soil  
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.<sup>2</sup>

If an unexamined life is not worth living, is unexamined jargon stripped of inner authority —seared with trade, bleared, smeared, and smudged by toil and dishonest use worth speaking?

Still, it is the only language we have, and my response to this dilemma is not to forsake the language, but to attempt to renew it from within, renewal not by fundamentalist polemic charged with absolutizing rhetoric, nor a return to pietistic ‘simplicity,’ but by a serious retrieval of the two great sources of Anglican spirituality: the 14th century mystics and the 17th century Caroline divines, since, as Martin

Thornton noted in his classic book, *English Spirituality*, 'a synthesis of fourteenth century and Caroline ascetic again looks like our most fruitful source of living religion'<sup>3</sup> From the 14th century, chiefly from Blessed Julian of Norwich who, in the words of Thornton, 'perfectly expresses the English spiritual tradition,'<sup>4</sup> I will draw a number of theological insights which remain as challenging in our day as they were in hers. This itself is the first means for the renewal of our Lenten language which I propose: a retrieval of theological insights stemming from mystical experience to overturn and refashion our usually non-mystical, pedestrian, 'bleared and smeared' converse with God. The second means for renewal looks to the 17th century Caroline Divines and is not so much theological as aesthetic. From the sermons and especially the poetry of Andrewes, Donne, and Herbert, as well as the Shakespearean (to my mind) text of Hooker's *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, I will draw texts which are commendable for the sheer felicity, literary skill, and allegorical playfulness with which they handle the Church's traditional scriptures and spiritual language. Here it is not the depths of personal self-revelation, nor challenging theology—the Carolines were fairly conservative in their thinking—which can serve to renew our language, but the cutting, humorous, brilliant, acerbically witty play with *and against* church language that can be most stimulating and instructive. They were masters of our English language, and some of them also saints of God, bringing traditional religion and the slightly anarchic, symbolic, witty play of poetry into an at times deeply disturbing conjunction, since analogical play with language often dips unexpectedly into depths bordering on the mystical. T.S Eliot understood that as a poet his 'concern was speech, and speech impelled us/To purify the dialect of the tribe/And urge the mind to aftersight and foresight...'<sup>5</sup>. My hope is that the mystically-enlightened, theological acuity of Julian, one of the greatest of Christian mystics who lived moreover at the heart of our English spiritual tradition, and the aesthetic, poetic joy in language of the Caroline Divines will help us, as stewards of the divine mysteries, to purify and renew the dialect of our Episcopalian tribe, renew our Lenten language and so our Anglican Lenten spirituality.

'Shall these bones live?' God asks Ezekiel. Shall these words live? Only by the gift of the Spirit of Jesus breathed on the apostles, our ancestors after his Resurrection.

### The Ash Wednesday Exhortation

Let me begin simply by reading the Ash Wednesday *Exhortation* as it appears in the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer*, since this Exhortation liturgically proclaims and prescribes what our Lent, as Episcopalians, is supposed to be about.<sup>6</sup> It is a beautiful text, serving as one book-end at the start of Lent and matched at the end of Lent by the Blessing over the New Fire at the Great Vigil. After the sermon on Ash Wednesday, the celebrant addresses the congregation:

Dear People of God: The first Christians observed with great devotion the days of our Lord's passion and resurrection, and it became the custom of the Church to prepare for them by a season of penitence and fasting. This season of Lent provided a time in which converts to the faith were prepared for Holy Baptism. It was also a time when those who, because of notorious sins, had been separated from the body of the faithful were reconciled by penitence and forgiveness, and restored to the fellowship of the Church. Thereby, the whole congregation was put in mind of the message of pardon and absolution set forth in the Gospel of our Savior, and of the need which all Christians continually have to renew their repentance and faith.

I invite you, therefore, in the name of the Church, to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's holy Word. And, to make a right beginning of repentance, and as a mark of our mortal nature, let us now kneel before the Lord, our maker and redeemer.

Doing a Caroline, homiletic *divisio* on the *Exhortation*, we can see that it is composed of three main sections. In the first, it establishes the historical reasons for the observance of Lent, namely, spiritual preparation of all the faithful for Good Friday and Easter, the preparation as well of catechumens for baptism, and the reconciliation of notorious sinners with the Church through public penance. In its next section, the *Exhortation* tells us what these practices are supposed to signify for us, what they are to put us in mind of: 'Thereby, the whole congregation was put in mind of the message of pardon and absolution set forth in the Gospel of our Savior, and of the need which all Christians continually have to renew their repentance and faith.' In other words, through our Lenten observances we are to penetrate more deeply into the mystery of divine mercy revealed in Jesus Christ, as well as become more aware of our perpetual human need to renew our repentance and faith. Lastly, the *Exhortation* gets practical, inviting us to the actual observance of a holy Lent by specifying a number of disciplines: 'self-examination and repentance... prayer, fasting, and self-denial...reading and meditating on God's holy Word.'

That, in a nutshell, is the basic Anglican approach to Lent as it is liturgically proclaimed and prescribed by the Ash Wednesday *Exhortation* of our Prayer Book: the disciplines of self-examination, repentance, prayer, and fasting preparing us for Easter, renewing our repentance and faith, and leading us into a more profound awareness of the mystery of divine mercy. In the following meditations, I will look closely at each aspect of this basic Lenten discipline with the help of Julian's mystical theology and the aesthetic, literary play of the 17th century Divines. For the remainder of this first meditation I would like however to confine my thoughts to the single theological focus which the *Exhortation* places at the very center of our Lent: 'The message of pardon and absolution set forth in the Gospel of our Savior,' that is to say, the theological mystery of divine mercy as revealed in Jesus Christ.

### Julian's Mercy without Wrath

Mother Julian is famous (or, for some, infamous) for her bold assertion, completely contrary to the theology and devotional life of the Church of her day, that there is no wrath in God. She says this repeatedly, bluntly, passionately; it is the yeast which leavens all of Julian's thought. Julian says, for example, that she

...saw truthfully that our Lord was never angry, nor ever shall be, for He is God: He is good, He is life, He is truth, He is love, He is peace; and His Power, His Wisdom, His Love, and His Unity do not allow Him to be angry. (For I saw truly that it is against the character of His Power to be angry, and against the character of His Wisdom, and against the character of His Goodness.)

...God is the goodness that cannot be angry, for He is nothing but goodness. Our soul is one-ed to Him, who is unchangeable goodness, and between God and our soul is neither anger nor forgiveness, as He sees it. For our soul is so completely one-ed to God by His own goodness, that there can be absolutely nothing at all separating God and soul.<sup>7</sup>

For Julian, gifted with a mystical awareness of God as the loving sustainer of all being who has in a special way drawn into immediate intimacy with the human soul, it is impossible that God could ever be angry not only because we would cease to exist but because God would cease to be God. The fact that you and I continue in our existence is a witness to God's mercy. 'To this understanding,' Julian says, 'the soul was led by love and drawn by power in every showing. That it is thus — and how it is thus... [God] wills that we desire to comprehend it.'<sup>8</sup> Wrath, Julian insists, is not in God, but in us.<sup>9</sup>

The first thing which I need to admit is that this insight does not represent mainstream Anglican theology, at least not the traditional river-courses of the 14th or 17th centuries. I'd suggest however that Julian's insights result from a core of solidly English religious sensibility and that she was, in fact, prophetically exploring a way of relating with God that is becoming more prevalent in our Church today. A good example of the Church evolving to catch up with Mother Julian on this point can be found by comparing our Ash Wednesday *Exhortation* with its original ancestor from the 1549 Prayer Book. Whereas our *Exhortation* (borrowed from the Canadian Prayer Book!) stresses Lenten discipline leading to a deeper awareness of the mystery of divine mercy, the 1549 *Exhortation* emphasizes the need for an acute fear of God's wrath as an antidote to vice, and then launches out into a litany of 'Holy Curses,'

'...to the intent that you being admonished of the great indignation of God against sinners, may the rather be called to earnest and true repentance...fleeing from such vices, for the which ye affirm with your own mouths the curse of God is due.'<sup>10</sup>

Such gorgeous language! Such questionable theology, not to mention pastoral psychology! My suggestion is that the Church as a whole, Anglican and otherwise, is slowly dropping its images of a wrathful deity as a crude anthropomorphism, and is coming to see God more from Julian's point of view.

Of course, this opens up a thousand theological questions, beginning with biblical interpretation. Julian herself spent much of the *Revelations* wrestling with her insights and their extensive ramifications. This is not my concern here. What is of special concern is rather how Julian's insight into a God without wrath forced her to evolve a more mature, comprehensive sense of the reality of divine mercy. The problem she faced was that if there is no wrath in God, divine mercy, understood as that attribute which slakes God's wrath and remits our punishment in the light of the Cross, seems to have lost its reason for being. Julian confessed her puzzlement over this directly, writing that,

...by the teaching that I had beforehand, I understood that the mercy of God was supposed to be the remission of His wrath after the time that we have sinned. (It seemed to me that to a soul whose intention and desire is to love, the wrath of God would be more severe than any other pain, and therefore I accepted that the remission of His wrath would be one of the principal objectives of His mercy.) But in spite of anything that I might behold and desire, I could not see this point in the entire showing.<sup>11</sup>

Without divine wrath, divine mercy seems to have no role to play, it has no divine ire to slake, no terrible punishment to remit. Julian's answer to this problem is short, simple, and profound, possessing tremendous pastoral implications in a Church today which generally does not live in existential terror of God's wrath, but mostly with a sense of God's absence, God's silence. What Julian said was that, while there is no wrath in God, there is in fact a tremendous amount of wrath in the human soul, and the role of divine mercy is not placating, satisfying, or repaying God, but rather placating our wrath and satisfying our sense of justice, however narrow and selfish it may be. 'It was necessary to agree,' wrote Julian, 'that the mercy of God and the forgiveness is in order to abate and consume *our* wrath, not His.'<sup>12</sup> Mercy exists to heal our wrath, not God's, to satisfy our sense of justice, not God's.

'Wrath' it must be noted, is something of a theological code-word for Julian. It does not signify merely that we now and then lose our temper, fly off the handle, rise to a high dudgeon. It is not a periodic fit of anger. Rather, it is a broad term which Julian uses to signify the fundamental malaise of the human soul after original sin. While the inmost substance of the human soul ever remains for Julian in a state of blissful, contemplative, loving surrender to God, there is in our outward consciousness a tremendously deep dissatisfaction with ourselves, with God, and with reality in general. There is a bitter contrariness, a deeply rooted and at times violently raging opposition to God's peace and love in us. In other words, while a hidden substance in us is always in blissful union with God, a good part of ourselves

has split off from that depth and lives in a state of unreal animosity, opposition, contrariness, and wrath. While inwardly the soul always continues surrendering to God in contemplative love, an outward dimension is most definitely not surrendering, but fighting God tooth and nail. Anyone who has gotten to know themselves to the least degree, has, I venture, gotten to know this contrary, dissatisfied, deeply wrathful element. It is the infant pounding its fists in angry complaint against the glass wall of reality.

When Julian says that the role of divine mercy is to slake our wrath she is thus not saying that God's mercy helps us with our bad temper, but, speaking at a much deeper level, she is saying that Mercy ministers to us for our entire lifetime, seeking to heal the fundamental malaise in us, experienced as an angry, bitter, anxious alienation of us from our own deepest selves, from creation, from God. Mercy then is a dimension of divine love acting in response to human sinfulness, healing the fundamental wrath that is in us, protecting us while we are in this fragile state of inner divisiveness, eventually instilling peace and reconciling all of us to joyful, loving surrender to God through satisfied acceptance of reality as such. Mercy works, simply, to make us whole, since when we are made whole, we are one with all that is. In a long but beautiful passage, Julian wrote:

The basis of mercy is love, and the action of mercy is our protection in love; and this was shown in such manner that I could not conceive of the property of mercy in any other way than as if it were all love in love. That is to say, mercy is a sweet, gracious working in love mingled with plenteous pity, as I see it. Mercy works, protecting us, and mercy works transforming everything into good for us...Our failing is frightful, our falling is shameful, and our dying is sorrowful; but still in all this, the sweet eye of pity and of love never departs from us, and the working of mercy ceases not. For I observed the attribute of mercy and I observed the attribute of grace, which are two kinds of action in one love; mercy is a pity-filled attribute which belongs to Motherhood in tender love, and grace is a dignified attribute which belongs to royal Lordship in the same love. Mercy works: protecting, enduring, bringing life, and healing, and all is from the tenderness of love.<sup>13</sup>

And thus, when we, by the action of mercy and grace, are made humble and gentle, we are completely safe. When it is truly at peace in itself, suddenly the soul is one-ed to God, because in Him is found no wrath.<sup>14</sup>

It goes without saying that for Julian this healing, salvific function of mercy is realized and mediated to us through the Incarnation, Passion, and Resurrection of our Lord. Jesus is, for Julian, our 'Mother of Mercy' who births us into eternal life through his full labor on the Cross, who feeds us sacramentally with his own body, who consoles us by drawing us into his open side.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, in a wonderful inversion of the medieval atonement theory where God or the Devil is satisfied by Jesus' death on the Cross, Julian experienced the Crucified Christ looking at her and asking her if *she* is satisfied:

Then spoke our good Lord Jesus Christ, asking: "Art thou well satisfied that I suffered for thee?" I said: "Yea, good Lord, thanks be to Thee. Yea, good Lord, blessed mayest Thou be!" Then said Jesus, our kind Lord: "If thou art satisfied, I am satisfied. It is a joy, a bliss, an endless delight to me that ever I suffered the Passion for thee; and if I could suffer more, I would suffer more."<sup>16</sup>

'Art thou well satisfied?' This is the crucial question for us as we enter Lent. Within ourselves, where are the tender, inflamed areas of wrathful dissatisfaction where we are not surrendered to God, but in secret revolt? Where are the little hells of bitterness, spite, hatred, unresolved suffering and anguish? The role of divine mercy is first to raise these negative dimensions of ourselves into explicit consciousness and then to bring them into dialogue with the self-emptying love of Jesus on the cross. Julian says that it is only when

our inner wrath and infantile sense of justice are slaked by the self-revelation of God in the suffering Christ, only when our interior hells of resentment and anguish have been invaded and overturned by the foolish prodigality of Jesus, only when through Jesus we are fully gratified and fully satisfied 'with God and with all His works and with all His judgments, and loving and peaceable with ourselves and with our fellow Christians and with all that God loves, as love pleases'<sup>17</sup> that we are blissfully safe in possessing our endless joy, our heavenly beatitude.

Jesus, our Mother of Mercy, as incarnate and suffering Love, is the means through which our own inner wrath is converted to satisfaction, our alienation to wholeness, our fear to love. We experience this in ourselves: our coming to be satisfied with God, that is, reconciled to God, to reality, to ourselves, happens not because we finally get everything exactly the way we want it to be, but because the divine love on the cross somehow takes up, redeems, transforms all the negativity of human existence into glory.

## Conclusion

Our Ash Wednesday *Exhortation* establishes the mystery of divine mercy as the theological focus of our Anglican Lenten spirituality, and we would be hard pressed to find a more significant exploration of divine mercy than that which Julian pioneered for us. Here we have discovered a therapeutic understanding of divine mercy, rather than juridical, focused on the healing and transformation of our inner wrath in a mature, intimate relationship with God, rather than on the periodic remittance of abstract divine anger or punishment. This, the healing of our wrath by the ministry of our Mother of Mercy, Jesus on the cross, is to me the heart of meaning in our Anglican Lent.

I will close this meditation with a quote, not from Julian, but Blessed John Donne, from one of his sermons where he almost reaches the sublime heights of Julian's mysticism.

...as by the sea [Donne writes] the most remote and distant nations enjoy one another by traffic and commerce, East and West becoming neighbors, so by mercy the most different things are united and reconciled: sinners have heaven: traitors are in the prince's bosom: and ignorant persons are in the spring of wisdom.<sup>18</sup>

By Mercy, sinners have heaven, traitors are in the prince's bosom, and ignorant persons are in the spring of wisdom—and as Julian would say, dissatisfaction becomes gratitude, wrath becomes love.

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<sup>1</sup> Two excellent books which address this problem: *When God is Silent* by Barbara Brown Taylor [Boston: Cowley, 1998.] and *Amazing Grace* by Kathleen Norris [New York: Riverhead, 1998.].

<sup>2</sup> *God's Grandeur* from: Hopkins, Gerard Manley. *Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Selection of His poems and Prose*. W.H. Gardner, ed. [Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1954.] p.27.

<sup>3</sup> Thornton, Martin. *English Spirituality. An Outline of Asetical Theology according to the English Pastoral Tradition*. [London: SPCK, 1963.] p.236.

<sup>4</sup> *English Spirituality*. p. 203

<sup>5</sup> *Four Quartets*. Little Gidding, §II. from: Eliot, T.S. *The Complete Poems and Plays*. [New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1971]p. 141.

<sup>6</sup> *BCP*. pp. 264-265.

<sup>7</sup> Julian of Norwich. *A Lesson of Love: The Revelations of Julian of Norwich*. Ed. and Trans. John-Julian Swanson, OJN. [New York: Walker and Co., 1988.] Chapter 46, pp. 104-105. All references to Julian's *Revelations* will be given in the form of the chapter number first, followed by the page number in this edition, the two separated by a period.

<sup>8</sup> *Lesson*. 46.105

<sup>9</sup> *Lesson*. 48. 108: "I saw no wrath except on man's part..."

<sup>10</sup> 1st Prayer Book of Edward VI, §363

<sup>11</sup> *Lesson.* 47.106

<sup>12</sup> *Lesson.* 48.111

<sup>13</sup> *Lesson.* 48.109-110

<sup>14</sup> *Lesson.* 49.113

<sup>15</sup> *Lesson.* 60.156-158

<sup>16</sup> *Lesson.* 22.51

<sup>17</sup> *Lesson.* 49.113

<sup>18</sup> Donne, John. *John Donne: Selections from Divine Poems, Sermons, Devotions, and Prayers.* John Booty, ed. [New York: Paulist, 1990.] p.194

## Meditation Two: Repentance

*God of your goodness, give me yourself, for you are enough to me. I can ask nothing less that is to your glory, and if I ask anything less I shall always be in want, for only in you have I all. Amen.*<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

In the previous meditation I spoke of the intention, framed in our Ash Wednesday *Exhortation*, that our Lenten practice should lead us deeply into the mystery of divine mercy as manifested and realized in Jesus Christ. From Mother Julian's *Revelations*, I developed an approach to divine mercy focused not on the satisfaction of divine wrath and our legal acquittal from due punishment, but on divine love which, through the Incarnation, Passion, and Resurrection, satisfies our wrath, heals our inner contrariness and emotional brokenness, converts our sin to glory. Such an optimistic, therapeutic approach to the mystery of sin and divine mercy focused on a mature and intimate relationship with God is eminently Anglican. To paraphrase Martin Thornton, the Anglican sense of confession and forgiveness is not controlled by the Roman, juridical metaphor of a criminal being released from prison and re-instituted into the society of the Church, but the metaphor of matrimonial reconciliation involving growth in a relationship of love, intimacy, and trust.<sup>2</sup> Anglican tradition does not bid us to see ourselves as acquitted from divinely incurred punishment by Mercy, but rather as being healed of our own inner wrath. This idea, which has enormous potential to renew our Lenten spirituality, will form the backdrop for everything I say in these meditations.

The Ash Wednesday *Exhortation*, however, does not content itself with broad theological affirmations of divine mercy; in its second section it gets very practical, inviting us, 'in the name of the Church, to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's holy Word.' First, self-examination and repentance, second, prayer combined with meditation on Scripture, and third, self-denial and fasting: these are the basic, ancient practices by which the *Exhortation* expects us to move deeply into the observance of a holy Lent, deeply into the mystery of divine mercy.

There is a lot of banter these days about the Anglican three-legged stool (I've even heard one slightly confused priest speak of the Holy Trinity as the Anglican three-legged stool!). Here in the *Exhortation* we are however given another three-legged stool for our Lenten spirituality, the three legs being repentance, prayer, and fasting. Presently, even though its one word in our Lenten vocabulary particularly 'bleared and smeared' by homiletic trade almost beyond recognizable meaning, encrusted with negative associations and corrupted by centuries of dishonest use, let us begin by exploring repentance.

### Repentance in Julian

Against the backdrop of a wrathless God who looks upon us in our sins 'with pity and not blame,'<sup>3</sup> who continually enfolds us in love, healing mercy, and grace—against, that is, the backdrop of Julian's theology which I sketched above, repentance remains necessary. While being very optimistic, Julian is also sanely realistic. Even if sin shall in fact be transformed into our glory as it is for St. Mary Magdalen and St. Peter, Julian never loses sight of the wretched pain, the un-naturalness, what she calls the 'most cruel hell' of sin.

For if before us [Julian says] were laid all the pains in hell and in purgatory and on earth, death and all the rest, over against sin, we ought rather to choose all that pain than sin, because sin is so vile and so much to be hated, that it cannot be compared to any pain — if that pain is not sin.<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, Julian describes in depth and stridently recommends the process of repentance and sacramental confession, and she asks God to wound her not only with compassion and holy longing, but also with true penitential contrition. At first sight, this may appear to indicate a contradiction in Julian between her mystical insights into divine love and an unthinking endorsement of late Medieval, penitential piety. My sense, however, is that the confluence of an overwhelming sense of God's homely loving with Julian's affirmation of penitential practice indicates rather the bracing truth that when sin is juxtaposed against the backdrop of God's self-effacing love, its true horror emerges—we are able to see sin as that which makes us unable to share in God's love, blinded and agonized in the swirling curse of our own selfish pride and confusion. Sin is, to use a classical image from Julian, a ditch into which we as God's servants fall, 'a huge, hard, and painful place'<sup>5</sup> where we are unable to remember our love for God or look upon God's love for us —bruised, sluggish, weak, stunned in our reason, and (what Julian says is the worst pain of all) utterly alone, alienated from each other and from God. Repentance remains necessary not because we have to placate God's wrath and get him to love us again, but as the very first step of becoming aware that we *are* in a ditch and that we *would like* to get out. It has nothing to do with fear of God but everything with the re-awakening in us of love, the love that yearns for something more than the hell of our own wrathful selfishness. 'Our Lord of His mercy,' Julian wrote, 'shows us our sin and our weakness by the sweet gracious light of Himself, for our sin is so vile and so horrible that He of His courtesy will not show it to us except by the light of His grace and mercy.'<sup>6</sup> Repentance is thus a gift from God, an effect of his grace on us that awakens the true self's love for God within the blind stupor of fallen selfishness.

### Repentance as Grace

That is Julian's understanding of repentance, and it is identical with the most common Anglican idea, found everywhere come every Lent, that repentance is a gift of the Holy Spirit. Blessed Richard Hooker is often quoted in this regard, having written in his *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* that 'The virtue of repentance in the heart of man is God's handy work, a fruit or effect of divine grace.'<sup>7</sup> Nothing could be clearer. Repentance is not the natural, autonomous stirring of a soul cut off from God by the squalor of its sin (is this even possible?) but is itself a grace of God, a sign of God's intimate presence, part of the ministry of divine mercy to us in our Mother Jesus, awakening our true selves and drawing us back to Godself. It is the start of the divine life in us. Our Lenten Collects are full of this classically Anglican idea: we ask God to 'create in us new and contrite hearts' on Ash Wednesday; on the 3rd Sunday in Lent we recognize that 'we have no power of ourselves to help ourselves,' and we re-affirm two weeks later that God alone 'can bring into order the unruly wills and affections of sinners.' Simply put, repentance is an unearned gift of God; it is a result of grace awakening us to a new awareness of reality which involves our sin. In his second *Divine Sonnet*, John Donne framed this idea with admirable simplicity:

...grace, if thou repent, though cans't not lack  
But who shall give thee that grace to beginne?<sup>8</sup>

...and in a gorgeous passion from his sermon, *The Grace of Repentance*, Donne poetically develops this idea using the ancient Egyptian myth of the sun drawing forth new life out of the unconscious slime of the Nile river. The language Donne uses is absolutely gorgeous. Even if I lost my faith, I would still read Donne for the joyful play of language. Donne writes:

Till the first beam of grace, which we consider here, strikes upon the soul of a sinner, he lies in the mud and the slime, in the dregs and lees and tartar of his sin. He cannot as much as wish that the sun would shine upon him. He does not so much as know that there is such a sun that has that influence and impression. But if this first beam of grace enlighten him to himself, reflect upon himself, *notum facit* (as the text says) if it acquaint him with

himself, then...as the new creatures at Nilus, his sins begin to take their forms, and their specifications, and they appear to him in their particular true shapes...And when he is thus come to that consideration, [He exclaims] Lord! how I have mistaken myself. Am I that thought myself and passed with others as a sociable, a pleasurable man, and good company; am I a leprous adulterer; is that my name? Am I that thought myself a frugal man and a good husband, I whom fathers would recommend to their children... am I an oppressing extortioner; is that my name?

Blessed by thy name, O Lord, that hast brought me to this *notum feci*, to know mine own name, mine own miserable condition.<sup>9</sup>

What do we mean, however, when we say that repentance is a gift of the Holy Spirit, an effect of the divine sun shining on 'the mud and the slime, the dregs and lees and tartar' of as-yet unconscious sin? A little theology here can open up space for insight. When we speak of something being a gift or grace of God we must remember that fundamentally there is one and only one gift which God gives to us: God in Godself. Despite the medieval divisions of grace into a thousand different varieties, despite as well our tendency to think of grace as a little package of something extra which God passes our way, extra strength or wisdom or piety, there really is only one 'grace' and this is the self-communication of God to us in the Holy Spirit. Grace is not a parcel of goodness conveniently given to us, it is the drawing near to us, in intimacy and radical presence, of a disturbing life which we cannot understand, the sudden proximity of a divine freedom which we cannot dispose and yet which utterly disposes us. It is God communicating the reality of God's own inner life of self-emptying love, self-forgetting humility, self-sacrificing trust and freedom to us with immediacy and vitality. Entering in a personal and direct way into the dance of our own finite consciousness and creaturely freedom, grace is the mysterious reality of Uncreated Freedom acutely immanent.

Saying repentance is a gift of the Holy Spirit is thus saying that repentance is an experiential element —perhaps *the* first experiential element— in our reception of God's gift of Godself. We open the window, or a window is blown open from outside, and light pours into the home of our soul. Where a saint might experience this incoming, immediate intimacy of the free mystery of Divine Love with the simple bliss of a surrendered soul becoming all window, completely diaphanous to that light, we experience that light rather as revealing every greasy smudge on the windowpane, every water stain on the ceiling, every bit of selfishness in us of that is not surrendered to the movement of God's freedom. Another way of saying this is that God comes to us only in the form of uncreated love, freedom pouring itself out in abandonment for us, and this illuminating life of love allows us to see, for the first time, how our lives, even in their pious and religious dimensions, have been puppet shows with our strings being mostly drawn by wrath, infantile bitterness, neediness, fear. Evelyn Underhill, that blessed Anglican Divine of our own century, expresses this uncomfortable insight thus:

The human soul cuts rather a ridiculous figure, clutching its own bits of luggage, its private treasures, its position, its personality, its rights, over against the holy self-giving of Absolute Love manifest in the flesh...[and that] strange and glimmering Presence...attractive and con-victing us, asks a total and flexible self-offering as our only possible attitude.<sup>10</sup>

To borrow a harsh phrase from George Eliot, the sense is that 'we walk about so well-wadded with stupidity' and pride, blinded and deluded, that it takes the lancing gift of God's love immediately present to us for us to see ourselves as we truly are, not against the backdrop of our pretentious illusions, but against the divine self-gift which is ultimately the only reality that there is. God's loving gift of Godself, bringing repentance, can indeed feel like wrath, shattering our pretensions by making us see how ridiculous and ugly our selfishness is, in order to draw us back to Godself. Sometimes the only way for God to actually get us to see ourselves is through a combination of inward grace with a catastrophic

outward tragedy that sends the illusions of our false-selves reeling. In a wonderful Ash Wednesday sermon on the text from the Psalter, “When he slew them, then they sought Him...”<sup>11</sup> Lancelot Andrewes points out [before Queen Elizabeth, to boot!] that to bring us to repent and seek God it is often not enough for God to kill others besides ourselves or merely to wound us, but God has to strike us ourselves with mortal wounds:

[God] took others away before their faces, and those not weak or sickly persons, but the godliest and strongest of all Israel...Now did this move [them to repent]?No... [Say that God come] then to themselves and smite them with the edge not with the point; with the edge to wound, not with the point to dispatch outright; will that serve?...No.

If we were put to it to say plainly, ‘Not till he kill me,’ it would choke us. We neither have heart nor face, we would not dare to answer so, we dare not avow it.<sup>12</sup>

Or, as God said to Julian from God’s point of view:

I shall totally shatter you because of your vain affections and your vicious pride; and after that I shall gather you together and make you humble and gentle, pure and holy, by one-ing you to myself.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, it is hard, in this context, not to think of Donne’s famous tenth *Divine Sonnet*, where he pleads with God his need for just such a shattering, a divestment, an undoing:

Batter my heart, three personed God; for you  
As yet but knocke, breathe, shine, and seeke to mend:  
that I may rise, and stand, o’erthrow me,’ and bend  
Your force, to breake, blowe, burne, and make me new...  
Take me to you, imprison me, for I,  
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,  
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.<sup>14</sup>

Repentance is thus a gift of the Holy Spirit, a gift that threatens in mercy to break, blow burn, and in the end, perhaps, make us new. It is the first tremor of the soul as it is invaded by the life of self-less love of the Holy Trinity. It may have to come to us first in the form, as it were, of killing, but ultimately it is the gift of eternal life.

### Penance as Passively Accepted

One last question needs to be addressed before this meditation can be closed. Once grace has brought us to the point of self-awareness, once the sun has raised the explicit forms of our sins out of the unconscious slime of the Nile, how do we integrate this new awareness into our lives? Obviously, there is the need for confession and absolution, whether performed privately or sacramentally—perhaps also spiritual direction. But there is also a need, to my mind, for penance. Penance is a very helpful way we can bodily, mentally, practically work through the full consciousness of our sinfulness and learn to integrate it with the fullness of our day-to-day lives. Awareness of sin, bringing contrition, is like a noxious heap of manure; penance is the fieldwork which digs this manure deep into the ground of our soul, paradoxically using it to fertilize new growth in humility, love, and divine intimacy. But what is the penance to be? We are not likely to go in for either the harsh canonical penitentiaries of the Celtic or old Roman systems. As Anglicans, we can only agree with Blessed Walter Hilton when he wrote that

It is a great courtesy of our Lord, and an endless mercy, that so lightly forgives all manner of sin, and so suddenly gives plenty of grace to a sinful soul that asks mercy of Him. [God] abides not great penance doing nor painful fleshly suffering before he forgives it.<sup>15</sup>

The short prayers assigned in the confessional, a Collect or a psalm, are fitting for their sacramental function but they are too small for the deeper task of a complete, ongoing integration of the new insight with the depths of our personality, an integration that will often take months to work itself out. We need something seriously embracing the whole of life, more than just saying a Collect, and something moreover that fits in with the domestic, homely essence of English spirituality which stresses not fantastic feats of virtue, piety, or penance, but quiet and recollected faithfulness through the duties of everyday life. Here, as in many other cases, Julian has a profound suggestion.

Late in her *Revelations*, Julian says some pretty surprising, sobering things after all the glory of her mystical showings and deep theological reflections. She comes right back to the facts of actual human existence and hears God saying to her with admirable bluntness:

'Whatsoever thou doest, thou shalt have woe. And therefore I will that thou wisely recognize thy penance which thou art in constantly, and that thou dost humbly accept it for thy penance, and thou shalt then truly understand that all thy living is beneficial penance.' This earth is im-prisonment, and this life is penance, and in this remedy He wills that we rejoice: that our Lord is with us, guarding us and leading us into the fullness of joy.<sup>16</sup>

Therefore He wills that we pay attention to His grace-filled inspiration, more rejoicing in His undivided love than sorrowing in our frequent fallings. For it is the most honor to Him of anything that we can do that we live in our penance gladly and merrily because of His love, for He looks upon us so tenderly that He sees all our living here to be penance. The natural yearning in us for Him is a lasting penance in us, which penance He produces in us and mercifully He helps us to bear it... for this life is our natural penance and the highest, as I see it, for this penance never goes from us until the time that we are fulfilled when we shall have Him for our reward. And therefore He wills that we fix our hearts on the transition — that is to say, from the pain that we feel into the bliss that we trust.<sup>17</sup>

In these two quotes, Julian is offering a piece of wisdom which it's going to take me my entire life to digest. Her first statement is very clear: 'Whatsoever though doest, thou shalt have woe,' which is much like the Buddha's affirmation, 'Life is suffering.' The reasons for this suffering are not only our physical, emotional, psychological, and moral weaknesses but also the yearning for God in us that can never be satisfied in this life. Whatever you do or don't do, wherever you go, whatever life-path you choose, you are going to have woe as long as you are alive. This is her first truth. The second truth is that we can embrace this basic suffering as penance, and please our God by living gladly and merrily in it, rejoicing in the self-gift of Christ to us through these very pains.

In other words, when we are looking for a penance to help us dig the manure of our sinfulness down deeply into our consciousness where it can feed a new life of humility and trust in God, we do not need to buy a hair shirt or perform exorbitant penance. That might be Spanish Catholic; it is certainly not Anglican. Where the penitential offering of our lives back to God happens is rather in a new, gracious, generous response to the manifold 'slings and arrows of outrageous fortune' that are bound to pierce and bruise us everyday. Death by pin-pricks, St Thérèse said; we might say penance by the pin-pricks of daily life. To live our daily lives as penance means not to live obsessed with guilt, despair and self-hatred, but to use the inevitable sufferings involved in being human as ways of graciously giving ourselves to God. We please God most and perform therapeutic—healing, restoring, transforming penance for our sinfulness—by living gladly and merrily in the everyday pains of life.

For the penance that man takes upon himself was not shown to me — that is to say, it was not shown in particular — but it was shown particularly and highly and with full lovely demeanor that we shall humbly and patiently bear and suffer the penance that God Himself gives us, with remembrance of His blessed Passion.<sup>18</sup>

## Conclusion

Because God draws near to us, we become aware of our sins. Divine love itself is awakened in our hearts and we sense the painful juxtaposition of this uncreated love with our own miserly selfishness. This insight leads to contrition and repentance as we seek to work this new awareness into the depths of our consciousness and the substance of our daily lives, there is no better way than to squarely accept the suffering of life as a therapeutic means of offering ourselves back to God, gladly and merrily. This is what Julian and the Anglican tradition have to offer us as we head into Lent: Love leading us to more love through painful growth in self-knowledge, repentance, contrition, conversion, all in the context of our hum-drum daily lives. Suffering is inevitable, and, as T. S. Eliot wrote in *Little Gidding*:

The only hope, or else despair  
Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre—  
to be redeemed from fire by fire

Who then devised the torment? Love.  
Love is the unfamiliar Name  
Behind the hands that wove  
The intolerable shirt of flame  
Which human power cannot remove.  
We only live, only suspire,  
consumed by either fire or fire.<sup>19</sup>

\* \* \*

<sup>1</sup> A prayer from Julian's *Revelations*. [Lesson. 5.13]

<sup>2</sup> Thornton, Martin. *English Spirituality. An Outline of Asetical Theology according to the English Pastoral Tradition*. [London: SPCK, 1963.]

p. 103

<sup>3</sup> Lesson. 82.207

<sup>4</sup> Lesson. 40.88

<sup>5</sup> Lesson. 51.117

<sup>6</sup> Lesson. 78.199

<sup>7</sup> *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*. VI-iii-2

<sup>8</sup> The Second *Divine Sonnet* from: Donne, John. *John Donne: Selections from Divine Poems, Sermons, Devotions, and Prayers*. John Booty, ed. [New York: Paulist, 1990.] p. 78

<sup>9</sup> *John Donne*. pp. 220-221.

<sup>10</sup> Underhill, Evelyn. *The School of Charity*. [London: Longmans, Green and Co. 1934.] pp. 31-32.

<sup>11</sup> Psalm 78.34

<sup>12</sup> Andrewes, Lancelot. *The Works of Lancelot Andrewes*. Volume I. [New York: AMS Press, 1967.] pp. 317-318.

<sup>13</sup> Lesson. 28.64

<sup>14</sup> The tenth *Divine Sonnet* from: Donne, John. *John Donne: Selections from Divine Poems, Sermons, Devotions, and Prayers*. John Booty, ed. [New York: Paulist, 1990.] pp. 81-82.

<sup>15</sup> Section II.7 from: Hilton, Walter. *The Scale of Perfection*. John P.H. Clark and Rosemary Dorward, eds. [New York: Paulist, 1991.] p. 201.

<sup>16</sup> *Lesson. 77.198*

<sup>17</sup> *Lesson. 81.206*

<sup>18</sup> *Lesson. 77.197*

<sup>19</sup> *Four Quartets*. Little Gidding, §III from: Eliot, T.S. *The Complete Poems and Plays*. [New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1971] p.144.

Meditation Three: Prayer

*Gracious Father, we pray for thy holy Catholic Church. Fill it with all truth, in all truth with all peace. Where it is corrupt, purify it; where it is in error, direct it; where in any thing it is amiss, reform it. Where it is right, strengthen it; where it is in want, provide for it; where it is divided, reunite it; for the sake of Jesus Christ thy Son our Savior. Amen*

Introduction: George Herbert's "Prayer"

I'd like to begin this meditation by reading a well-known poem from Bl. George Herbert. I have a friend who studied 17th century Literature in graduate school; she says that George Herbert is foppish, that you have to go to John Donne if you want real poetry of spiritual struggle. For a while, I agreed with her, but in the end I think Herbert is a more gifted, felicitous poet. This poem is entitled, simply, 'Prayer.'

*Prayer I*

Prayer, the Church's banquet, Angel's age,  
God's breath in man returning to his birth,  
The soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage,  
The Christian plummet, sounding heaven and earth;

Engine against the Almighty, sinner's tower,  
Reversed thunder, Christ-side-piercing-spear,  
The six-days-world transposing in an hour,  
A kind of tune which all things hear and fear;

Softness, and peace, and joy, and love, and bliss,  
Exalted manna, gladness of the best,  
Heaven in ordinary, man well drest,  
The Milky Way, the bird of Paradise;

Church bells beyond the stars heard, the soul's blood,  
The land of spices, something understood.<sup>1</sup>

There are few poems on prayer that I enjoy more than this one; the last couplet rivals anything John of the Cross ever composed:

'Church bells beyond the stars heard, the soul's blood,  
The land of spices, something understood.'

I start this meditation with such an exalted poem because I want to reflect on an Anglican approach to the life of prayer, prayer being the second basic discipline which our Ash Wednesday *Exhortation* calls us to for the 'observance of a holy Lent.' While one might perhaps expect exalted speech from a monk about prayer, much of what I say may strike you as quite pedestrian. Grounded in the Anglican tradition, I will not venture into the exalted realm of San Juanist spiritual espousals, the Song of Songs, nor Dionysian ecstatic unions with the divine substance beyond all being. I want to begin in a much more down to earth manner with the good, old Book of Common Prayer, which is, after all, where George Herbert lived the main body of his prayer life—that strange 'land of spices' indeed.

The Anglican Three-fold Rule of Prayer:

## Holy Eucharist, The Daily Offices, and Personal Devotion

Several times already I have mentioned Martin Thornton and his wonderful, if somewhat dated book, *English Spirituality*. This is because while I was wading my way through John Donne's sermons and George Herbert's poetry, and contemplating reading parts of Hookers *Laws* again in preparation for this retreat, Thornton's *English Spirituality* came as a god-send, drawing my quickly unraveling vision back to the fundamental basics of Anglican spirituality. Here I am going to lean on him rather heavily. What he says, very basically, is that Anglicans have, enshrined in the Prayer Book—which he says should never be stored in the back of the Church as a *Rituale* for use on Sundays, but should be one's constant companion in the kitchen, on the bus, in the library—we have enshrined in the Prayerbook a substantial, deeply nourishing, bracing rule of prayer composed of three necessary, inter-related, complementary elements: The Holy Eucharist, the Divine Offices, and private devotion. The distinctly Anglican way and discipline of prayer involves the cultivation and healthy interaction of these three essential forms: Mass, Office, Devotions, each of which depends on the other two elements for its correct complement and balance. Thus when our Ash Wednesday *Exhortation* invites us to the observance of a Holy Lent through prayer, it is inviting us to some amplification of our entire three-fold rule of Anglican prayer. Through self-examination and repentance, we can look moreover to see which of these elements we have ignored, which we need to cultivate more intentionally. This is vital, since when we slip out of a healthy balance of Mass-Office-Devotions, we are neglecting the richness of spiritual balance and sanity which is the hallmark of our Anglican way.

Of course, there are a thousand other ways to approach the life of prayer. The Roman Church alone has hundreds of traditions to learn from; more books are also being published daily on Eastern Orthodox prayer and forms of prayer and meditation from the Far Eastern religions. While it's important that we learn as much as we can and prudently experiment with these different forms of prayer and meditation, especially in our private devotions, we still need to retain the core essence of our Anglican balance of Mass-Office-Devotion. In a post-modern age, when the modernist hope of melting every religious practice down to a lowest common denominator of belief or worship or bland sameness of experience has largely been abandoned, an age when unique identity grounded in ancient tradition is realized as the way to move forward in the symbolic, linguistic, liturgical 'play' of religion, we need honor our Anglican heritage, especially when it comes to the cultivation of a prayer-life. We honor it not as the way in which things absolutely must be done for all people, or even as the best way, but as the way we have chosen for ourselves, 'for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish,' until we can recline in the beatific vision. Especially as clergy of this Church, we are especially consecrated to be, as the Collect says, 'stewards of the divine mysteries,' not according to our private whim, but as they have been mediated to us through symbolic, liturgical, and textual forms developed over centuries of tradition and expressed succinctly, beautifully even, in our *Book of Common Prayer*.

Our way as Anglicans is very simple; it does not tingle with novelty nor promise immediate relevance, but it does resound with profound depth when embraced wholeheartedly and worked through with a lifetime of devoted fidelity. Anglican Lenten spirituality demands prayer, and Anglican prayer takes the form of Mass *and* Offices *and* private devotion. Thus even as we avoid becoming narrow, defensive people who condemn all ways of being Christian, or being human, apart from our Anglican way, we avoid as well the opposite danger of a superficial sampling from a thousand different spiritual traditions, taking a little bit of Hinduism, a little bit of Zen, a little bit of Native-American spirituality and tacking it onto our Christianity—what Alan Jones calls developing an 'eclectic pastiche of kitsch' so amused with superficial novelty that it never attains to any transformative depth. (In a lecture he gave some years ago, Jones told the amusing story of a college sophomore who told him apathetically: 'Yeah, I've done Zen!' 'You've done Zen?' Jones asked. 'We'll see. Come back to me in twenty years!') Our three-fold way of prayer is a remarkable gift we have to give, especially us clergy, to a spiritually starving world fed too often on an 'eclectic pastiche of kitsch,' sickened with the candy of self-help, new-age spirituality, or

clobbered over the head with the bludgeon of conservative fundamentalism, biblical or ecclesial. Mass-Office-Devotions:

Prayer, the Church's banquet, Angel's age,  
God's breath in man returning to his birth,  
The soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage,  
The Christian plummet, sounding heaven and earth;

· · ·  
Church bells beyond the stars heard, the soul's blood,  
The land of spices, something understood.

The question which this raises, however, is: How do we affirm, explain, understand our Anglican way of prayer balanced between Mass, Office, and personal devotion without slipping into a blind formalism, blind obedience. We need to think more deeply and speak more encouragingly than just to say: "It's Anglican; you're Anglican; so do it!" We need to develop an apology for the way of prayer developed in our Church.

An Apology for the Anglican Way of Prayer

For the sake of the already-converted, we could develop a theology relating our way of prayer to the basics of Christian faith and human existence. This is the route Thornton followed when he developed a Trinitarian, theological argument for the three-fold way, saying that in the Offices we offer objective, public praise and supplication to God the Father, in the Eucharist God the Son comes to us, incorporating us into himself sacramentally, and lastly, in private devotion the subjective, non-sacramental, ahistorical life of the Spirit prays through us.<sup>2</sup> That's a neat bit of theology. In the Offices we offer objective praise to the Father, in the Eucharist, we are incorporated into the Son, in private devotion the purely subjective, interior, non-institutional encounter between us and God in the Spirit takes place. Even if such a theology glows with meaning only for the converted—and I am afraid this is the case—behind it however there lies the idea which is the dynamic engine for all Anglican spirituality and which can be deeply convincing even to the unconverted—and this is the commonsensical idea of *balance*, blessed balance which we hear so much about these days (and which Thornton says the English Church learned from the Benedictines!). Balance is what we aspire to through the classical *via media* not as compromise but as comprehension for the sake of love, 'choosing all' for God's sake and for our soul's sake. By balance we walk the middle way between opposite see-sawing extremes, walking at the exact fulcrum point and so able to use both extremes as part of our spiritual dance, the spiritual play between ourselves and God. This is the height of Anglicanism. Driven neither by a blind idealism or fanaticism to veer off to one extreme or the other, the Anglican way takes both extremes and plays them off against each other in a convivial kind of balanced, contrapuntal, antiphonal exchange like the psalms chanted in choir or the themes of a Baroque fugue. Rather than a cerebral search for propositional certainty or an emotional search for a self-annihilating ecstasy or an insecure search for absolute authority, we have an aesthetic spirituality which delights in a lively interchange of diverse (even extreme) forms, ideas, symbols, narrative, methods, playing back and forth off one another, *against* one another for the greater glory of God and the delight and sustenance of every dimension of the human soul.

#### a. The Divine Office

Looking at each element of the three-fold way of prayer, especially with an eye to self-examination and the implementation of all three elements during Lent, we can begin with the Divine Offices. The Offices, as Thornton suggests, theologically focus on the transcendence of God, God the Father as the protological ground and eschatological goal of all being: the sustaining, ever-mysterious freedom which continuously creates, enlivens, sustains all being. "We believe in God the Father, creator of heaven and earth" is the credal core of the Divine Offices, our primary aim being not only the recognition of the

transcendent divine reality itself, something we are liable to forget in our technological wonder-world, but also the offering of praise and supplication to God as transcendent mystery beyond all images and words, creating and sustaining and calling all creation back into union with Godself.

On the anthropological side, the Offices in their focus on the transcendent Godhead, fulfill the human need for public, objective worship, its objectivity being established by communal solidarity and public observance through set forms of prayer. The Divine Offices are not times for extempore prayer or for following individual preferences: they are public, communal, patterned prayers through which the worshipping body moves like dancers in strict but interpretive obedience to a set choreography.

I want to digress for a moment to express my love for this objective, patterned way of communal prayer. Being a contemplative monk does not mean living in some kind of paradise of spiritual consolations. On some level it does mean aspiring to heaven, but I have found, like Dante in his *Divine Comedy*, that you only get to heaven by going first through inner hell. There thus necessarily have been times as a monastic when my whole psyche has been turned inside-out, upside down, disintegrated into a chaos of unfulfilled desire, angst, and pain. In these difficult times, when I have been out in the desert being hunted by wild beasts, to use traditional monastic imagery, the patterned, public, objective ritual of the Divine offices has quite literally saved my faith, if not also my life, from complete despair and disintegration. To have been able in times of distress to enter four times a day into the objective, patterned movement, disciplined yet not self-annihilating, of the Offices *with the other members of my community* was the most healing, sustaining, consoling activity possible for me. When all hell had broken out inside, I could still enter into this disciplined, formal pattern like a dancer into his steps or a musician into her part, and it is in this patterned dancing that healing came, that space was opened up, that I was able to breath again. Precisely because I gave myself over to an objective pattern in relationship with the other members of my community, a little light was able to slip into the soul—which for a moment had ceased to obsess about its own suffering—and could begin the work of re-creation, resurrection. Very realistically, Blessed Julian wrote that,

...one particular person can often be broken, as it seems, by himself, but the whole Body of Holy Church is never broken, nor ever shall be, without end. And therefore a certain thing it is, a good and a gracious thing, to will humbly and strongly to be made fast and one-ed to our Mother, Holy Church, that is, Christ Jesus.<sup>3</sup>

... and to my mind the strength and solidarity of being in the Church is realized with special force through the unending cycle of patterned prayer offered in the Offices.

Speaking less personally and more historically, it should be noted that almost every Caroline Divine rallied to defend against Puritan attack the objective, formal, patterned worship of the Offices, of public 'set-prayers' at certain pre-established times with pre-established forms, texts, and ministers. (A seminarian at Nashotah House told me the story of his previous rector being asked to speak at a meeting of Baptists. The Baptist moderator introduced the Episcopal priest, saying, 'Now Father so-and-so will lead us in one their famous *written-out* prayers.' The priest paused, and began: 'Our Father, who art in heaven...') No writer that I know of is more zealous on account of public set prayers than Blessed Richard Hooker. Here is a longish quote; imagine that you are listening to Shakespeare and the language will perhaps come all the more alive for you:

A great part of the cause, wherefore religious minds are so inflamed with the love of public devotion, is that virtue, force, and efficacy, which by experience they find that the very form and revered solemnity of common prayer duly ordered hath to help the imbecility (sic!) and weakness in us, by means whereof we are otherwise of ourselves less apt to perform unto God so heavenly a service, with such affection of heart, and disposition in the powers of our souls as is requisite.<sup>4</sup>

Much the same as my own personal feelings about the Offices, though coming from less a therapeutic angle and more from that of duty, service, and reverence, Hooker admits being inflamed with the love of public devotion over private devotion, because its objective pattern and reverent solemnity *in public* are the greatest of possible aids to the worship of our heavenly Father, in our ‘imbecility and weakness.’ As Hooker wrote elsewhere:

But of all helps for due performance of this service, the greatest is that very set and standing order itself, which framed with common advice, hath both for matter and form prescribed whatsoever is herein publicly done.<sup>5</sup>

As Anglicans we need to cultivate and affirm the value of patterned, objective, public worship that doesn’t take much account of personal whims or tastes (God knows the hell that rages through every parish over personal preferences being crossed!) but rather requires the submission of our own selves to a common discipline, a common musical score, as it were, a common choreography, not as a way of proving ourselves holy, but as a tremendously nourishing, edifying practice both for the church and unchurched, that bears in its patterned, trans-subjective discipline great therapeutic and transformative power. We need to affirm patterned, public prayer as fun-damental to Anglican spirituality. Just as musicians rejoice in *being played* by the music, so we must learn to rejoice in *being prayed* by the objective, patterned text of the Offices.

#### b. Private Devotion

As the contrapuntal opposite of the objective worship of the Divine Office, the habit of private devotion embodies everything that the Offices do not. The Offices are public, objective, patterned; devotions are private, subjective and can be extempore. They are guided not by set rules and rituals but by interior, individual conscience —the personal conscience and limited individualism so loved and respected in the English tradition. Here it is not a matter of giving oneself over to an objective pattern of worship in community but of following divine Wisdom wherever she may lead. Whereas the theological basis of the Divine Office is the ever-transcendent Creator, God the Father, the theological basis of private devotions is the completely immanent, indwelling, sanctifying Holy Spirit who prays for us through inarticulate groans when we do not know even how we ought to pray.

Jesus said, “What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”<sup>6</sup>

Writing vividly about the soul coming under the direct and personal influence of the Holy Spirit, Mother Julian said that when we reach this state in our inner prayer,

...we can do nothing more than to gaze at Him and rejoice with a high mighty desire to be wholly one-ed to Him, and to pay attention to His prompting, and rejoice in His loving, and delight in His goodness.

This is an exalted incomprehensible prayer, as I see it, for the whole cause for which we pray, is to be one-ed to the vision and the contemplation of Him to whom we pray, marvelously rejoicing with reverent fear and such great sweetness and delight in Him that for the time being we can pray absolutely nothing except as He moves us.<sup>7</sup>

The credal basis of the interior, private, devotional life. is very simple: 'We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life.'

At OJN, we work very hard at maintaining a properly Anglican balance between these two poles of Christian prayer, remembering that Julian not only achieved the heights of private, affective and mystical contemplation but also spent many hours every day reciting formal offices as part of her Rule. On one hand, attending the Offices is required and the Offices are recited according to set norms that rarely change. It is expected that one will give oneself over to the patterned movement of the whole community in speech and gesture and not improvise a dance of one's own across the oratory stage. The therapeutic and transformative power of this I have already bore my witness to. However, directly opposite to this objective worship, we have also vowed to spend at least an hour a day in private still prayer and in intercessory prayer, and there is, as a matter of principle, no guidance whatsoever given on how to go about this hour or more of private devotions each day. This seems to me to be eminently Anglican: a concerted and intentional effort to cultivate a balance between extremes in prayer, a balance achieved not by watering every practice down or mixing them all together, but rather by walking on that fulcrum point, keeping a hand on both extremes. There is thus a healthy play back and forth between the subjective and objective poles of worship, between affective devotion in the cell and more intellectual presence in choir, between inward spontaneity and patterned worship, between the mystery of the transcendent, Creator Father and the mystery of the immanent Holy Spirit sanctifying and animating our lives from within.

Obviously, non-monastics are generally not called to the monastic regime of the four or seven-fold Office and an hour or two of silent prayer each day, but as Anglicans we *are* all called, whether monastic or secular, clergy or laity (true Anglicanism never regards the clergy as a separate caste above and beyond the miserably un-ordained) to the intentional balancing of outward, objective, public worship with inward, private, devotions. You can't simply do one and not the other because the balance gets lost and you end up either trying to formalize devotions in an Ignatian way or pentecostalize the Offices!

### c. Synthesis in the Eucharist

Lastly, there is the Eucharist, which represents in many ways the synthesis of the two other dimensions of Anglican prayer —sacramental worship involving the dilation of the outward and visible, the patterned, public, and institutional, by the Holy Spirit to manifestly realize through them God's unique, incarnate presence in his Church. The objective and formal is dilated by the subjective and pentecostal to create the reality of Jesus Christ in his body, the Church. More plainly it could be said that in the sacramental celebration the outward and physical body of the Church, becomes, by the descent of the Holy Spirit, the actual body of Jesus Christ in space and time, an extension of the Incarnation into our world. The future reality of the eschatological kingdom is opened up for a moment in the present and we are incorporated into Jesus, sharing in his unique life at once human, physical, and earthly, and yet intimately one with God the Father. The intellectual and the affective are both radically outstripped by this mystical realization of the eschatological union of God with Creation in the sacrament of the altar. 'We believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son our Lord, God from God, Light from Light, of one being with the Father...for our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again...' This is the credal basis of our Eucharistic celebration. Bl. Richard Hooker wrote eloquently on the depth reality of the sacraments:

Whereas therefore in our infancy we are incorporated into Christ and by Baptism receive the grace of his Spirit without any sense or feeling of the gift which God bestoweth, in the Eucharist we so receive the gift of God, that we know by grace what the grace is which God giveth us... we understand that the strength of our life in Christ is Christ, that his flesh is meat and his blood drink, not by surmised imagination but truly, even so truly that through faith we perceive in the body and blood sacramentally present the very taste of eternal life.<sup>8</sup>

It is plainly confessed...that this sacrament is a true and real participation of Christ, who thereby imparteth himself even his whole entire person *as a mystical Head*, unto every soul that receiveth him, and that every such receiver doth thereby incorporate or unite himself onto Christ as a *mystical member of him*.<sup>9</sup>

As Martin Thornton observed, drawing the Eucharist, personal prayer, and habitual recollection, into a tight union: 'We should constantly recollect the fact that we have communicated, or rather, that we are, every moment of the day, communicants. To absorb, internalize, that is, to receive, is the whole point. Again prayer links itself with Eucharist, for in prayer the sacrament is 'digested' and grace becomes crystallized into resolutions and ideas.'<sup>10</sup>

## Conclusion

In the Divine Office, we participate as Anglicans in an objective, formal, communal pattern of worship focused on the Father; in our private devotions we participate in the indefinable, unpredictable, subjective life of the Holy Spirit often with a deep affective dimension, and in the Holy Eucharist these two elements of public and private, communal and personal, immanent and transcendent worship, are synthesized to realize the worshipping body as the body of Christ, incorporated into him, becoming his incarnation in our world, his kingdom, if only for a split second before the heavens close up and we become again our fractious selves vying for vestry control at the coffee hour. Our personal appropriation of the depth reality of the Mass depends on a healthy life of both private, affective devotions and the objective worship of the Offices, and conversely, the inner trajectory of the Offices and of private devotions is frustrated when these two elements are not sublimated into Eucharist. This is the Anglican way of prayer—Mass, Office, Devotions—and as we head into Lent, and hear our *Exhortation* calling us again to a renewed life of prayer, we might, instead of intensifying what we are already doing to the neglect of other dimensions, inspect to see which dimension we have neglected and pursue some course to bring it into balance with the others.

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<sup>1</sup> Herbert, George. *George Herbert: the Country Parson, the Temple*. John N. Wall, ed. [New York: Paulist, 1981.] pp.165-166.

<sup>2</sup> Thornton, Martin. *English Spirituality. An Outline of Asetical Theology according to the English Pastoral Tradition*. [London: SPCK, 1963.] pp. 274-275.

<sup>3</sup> *Lesson*. 61.161-162

<sup>4</sup> *Laws.V.25.i*

<sup>5</sup> *Laws.V.25.iv*

<sup>6</sup> John 3

<sup>7</sup> *Lesson*. 43.98-99

<sup>8</sup> *Laws.V.67.i*

<sup>9</sup> *Laws.V.67.vii*

<sup>10</sup> *English Spirituality*. p.100

Meditation Four:  
Lenten Allegory in the Lenten Gospels for Year A

*Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.*

Introduction

The Scriptures, and the Gospels in particular, are the nourishing ground of our imaginative, symbolic, liturgical life as Christians, Anglican or otherwise. When they are prayed with faithfully through the Offices, year after year, they become the symbolic and linguistic lens through which we see and interpret reality. The lections in the Holy Eucharist, rather than being fragmentary voices out of the past, become for us a playful poetry, a musical composition of well-known, much loved images, symbols, narratives. The Ash Wednesday *Exhortation* itself invites us to reading and meditating on God's holy Word as a key Lenten discipline, and behind all this there is a great love for the personal, affective appropriation of Scripture in the Anglican tradition which George Herbert expressed thus:

O Book! infinite sweetness, let my heart  
Suck every letter, and a honey gain,  
Precious for any grief in any part;  
To clear the breast, to mollify all pain

Thou art all health, healthy thriving till it make  
A full eternity: thou art a mass  
Of strange delights, where me may wish and take

. . .  
Thou art joy's handsel, heaven lies flat in thee,  
Subject to ev'ry mounter's bended knee.<sup>1</sup>

Clearly, an Anglican Lenten spirituality which did not employ scriptural meditation would be lacking. Thus far, however, I have hardly mentioned the Gospels in my meditations. Consequently, I would like to take in this meditation a relaxed allegorical stroll through the five Lenten Gospels for this year,<sup>2</sup> excluding the usual Ash Wednesday Gospel and the Palm Sunday Passion narrative, to see how they incarnate in their stories all three of the themes which these meditations have addressed so far—divine mercy, repentance, and prayer. None of this will rival sermon preparation; it's simply an overview combined with my own penchant for poetic, allegorical play with scripture.

Allegorical Play on the Five Lenten Gospels for Year A

Paging quickly through the Gospels for the five Sundays preceding Palm Sunday this year, the first thing to notice is that each Gospel involves Jesus' direct interaction with one other central character. Instead of apocalyptic, parabolic or straightforward teaching texts, we have narratives of Jesus' relationship with five other people. In the order of their appearance, these five persons are: Satan the Tempter in the wilderness, Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman by Jacob's well, the man born blind, and finally Lazarus. Satan is sharply rebuked by Jesus, Nicodemus is first confused then left completely in the dust of Johannine mysticism, the Samaritan woman is likewise confused but comes around to conversion, the man born blind is healed but has to face a confrontation with the Pharisees, and finally Lazarus is pulled newly alive out of his grave. Five different persons, five encounters, five narratives.

Without turning our lectionary into a Cabalistic code inscribed with esoteric patterns, to say nothing of those who composed our lectionary, is it too fanciful to see in the linear succession of these five stories a single, overarching narrative of our Lenten journey from initial selfishness, through divine mercy, repentance, and prayer into a final state of grace? Perhaps it is; but I would like to try it anyway.

a. Jesus and Satan in the Wilderness.

The Gospel for the first Sunday in Lent this year is the story of the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness from Matthew 4. Still dripping wet from his baptism, Jesus is 'led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil...' as our Gospel has it. 'For forty days and nights he fasted, and at the end of them, he was famished. [Then] the Tempter approached him...' In the dialogue that follows, there are only two characters, Jesus and the Devil. Seeing as how Jesus represents literally and figuratively the gift of divine mercy become incarnate, that is to say, that Jesus is going to play himself, it appears that the only role left for us to play is that of the Devil. This is strange, certainly not appealing, but is it all that far from the truth?

The Devil, as we all know, asks Jesus to do three things: turn stones into bread, throw himself from the Temple, and do homage to the Devil himself as a way for Jesus to gain control over all the kingdoms of the earth. Applying these demonic requests to ourselves, my sense is that they are all too true. When we first hear of the reality of divine mercy, the possibility of intimate relationship with God, we come to God, to Jesus, asking for all these things, seeking a God who will boost our human weakness and poverty by a vast deployment of divine powers on our behalf. Perhaps we come first seeking a God who will turn stones to bread to satisfy not only our need for material well-being but, more insidiously because more piously, we seek the special bread of divine consolations to alleviate our sense of spiritual emptiness, hunger, and poverty. Jesus, however, bids us live first by naked faith in God's word, not relying entirely on interior or exterior consolations. Secondly, we may come to Jesus, along the lines of Dostoyevsky's *Grand Inquisitor*, seeking a God who will dazzle us and everyone else with obvious displays of divine power, a God to whom we can thus surrender the painful burden of mature conscience and adult freedom, regressing into a childish, blind obedience before a manifestly powerful deity. Jesus bids us instead to relate to God through the painful, halting, never quite successful exercise of adult freedom against a backdrop, often, of divine silence. Finally, we may ask Jesus to bow down and do homage to our own needs for power, control, and domination, domination if not of the world, then of the vestry. We want Jesus, that is, to opt into our little schemes of control and power-worship. Jesus actively rebukes this idolatry, often by making the practice of our religion, in parish or monastery, a context for humiliation and powerlessness. Thus even as we seek to enlist God as a supernatural power for our own selfish, egoistic needs, God comes to us not in displays of power, but as weakness itself, as just a human being, as divine mercy in Jesus. God seeks not to boost our egos but to draw us into intimate self-giving with Godself. Consequently, just as Jesus said to St. Peter when Peter urged him to pursue a Messiahship of power rather than one of suffering and death, so now Jesus says to us, "Get behind me Satan, for you think as men think, not as God thinks."<sup>3</sup> We satans stalk away rebuked, without any comprehension of the mystery of divine mercy, let alone any exercise of true repentance or prayer. Not a very good start perhaps, but this is only the first week of Lent.

b. Nicodemus

After spending a week of sleepless nights tossing and turning in bed, something urges us come Lent's second Sunday, to seek Jesus out in the middle of the night—not as the Tempter from Matthew, but as Nicodemus from John 3, a definitely more reformed character. 'Rabbi,' we say to him, 'we know that you are a teacher sent by God; no one could perform these signs of yours unless God were with him.' Saying this reveals that all we can see in Jesus is a holy teacher whom we want to learn from; we still have not grasped the basic reality of Jesus as the gift of divine mercy. At once Jesus responds to our query, saying, 'No one can see the kingdom of God unless he has been born again,' which is the equivalent of saying, 'I can't teach you anything if you are as spiritually blind and dead as that.' Obviously, this is not

very good pastoral counseling. So for a while we bicker with Jesus about being born again, the good old theological debate of baptismal rejuvenation: 'How can a man be born a second time?' We're looking for special knowledge about the Kingdom so we can be masters of that kingdom. We are not yet looking for the gift of God to us in Mercy; it hasn't even crossed our minds at this stage that we desperately need, before any kind of knowledge, this sort of mercy.

Finally, however, Jesus pops us straight between the eyes with a direct statement of who he is and the nature of his Messianic ministry: "No one has gone up into heaven," he says, "except the one who came down from heaven, the Son of Man who is in heaven. Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, in order that everyone who has faith may in him have eternal life." In this, we get our first direct shot of what Jesus is about, and what he is offering us, resulting in a perplexity so deep yet so haunted by an intuitive sense of rightness, that we don't even respond. We sit in silence and listen to his strange, perplexing speech: so much for Jesus as the wise Rabbi, teacher of the Law. The presence of Mercy in this second week of Lent is starting to make its way into our souls, but has as yet brought only a haunted perplexity, has only unsettled and disturbed us, has not brought us to repentance.

### c. The Samaritan Woman by the Well

When we come to the Gospel for the third week in Lent we reach a very crucial encounter, the encounter in which our conversion happens. As the story of the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well from John 4, this Gospel bears, upon close examination, an exact topography of repentance under the influence of Divine mercy. Every detail of this story demands more reflection than even the sustained meditation I am able to give it here.

As the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well, we don't seek Jesus out as in the past two weeks; rather, Divine Mercy in Jesus comes around looking for us. Sitting down near our well, Jesus asks us for a cup of water. 'What!' we exclaim in shock, 'You a Jew, ask for a drink from a Samaritan woman?' There is some irony here, since what we are shocked at is not the mystery of divine mercy humbling itself in the Incarnation to minister to us with direct, historical immediacy. As yet we don't perceive this depth reality in Jesus. What we are shocked at is instead the anarchic behavior of a mere man assuming divine prerogative to ignore, violate, overturn the most fundamental prescriptions of religious law. In asking for a cup of water, Jesus is performing, to my eyes, a very subtle acted-parable. His need for water, calling to mind the "I thirst" from the Cross, is an obvious sign that God the Son has come us in the poverty, need, and weakness of our human condition. Not counting divinity a thing to be grasped at, he assumed the form of a slave. The fact, however, that he steps right through the barriers of religious, legal, and national identity, relating to us not through nationalistic zeal or legal purity, but directly and personally, asking to share our ritually unclean cup, signifies his divine authority as the one whose presence fulfills and transcends all that the nation Israel and its Law intended. Jesus's asking for a cup of water reveals the mystery of God as Mercy coming to relate to us not through legal commands or national zeal, but in direct, personal intimacy in the mystery of Incarnation.

Jesus would, I think, have been glad just to have had a drink and gone on his way, but by our silly quibbling ('What, you a Jew...?') he is forced now to take the encounter to a whole different level. He says, 'If only you knew what God gives, and who it is that is asking you for a drink, you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.' The tables are thus turned. Jesus as a Jewish man needs a cup of water from us. Jesus as Son of God, as Mercy incarnate, is the gift of God with an eternal flood of Mercy to slake the ravaging thirst of our existential wrath, our fundamental bitterness against ourselves, reality, and God.

Not surprisingly however, we don't pick up that the conversation has leapt to an entirely different level; we rather stupidly ask if Jesus has a bucket, indeed if he thinks he is greater than Jacob. Jesus responds only by elaborating his remarks: 'The water that I shall give will be a spring of water within him, welling up and bringing eternal life,' and so forth. There is more irony, humor, pathos here, two conversations passing like monologues in the night. It's an absurdist-type conversation of divine self-

revelation coupled with human blindness still trying desperately to remain in control of the conversation. For all that, the Samaritan woman ironically utters, as something of a taunt, the truth of Jesus as the new Jacob, the Israel, and her blatant, absurd ignorance does not stop her from realizing in some vague intuitive way that she wants what Jesus is offering : ‘Sir give me this water...’ she says. Using Jesus’ own language which she does not understand, she asks for she knows not what, and this is in truth the beginning of prayer: using language we do not understand to ask for something we do not recognize.

Repentance has not yet come, but dialogue with Divine Mercy, even if it be of the absurdist variety, has begun in earnest. The fact of Jesus’ human thirst has thus served as the occasion for a revelation of his divine mission to slake our thirst, our wrath, the bitter disease of our selfishness. This too is an allegory for prayer: meditation with the outward humanity of Jesus leads to an awareness, however ignorant, dull, and groping of Jesus’ divinity and the gift of mercy he has to give us, a flood of living water to cleanse and purify and birth us to new life. Repeatedly through our lives we are led in prayer into this kind of bizarre dialogue, this strange groping in the dark with we know not what, a darkness where language is unhinged and the windows of syntax are pulled out of their sills. In this manner Mercy enters into hitherto unbaptized regions of our soul.

The first thing that happens, however when we begin relating to Mercy is—you guessed it—self-conviction in our conscience. ‘Go and call your husband,’ says Jesus, a pointed request uncovering the sad story of five different marriages and an adulterous relationship, indicating in the literal sense a tremendous amount of shame and suffering in this woman’s life as well as a pathological degree of emotional, social, and moral instability. More powerfully for us, it is a symbol for our basic infidelity to God. The woman responds: ‘Sir, I can see that you are a prophet.’

What I find profound in this is that it’s only when this woman’s suffering and shame are uncovered that she perceives that Jesus is in some way specially related to God. In other words, only in contrite repentance does perception into the divinity of Jesus truly begin to open up. Only when we begin to know the depths of our sinfulness do we begin to draw on, in urgent need, the gift of mercy that is in Christ. Our relationship to God through Jesus is a marriage consecrated and solemnized always through the humbling pain of growing self-knowledge, absolution, and the joy of acceptance. Repentance is the substance of our marital union with God, and this is why, as the Ash Wednesday *Exhortation* says, we are in continual need to renew it.

The story of course goes on (this is a huge Sunday Gospel). Using an essentially Anglican ploy to protect herself from the gaze of Divine Mercy, the woman tries to sidetrack the conversation off from her personal history into liturgical theology. ‘Well,’ she says, ‘You Jews worship God in Jerusalem, but we worship God on this mountain...’ and so on. There is more talk about mountains and temples, a baffling passage about worshipping God in Spirit and Truth, and finally the Samaritan woman frankly admits: ‘I know that Messiah...is coming. When he comes he will make all things clear to us.’ In other words, ‘Sir, I don’t have any idea what you are talking about.’ Jesus’ reply, ‘I am he, I whom am speaking to you’ is a New Testament way of saying, ‘I am the Messiah, and it doesn’t get any better, any clearer than this.’ In the end we run to tell our neighbors about a man we think is the Messiah.

Thus in the third week of this year’s Lent, Mercy finally breaks down our selfish walls in an absurdist-type conversation. In almost complete ignorance, we ask for Mercy, and God thus gives Godself to us, making an impact on our soul that is first experienced in the form of painful contrition, which itself opens our eyes to the reality of Jesus and the possibility for reconciliation with ourselves, our history, our shame and suffering, and so with God. This is an enormous step to take, and its one we are asked to take again and again in the spiritual life.

#### d. The Man Born Blind and Lazarus

In the last two Gospels for this year’s Lent, the stories of the man born blind and of Lazarus, our Lenten passage through prayer, repentance, and divine mercy reaches a climactic peak that carries us over into the intensity of Palm Sunday and Holy Week. Both of these stories can obviously be read as metaphors for the healing, resurrecting power of divine mercy that through repentance and prayer restores

us to light and life from the blindness and death of our sins. They are acted-parables of divine mercy, prayer and repentance, every bit as intense and intricate as the story of the Samaritan woman by the well. The story of Lazarus in particular, with Jesus' penetrating conversations with Martha and his proclamation of himself as 'the Resurrection and the Life' is rife all the way through with allegorical meaning. Meditation on these stories would, I think, prove exceedingly fruitful.

What interests me most however and what is adequate to close this meditation is to note the connection between the restoration of sight to the blind man and the resurrection of Lazarus. Admittedly, this is very fanciful, but what I see in the placement of these two gospels in our lectionary is a manifestation of a strange, spiritual dynamic that dictates that to be restored to life we first must recognize the full extent of our illness, our inner deadliness, our spiritual *rigor-mortis*. We first must have our spiritual blindness healed by Mercy so that we can see just how dead we are. Mercy plays the role of the divine physician who heals us first by making us feel worse. As T. S. Eliot wrote in his poem, *East Coker*:

The wounded surgeon plies the steel  
That questions the distempered part;  
Beneath the bleeding hands we feel  
The sharp compassion of the healer's art.  
Resolving the enigma of the fever chart.

Our only health is the disease  
If we obey the dying nurse  
Whose constant care is not to please  
But to remind of our, and Adam's curse.  
And that, to be restored, our sickness  
must grow worse.<sup>4</sup>

As the man born blind in the fourth week of Lent, we are healed by Jesus. Our spiritual sight is restored by mercy and grace. Yet the chief upshot of this inner healing is not new and abundant life and freedom from sin, but the acute, penetrating perception of how deep sin has sunk its roots in us, how spiritually dead we are. To the degree that we are healed of the blindness of pride and religious vanity, we will smell, as it were, the stench of our soul rotting in the tomb of sin. Like Peter, we say, still not understanding what Jesus is about, 'Lord leave me, sinner that I am. I've been dead now for so long that there will be a stench if you roll back the stone from my grave.' Strangely, our Lenten journey through prayer and repentance under the tutelage of divine Mercy is ordered to bring us exactly to this point, to the acute and direct perception that we are, like Lazarus in week five, spiritually dead. Divine Mercy converts us in week three, restores our sight in week four, so that in week five we can see that we are dead. To quote again a passage from Julian's *Revelations*:

Our Lord of His mercy shows us our sin and our weakness by the sweet gracious light of Himself, for our sin is so vile and so horrible that He of His courtesy will not show it to us except by the light of His grace and mercy...It truly behooves us to see that by ourselves we are just nothing but sin and wretchedness. And thus by the sight of the less which our Lord shows us, the more which we do not see is diminished, for He of His courtesy adjusts the sight to us (for it is so vile and so horrible that we would not endure to see it as it is). And by this humble knowledge thus, through contrition and grace, we shall be broken away from all things that are not our Lord, and then shall our blessed Savior perfectly heal us and one us to Himself.<sup>5</sup>

Who can talk about how this happens in the human heart? It does happen though, and if we are faithful to our Anglican Lent we will be taken on this journey through death to new life over and over. Again and

again we will approach Jesus as the Devil in our infantile desire to subordinate Jesus to our need for security and power. We will talk with him coolly as Nicodemus, looking for special knowledge. Like the Samaritan woman by the well, we are eventually converted by him, though we have no idea of what we are being converted into. Finally, Jesus by miraculous grace restores our spiritual sight so that we can see that we are dead. Thus, come Holy Week, especially Holy Saturday, all we can do is wait still and silent in the grave for some gift of light, life, love to come to us from outside ourselves, from God as truly Other, breaking newly, unexpectedly, gloriously into our life... or should I say, our death?

Closing Prayer: George Herbert's 'The Call'

Come my Way, my Truth, my Life:  
Such a Way, as gives us breath:  
Such a Truth, as ends all strife:  
And such a Life as killeth death.

Come my Light, my Feast, my Strength:  
Such a Light, as shows a feast:  
Such a Feast, as mends in length:  
Such a Strength as makes his guest.

Come, my Joy, my Love, my Heart:  
Such a Joy as none can move:  
Such a Love, as none can part:  
Such a Heart, as joys in love.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *The Holy Scriptures I* from Herbert, George. *George Herbert: the Country Parson, the Temple*. John N. Wall, ed. [New York: Paulist, 1981.] p.173.

<sup>2</sup> As the retreat was given in Year A, the five Gospels are: Matt. 4:1-11; John 3:1-17; John 4:5-26(27-38)39-42; John 9:1-13(14-27)28-38; John 11:(1-17)18-44. [BCP. pp. 891-892.]

<sup>3</sup> Mark 8:33

<sup>4</sup> *Four Quartets*. East Coker §IV from: Eliot, T.S. *The Complete Poems and Plays*. [New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1971] p. 127.

<sup>5</sup> *Lesson*. 78.199-200

<sup>6</sup> *The Call* from: Herbert, George. *George Herbert: the Country Parson, the Temple*. John N. Wall, ed. [New York: Paulist, 1981.] p. 281. See also *Hymnal 1982*, #487.

Meditation Five:  
Fasting, Self Denial, and Recollected Joy

*Support us, O Lord, with your gracious favor through the fast we have begun; that as we observe it by bodily self-denial, so we may fulfill it with sincerity of heart; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, for ever and ever. Amen*

Introduction

One Lenten discipline which the Ash Wednesday *Exhortation* invites us to practice, but which has not yet been reflected on is the discipline of fasting and self-denial. As the theme of a final retreat meditation, this does not bode well. Over the past two thousand years, Christian exhortations to fasting and self-denial have stomped in muddy boots over the same old ground of disordered human desire and its correction, making this theme a wasted no-man's land of scraggly rhetoric and withered philosophy that no-one wants to re-visit. Lancelot Andrewes himself, 350 years ago, complained about the difficulty of encouraging fasting. He said:

'We are so evil able to [fast, that]... we are scarce able to hear of it. Our Saviour when He speaks of fasting points at this. Having been so long at our 'old wine,' we cannot away nor relish the 'new.' We see the experience of this in our preaching it. Our bottles are so used to the old that they leak with the new, as fast as we pour it in it runs out again. We must provide us new vessels; else all we speak of this theme will be spoken into the air.'<sup>1</sup>

How does one approach this topic with living thought again, not tired cliché, with sanity, insight, and the full depths of one's humanity, that is, with new vessels able to hold the new wine? It does not seem adequate to me merely to find new things in our culture to fast from: TV, the Internet, idle conversation (though abstaining from all these would I think prove extremely helpful to many people.) Can the Anglican tradition help us to rediscover something truly human,—including mind, heart, and body— in this invitation to fasting and self-denial? I'd wager that it can, and I'd like to start in a strange place: the second Eucharistic preface for Lent in our *Book of Common Prayer*.

The Preface: Preparing with Joy

This Preface reads: "You bid your faithful people cleanse their hearts, and prepare with joy for the Paschal feast; that, fervent in prayer and in works of mercy, and renewed by your Word and Sacraments, they may come to the fullness of grace which you have prepared for those who love you." The phrase which always sings in my mind when this preface is read, and which is relevant here, is: 'prepare with joy for the Paschal Feast.' 'Prepare with joy.'

The main reason why this leaps out at me is that six or seven years ago one of the priests in the Order was grumbling about this particular affirmation of joy in Lent: 'Joy, joy, joy! All the Church ever talks about today is joy, happiness and balloons, never contrition or repentance, not even in Lent!' Now nearly everyone is aware that Anglo-Catholic High Churchmen have a little quirk. The Church they exalt and vow obedience to often becomes the Church not as she really is, but as they think she ought to be, the Church as she is in their own private theology. Thus obedience to Mother Church quickly becomes obedience to their own ideas. (Please know that I level this criticism at myself as well, since I consider myself a restrained and liberal sort of Anglo-Catholic.) It was under the influence of this little quirk however that the disgruntled priest told me that he planned to change the preface at Mass that day, leaving out the words, 'with joy.' Now I was a plucky junior monk, and after taking a moment to think, I responded by saying something like, 'Well, I would rather be a part of the Church in her common liturgy.' The result? We used the first preface for most of Lent that year!

My brother priest did of course have a point. It does seem at times as if the Church is becoming entirely absorbed with the maintenance of superficial happiness, unable to plumb prophetically or contemplatively the depths of human suffering to integrate this darkness and pain into the full proclamation of her Gospel. All too quickly the Church becomes a rather sorry self-help group that lacks even the basic honesty, order, and personal respect of a 12-step meeting. Gary Trudeau, the wit behind the 'Doonesbury' cartoon, lampooned the Church in this a few years ago when he had the pastor of 'Walden Church' in his Sunday strip announce that the usual church services would be canceled for the next month due to a conflict with the self-esteem workshop! Sometimes we want to feel good so bad that we forget who we are. Even if we focus theologically on Incarnation or Resurrection, Crucifixion remains an essential moment in our Christian and Anglican identity.

Still, the more I thought about it, the more I began to think that the phrase, "prepare with joy," if taken seriously, does not so much mitigate the penitential and ascetical dimensions of Lent as demand them and intensify them to their highest possible extreme, and it does so, I believe, in an eminently Anglican way exemplified in Blessed Mother Julian.

### Joy in Julian and John Donne

Mother Julian is well-known for her gentle optimism. There was a time when I felt that if I saw one more card or heard of one more person quoting 'All shall be well,' I was going to scream. There is however a basic health, joy, and hopefulness, an affirming outlook that permeates her work. Throughout the *Revelations* Julian is continuously reminding us of the joy which the whole Trinity has in our salvation, indeed, the joy which Jesus has in his suffering for us, and she is ever telling us that our salvation lies chiefly in being satisfied with God and his works, allowing ourselves (in spite of ourselves!) to share in the joy which God has in our salvation. To sample three of many passages along these lines, Julian says that

...of everything that is proper to us, it is most delight to our Lord that we rejoice in this joy which is in the blessed Trinity because of our salvation.<sup>2</sup>

And what can make us rejoice in God, more than to see in Him that He rejoices in us, the highest of all His works...because He made man's soul as fair, as good, as precious a creature as He could make it, therefore the Blessed Trinity is wholly pleased without end in the creation of man's soul, and He wills that our hearts be powerfully raised above the depths of the earth and all vain sorrows, and rejoice in Him.<sup>3</sup>

... because of my love, [God says to Julian] do rejoice in me, for of all things, with that thou canst most please me.<sup>4</sup>

Thus for Julian, it is not when we accomplish heroic deeds of sanctity or grovel in fearful shame that we most please God, but when we allow ourselves to share in the joy which God has in our creation and redemption, God's joy in our making and again-making, as she would say. In advocating this interior recollection in divine joy, Julian touches on a very deep vein in Anglican spirituality. To paraphrase C.J. Stranks' comment on that ebullient and innocent 17th century mystic, Thomas Traherne: our eyes as Anglicans are fixed not so much on the damnation from which the Passion of Christ saves us, but on the felicity to which it admits us.<sup>5</sup> Witness too even John Donne, who has been called the 'sick soul' of the Anglican Divines with his self-lacerating, morbid focus on sin and death, rise to an Anglican evocation of joy as spiritual duty in his sermon, "In the Shadow of Thy Wings." Allow me to read a longish quote from this sermon for the sheer felicity of Donne's language as well as the topic itself. He writes:

I would always raise your hearts and dilate your hearts to a holy joy, to a joy in the Holy Ghost. There may be a just fear that men do not grieve enough for their sins. But there may

be a just suspicion, too, that they fall into inordinate griefs and diffidence of God's mercy...God hath accompanied and complicated almost all our bodily diseases of these times, with an extraordinary sadness, a predominant melancholy, a faintness of heart, a cheerlessness, a joylessness of spirit. And therefore I return often to this endeavor of raising your hearts, dilating your hearts with a holy joy, joy in the Holy Ghost, for 'under the shadow of his wings' you may, you should, rejoice...

For that which Christ shall say to your soul at the last judgment, "Enter into my Master's joy," he says to your conscience now, "Enter into my Master's joy." The everlastingness of the joy is the blessedness of the next life, but the entertainment, the incoation is afforded here...

That soul, that is dissected and anatomized to God, in a sincere confession, washed in the tears of true contrition, embalmed in the blood of reconciliation...can give no just answer to that interrogatory, 'Why art thou cast down O my soul? why art thou disquieted within me?'...if God afford thee the shadow of his wings...not to thank God is murmuring, and not to rejoice in God's ways is an unthankfulness...

Howling is the noise of hell, singing the voice of heaven; sadness the damp of hell, rejoicing the serenity of heaven. And he that has not this joy here lacks one of the best pieces of evidence for the joys of heaven and has neglected or refused that earnest by which God uses to bind his bargain, that true joy in this world shall flow into the joy of heaven, as a river flows into the sea.<sup>6</sup>

## Joy and Self-Denial

'He that has not this joy here... has neglected or refused that earnest by which God uses to bind his bargain, that true joy in this world shall flow into the joy of heaven, as a river flows into the sea.' Donne, Julian, Traherne, and countless others in our Anglican tradition, thus understand joy as a participation in God's inner life, a foretaste of heavenly reality, our recollection in which is something of a duty whose absence is a sign of spiritual self-neglect. Such 'holy joy,' to use Donne's expression, is not however a facile happiness through the sustained repression of all the nasty bits of life, nor a narcotic pleasure in a sweet and peaceful existence. We must remember that Donne lived a short, painful life crossed with poverty, sickness, an ill conscience, and the death of his beloved wife. Thomas Traherne, the Anglican apostle of joy, came of age during the blood bath of the English civil war and lived through the dreary years of the Puritan Commonwealth. Julian, for her sake, lived in an age filled with unrest and suffering: the Black Plague killing off a third of Norwich, Lollards being burned at the stake just down the street from Julian's cell, Bishops riding off to war in armor, wielding metal-spiked battle maces because it was against canon law for clerics to use swords! Holy joy, in the context of these saints' lives, was thus not facile, nor cheap, nor dependent on outward circumstance; it is rather the resolute, habitual practice of interior recollection in the basic mysteries of our Christian faith in spite of what is going on in one's external self and external life. Not a transient emotion, it is rather a distinctly contemplative virtue, a rigorous contemplative power by which one remains recollected throughout the day in the eschatological truth of our final redemption in Christ. If Julian urges us to rejoice with the Trinity in our salvation, in 'All shall be well,' it is not because she had a wistful piety that doted on a saccharine deity, but because she had been so stripped of her egoistic self that she was able to see through the horror of the historical moment into the ground of redemptive love that enfolds and eventually transforms everything to glory, to praise, to bliss. Stripped, denied her egoistic self, Julian was able to move into a place of rejoicing even amid horror, pain, anxiety.

Thus the insistence in the second Lenten preface that we ‘prepare with joy for the paschal feast’ is not at all at cross-purposes with the Ash Wednesday’s *Exhortation’s* call to penance, self-denial and fasting. Instead, these two aspects of our Lenten worship —recollection in joy and ascetical self-denial— express one common intent: the loosening of the selfish, infantile ego’s hold on our consciousness. Just as, in a preceding meditation, I suggested that the gracious acceptance of the daily ‘slings and arrows of outrageous fortune’ is an ideal Anglican form of penance based not on heroic deeds but on a hidden, domestic, consistent surrendering of self to God, so here I suggest with Julian that the practice of calling ourselves back to interior recollection in God’s joy in our redemption is an eminently Anglican, rigorous form of self-denial which we are invited to practice with special intensity and special intentionality, in Lent. If there ever was anything that involved true denial of self —death to self, forgetfulness of self— interior recollection in God’s joy is it.

Imagine, for a moment, that you have ripped a toenail off your left foot and so stained your favorite pair of argyle socks with blood. You are trying to get a sermon composed but the hard drive keeps crashing with that delightful message: “The application has unexpectedly quit due to an unknown error of Type One.” Phone calls interrupt your attempt to get your computer fixed and your lunch burns in the oven. In such a situation, it is going to take a serious pole-vault of divine grace and utter self-denial to get you out of, beyond, over your selfish wrath to a place where you can abide seriously in God’s joy in you. Anglican self-denial begins with the effort to look beyond the thousand little deaths we suffer every day to the eternal reality of God’s kingdom which is our true and only home. To my mind, practicing habitual recollection in God’s joy in our salvation is perhaps the most strenuous form of self-denial that can be asked of us —and it is essentially, thoroughly, one hundred percent Anglican. It is, at any rate, my suggestion for a new bottle to hold the new wine of self-denial and fasting without thereby rupturing.

### Fasting and Mortification

Where, it may be asked, does actual fasting, be it from chocolate or the Internet or small-talk, fit in with this? To answer this very simply: if your basic consciousness, your day-to-day self, remains in infantile egocentricity, and thus is a riot of emotions, needs, anxieties, fears, sensations, distractions, it will be impossible for you to step beyond yourself to rejoice in God. Before you can think about letting go of the egoistic self, surrendering yourself to God, denying yourself, you must have a firm grip on your self. You can’t deny what you don’t have, you can’t let go of what you are not first holding firmly in your hands, you can’t forget yourself if you are immersed over your head in a riot of disorientating distractions, cravings, and howling neediness. Fasting is a way of getting a grip on ourselves, otherwise lost in distraction and desire, so that we can hand ourselves over to God. The age-old exhortations to fasting and asceticism, need not be heard as kill-joy invitations to hate our bodies and punish ourselves, but as realistic tools to help us get a handle on ourselves so that it will become possible for us to recollect our consciousness in God’s joy in us. In our intensely sensual, materialistic age when we are bombarded with manipulative advertising and useless sensationalism, our consciousness can so easily get hooked, lost, destroyed in a cycle of anxious need, desperate craving, and feverish consumption. Fasting, whether it be culinary, informational, conversational (I will insert my personal opinion that informational fasting is perhaps the most pressing need of our day!) becomes a tool we use to remove ourselves from the whirl of infantile desires and anxieties and to center ourselves more firmly in the truth of our existence before God. Perhaps with this in mind we can hear with new ears the advice from, for example, George Herbert’s *The Country Parson*, not as the whining of a dead tradition but as something which speaks with new urgency about the need for a fundamental custody of the self in our Christian lives. Herbert wrote,

The two highest points wherein a Christian is most seen, are Patience, and Mortification; patience in regard of afflictions, Mortification in regard of lusts and affections, and the stupefying and deading of all these clamorous powers of the soul, therefore he hath

thoroughly studied these, that he may be an absolute Master and commander of himself, for all the purposes which God hath ordained him.<sup>7</sup>

## Conclusion

We are strange creatures. Our destiny is bliss in God through resurrection of the body, but we need to take up basic practices of fasting and bodily self-denial precisely so that we can remain in touch with something beyond the chaos of our own distracted and beleaguered consciousness—in touch, that is, with God's joy in us. Allow me to close this meditation, indeed all the meditations, with two final quotes from Julian which define much of our Lenten journey. In a wonderful convergence of an affirmation of creation in divine love, of human yearning for God and the need for fasting and self-denial, Julian wrote:

...in this revelation [God] showed a little thing, the size of an hazel nut in the palm of my hand, and it was as round as a ball. I looked at it with the eye of my understanding and thought: "What can this be?" And it was generally answered thus: "It is all that is made." I marveled how it could continue, because it seemed to me it could suddenly have sunk into nothingness because of its littleness. And I was answered in my understanding: "It continueth and always shall, because God loveth it; and in this way *everything* hath its being by the love of God."...It is necessary for us to have awareness of the littleness of created things and to set at naught everything that is created, in order to love and have God who is uncreated. For this is the reason why we are not fully at ease in heart and soul: because here we seek rest in these things that are so little, in which there is no rest, and we recognize not our God who is all powerful, all wise, all good, for He is the true rest. God wishes to be known, and He delights that we remain in Him, because all that is less than He is not enough for us. And this is the reason why no soul is at rest until it is emptied of everything that is created.<sup>8</sup>

God rejoices that He is our Father, God rejoices that He is our Mother, and God rejoices that He is our true Spouse and that our soul is His beloved wife. And Christ rejoices that He is our Brother and Jesus rejoices that He is our Savior. These are five high joys, as I understand, in which He wishes that we rejoice: praising Him, thanking Him, loving Him, endlessly blessing Him.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Andrewes, Lancelot. *The Works of Lancelot Andrewes*. Volume I. [New York: AMS Press, 1967.] p. 382

<sup>2</sup> *Lesson*. 55.141

<sup>3</sup> *Lesson*. 67.177-178

<sup>4</sup> *Lesson*. 36.80

<sup>5</sup> Stranks on Traherne quoted in: Thornton, Martin. *English Spirituality. An Outline of Asetical Theology according to the English Pastoral Tradition*. [London: SPCK, 1963.] p. 235.

<sup>6</sup> *John Donne*. pp.183-186.

<sup>7</sup> The Country Parson III from *George Herbert: the Country Parson, the Temple*. John N. Wall, ed. [New York: Paulist, 1981.] p. 56.

<sup>8</sup> *Lesson*. 5. 11-13

<sup>9</sup> *Lesson*. 52.130-131