

Introduction

Julian of Norwich seems an improbable guide in the twenty-first century. We orbit the earth. She spent her life in one small room. But she knew the message God gave her was not meant only for her. 'I would to God it were known, and my fellow Christians helped on to loathing of sin and loving of God,' she wrote. 'This sight was shown for all the world.'

Julian was given that sight because she prayed. Most of us pray for good health. Julian prayed for an illness in which she and everyone else would think she was dying. She prayed to be present at the crucifixion, another unusual request. And above all she prayed for compassion, repentance and longing for God. She made the first two requests 'if it is your will', but she prayed for the last without any conditions.

And in May 1373, when she was thirty and a half years old, all her prayers were granted. She became so ill that her priest was sent for to give her the last rites. As he held the crucifix before her eyes it seemed to her that the cross began to bleed.

In that near-death experience she was given a series of 'showings', during which our Lord appeared to her and spoke with her. They lasted from four in the morning until past 'none', which could mean midday or 3 p.m., the time the office of the ninth hour is said. 'These were given in three ways – by inward sight, by outward sight and by words formed in her mind. Each overlapped and complemented the other.'

Julian got better and went to live in a little room beside St Julian's Church in Norwich, where she spent the rest of her life meditating on what she had been shown, and writing it down – giving us her book, *A Revelation of Divine Love*. At the time, there seemed little chance of our getting to read it, six centuries later. There was



This fifteenth-century roof boss in Norwich Cathedral shows a woman holding open the door to a small room, as if Julian is inviting us into her cell to share God's message with us

just her own handwritten copy and, if she asked a scribe to make another, there was a chance it might come to the official notice of the Church. And if that happened, there was a risk that both she and her book would be burnt.

Because many of the things she was shown did not appear to be the same as the teaching of the Church in her day. Julian was troubled by this.

Now during all this time, from beginning to end, I had two different kinds of understanding. One was the endless, continuing love, with its assurance of safekeeping and salvation – for this was the message of all the Showings. The other was the day-to-day teaching of holy church, in which I had been taught and grounded beforehand, and which I understood and practised with all my heart. (Chapter 46)¹

God himself showed me the higher judgement at that time – and therefore I must needs accept it. And the lower judgement was taught me by holy church – and therefore there was no way in which I could forsake the lower judgement . . . And I still stand in longing, and shall until I die, to understand – by grace – these two judgements as I ought to. (Chapter 45)

We are able to engage in these contradictions today because, by the grace of God, we are now less likely to react by retreating into our prepared positions and lobbing missiles at each other. Like the soldiers in the First World War who climbed out of their trenches and played football together on Christmas Day, we have to be prepared to venture into the no man's land our sectarian squabbles have laid waste; for it is only there we can recognize that there are no enemies, but only people like us. Today, after centuries of being handed round in secret (See YouTube, 'Julian Scribes'), Julian's book has emerged as one of the great guides to faith in the twenty-first century.

Julian invites us into her cell to join her in her search for understanding. This will not be easy, because once she went into her cell the entrance was sealed. But a solid barrier need be no obstacle to the world that lies beyond it, as Alice found when she stepped through the looking glass, and Harry Potter when he pushed his trolley through the wall that concealed Platform 9¾ at King's Cross. There is a sure way to dissolve the wall that bars the entrance to Julian's cell. It is prayer. And that is how we shall have to begin.

1

Our prayer makes God glad and happy

Prayer will let us join Julian in her cell. But where to begin? On Ash Wednesday we are given instructions: 'Go to your private room and, when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in that secret place, and your Father who sees all that is done in secret will reward you' (Matt. 6.6)

But not many of us have a private room, and open plan means we increasingly share our space with other people. Sometimes the only room with a door is the bathroom. Julian most likely never had a bath in her life, but she knew about bodily functions. And one of the most unexpected things she says is something you would never think to find in a holy book.

A man walks upright, and the food in his body is sealed as in a well-made purse. When the time of his necessity comes, it is opened and sealed again most properly. And that it is God who does this is shown where he says that he comes down to the lowest part of our need. For he does not despise what he has made, nor does he disdain to serve our humblest earthly needs. For he loves the soul he has made in his likeness.
(Chapter 6)

So take heart. You can pray to God in the bathroom. You don't have to wait for a special time and place. God is with us all the time, wherever we are. We just have to recognize it.

I grew up in an age when many people only had a weekly bath (and sometimes had to take turns in the bathwater) but now some

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people shower two or three times a day, so there are plenty of opportunities. Each time, you can remember your baptism. You can thank God for the gift of clean, pure water – not something to be taken for granted. You can stand naked before God – as naked as Christ at his crucifixion. And as you dress, you can remember God showed Julian:

At this time our Lord showed me an inward sight of his homely loving. I saw that he is everything that is good and comforting to us. He is our clothing. In his love he wraps and holds us. He enfolds us in love and will never let us go.
(Chapter 5)

But prayer begins when you first wake to a new day. One Lent I decided to give up 15 minutes in a warm bed each morning. I am a reluctant riser, but I dragged myself out of bed and prayed. It was the best thing I ever did.

Julian tells us that prayer is not one-sided. God is longing to hear from us.

Our prayer makes God glad and happy. He wants it and waits for it so that, by his grace, he can make us as like him in condition as we are by creation. This is his blessed will . . . He is avid for our prayers continually.
(Chapter 41)

All of us have known times when we have waited anxiously for a letter, or these days an email, to drop into the mail box. The thought that God feels the same is a revelation, and so is the assurance that we often find praying hard work. Julian writes:

So he says this: 'Pray inwardly, even though you find no joy in it. For it does good, even though you feel nothing, see nothing – yes, even though you think you cannot pray. When you are dry and empty, sick and weak, your prayers please me – though there be little enough to please you. All believing

Our prayer makes God glad and happy

prayer is precious to me.' Because of the reward and endless thanks he longs to give us in return, he is avid for our prayers continually. God accepts the goodwill and work of his servants, no matter how we feel.
(Chapter 41)

Praying can be hard work, and it also needs time. And finding time seems to get harder and harder in our busy world. One way is multitasking.

Brother Lawrence, in *The Practice of the Presence of God*, wrote

We can do little things for God; I turn the cake that is frying on the pan for love of him . . . In the noise and clatter of my kitchen, while several persons are at the same time calling for different things, I possess God in as great tranquillity as if I were upon my knees before the Blessed Sacrament.

It would be hard to find tranquillity in the frenzied kitchens today's competitive television cooking shows, and our life seems designed more and more to blot out the awareness of God. I feel our growing concern with physical fitness is a great opportunity to multi-task. Even though I no longer have a dog, years of dog ownership have made me a daily walker, and the rhythm of walking makes it a wonderful way to pray. In the long run it is even more important than making time to go to the gym. After all, your body has got a die-by date, no matter how rigorously you exercise, whereas your soul is destined to live for ever. (You may well be able to multi-task and pray when on a treadmill or lifting weights, but just that I have never tried it.)

There are a lot of prayers you can say while walking, and one that goes well with walking is the rosary. But just to mention the word can cause hostilities to break out once more. Thankfully the rosary is not as extreme as it was in a Devon village in 1549 when the local squire, Walter Raleigh (whose son was to become a superior of the Elizabethan age), overtook an old woman saying the rosary as they were both on their way to church, and told her she would

punished and the village burnt down if she continued to use it. Her fellow churchgoers were so angry when they heard this that they set about him. The scuffle turned into a riot, and the riot became a rebellion. Troops were sent in. A thousand local men were killed at the battle of Clyst St Mary. Next day the nine hundred men taken prisoner were slaughtered, and the village was burnt to the ground.

The rosary can still draw a line between Catholics and Protestants. But the line is getting blurred. Christians of all denominations who practise meditation and contemplative prayer have come to recognize the virtue of a repeated word or phrase. The rosary, once despised as 'vain repetition' by many Protestants, and even by some Catholics, is coming to be seen in its true light.

Robert Llewelyn, the much-loved chaplain at the Julian shrine, first discovered its riches at the age of 67, shortly before he came to Norwich to be a praying presence in Julian's cell. In *A Doorway to Silence* he writes:

The rosary is, in fact, a little Office. It has the great advantage of simplicity. No books, no distractions in searching for hymns, antiphons, psalms and lessons, and the rosary itself can be easily carried wherever we go. The rosary has been, for many, a way into silent prayer.²

I discovered this one day in an airport. My flight was delayed for an hour, so I had another coffee, bought a newspaper and did the crossword. Then it was delayed for another hour. People were angry and upset. Then I noticed a nun sitting a few rows away. She was calm and tranquil. I was on my way to give a talk on prayer, so I thought, 'You had better try to practise what you preach.' An airport is not an encouraging place to pray, but I had a rosary in my pocket which was given to me when I moved to Australia. It is olive wood from Bethlehem, knotted on cord, and slipping the beads through the fingers is an invitation to prayer. I still was not very practised at remembering the different Mysteries, so I took Robert Llewelyn's advice to sometimes choose another prayer instead. Starting with the cross I said the Creed, then the Gloria and Our

Father on the single bead, and then, on the first three small beads and all the groups of ten, said the Jesus Prayer, 'Lord Jesus Christ, son of the living God, have mercy on me a sinner', instead of the Hail Mary. It seemed no time before my flight was called.

All prayer has a result, whether or not we recognize it at the time, but such repeated prayer often has dramatic and unexpected consequences, as Julian found. We can be sure that St Paul was praying repeatedly – and praying for the wrong thing – when he stormed down to Damascus to seek and destroy the blasphemous heretics whom he believed were profaning his God's name. The result overturned not just his mistaken expectations but his whole life.

I have only once prayed in such a way, and it is worth recording here. Back in the 1980s a woman academic visited Norwich to make a series of videos about Julian. I made myself useful and got to know her. She was in her thirties and full of life, and so, one Sunday not long afterwards, I was surprised to hear her name in the prayers for the sick in Norwich Cathedral. I asked my priest friend Michael what was wrong with her. 'It's cancer,' he said. 'The specialist says she's got weeks, not months.'

Now Julian writes:

A man has to stretch out his patience over the length of his days, since he does not know when he will die. This is great profit to him. For if a man knew when he was going to die, his patience would not last beyond then.
(Chapter 64)

So I wondered whether she was waiting patiently, and asked: 'How's she taking it?'

'That's just the point,' he replied. 'She's finished her Julian book, but not the critical notes, without which it can't be published. She's got lectures lined up in Oxford and in Canada. She's bitter, she's angry, she's resentful.' And I thought, 'I can't let her die like that.' There was only one thing to do, and that was to pray at St Julian's. But on Mondays the Eucharist, I discovered, was not in the cell

but in the chapel of the convent next door. There are few places more intimidating to venture into than an unknown church, but a convent chapel is one of them. In my anxiety I turned up far too early, but a sister tranquilly let me in, and I began to pray. From then on I was at St Julian's every morning, lifting her up to be reconciled to God.

It must have been six or seven weeks later before I met Michael in the cathedral again and, thinking that her end must be near, asked how she was getting on. 'It's extraordinary,' he said. 'There seems to have been a miracle. She's getting better.' I stamped my foot and said, 'She can't do that! I've been praying for a good death!' And we flung our arms round each other and fell about laughing. It was nearly twenty years before cancer sent her on her way.

There is no knowing what effect my prayer may have had on the cancer, but the effect on me was inescapable. I had to go back to say thank you, and so from then on I was at the daily Eucharist in Julian's cell until I moved from Norwich years later.

We all pray in different ways. There is no one-size-fits-all. But pray we must if we are to come to know God. And we can begin no matter what state we are in. Julian writes:

So he says this: 'Pray inwardly, even though you find no joy in it. For it does good, even though you feel nothing, see nothing – yes, even though you think you cannot pray. When you are dry and empty, sick and weak, your prayers please me – though there be little enough to please you. All believing prayer is precious to me.'
(Chapter 41)

When the soul is tempest-tossed, troubled and cut off by worries, then is the time to pray – so as to make the soul more responsive to God. But there is no kind of prayer that can make God more responsive to the soul, for God is always constant in love.
(Chapter 43)

Julian prayed unconditionally for compassion, repentance and longing for God. She prayed for the illness, and to be present at the crucifixion, with the condition, 'if it is your will'. And in May 1373 all her prayers were answered. She became so ill the priest was called to give her the last rites, and the cross he held before her was transfigured.

At this, suddenly I saw the red blood trickle down from under the crown of thorns – hot and fresh and flooding out, as it did at the time of his Passion when the crown of thorns was pressed into his blessed head – he who was both God and man and who suffered for me. And I knew in my heart that he showed me this without any go-between. And in this same Showing, suddenly the Trinity filled my heart full of joy. And I was astounded at the wonder of it, that he, who is so high and holy, will be so homely with a sinful soul living in frail flesh.
(Chapter 4)

Joy at the crucifixion is the last thing most of us would expect to feel. But then, in this many-layered vision, Julian is shown something else which is completely unexpected:

In this, he brought our blessed Lady to my mind's eye. I saw her as if she breathed – a simple, humble girl, not much more than a child – the age she was when she conceived. God showed me, too, in part, the wisdom and truth of her soul, so that I understood the reverence she felt before God her Maker, and how she marvelled that he would be born of her – a simple soul; that he Himself had made. It was this wisdom and truth in her that showed her the greatness of her Maker, and the smallness of herself whom he had made. And it was this that made her say so humbly to Gabriel: 'Behold God's handmaid.' By this I know surely that she is higher in worth and grace than anyone that God has made. For, as I see it, no one is above her, except the blessed manhood of Christ.
(Chapter 4)

With the appearance of Mary, there is once more a danger that the truce in no man's land will be suspended. How did it come to this? Fearing that honouring Mary was idolatry, and an attempt to elevate her into a fourth person of the Trinity, sixteenth-century zealots set out to obliterate her image. The once-glorious Lady Chapel at Ely, with its beheaded statues and the soaring windows that were once rich with stained glass, is just one of the many places that bear the marks of their anger, hatred and violence. They did their work more thoroughly in Norwich. When we lived in the Cathedral Close, the children used to play on a stretch of ruined wall they called 'the crocodile'. It is all that remains of the demolished Lady Chapel.

But after this glimpse of the smallness of Mary, Julian is given another insight – and again it is of the smallness of things.

And then he showed me a little thing, the size of a hazelnut, in the palm of my hand – and it was as round as a ball. I looked at it with my mind's eye and I thought: 'What can this be?' And answer came: 'It is all that is made.' I marvelled that it could last, for I thought it might suddenly have crumbled to nothing, it was so small. And the answer came into my mind: 'It lasts, and ever shall, because God loves it.' And so all things have being through the love of God. In this little thing I saw three truths. The first is that God made it. The second is that God loves it. And the third is that God looks after it. We need to know how small creation is, and to count all that is made as nothing, if we are to love and have God who is not created. For this is the reason we are not at rest in heart and soul – that here we seek rest in things that are so little there is no rest in them – and we do not know our God who is all-mighty, all-wise and all-good. For he is true rest.*
(Chapter 5)

With the hazelnut, another image comes to mind, words written by the astronaut Russell Schweickart, in which a modern man who

orbited the earth, and a medieval woman who never left her cell, use practically the same words:

And a little later on, your friend . . . goes out to the moon. And now he looks back and sees the Earth not as something big, where he can see the beautiful details, but now he sees the Earth as a small thing out there. And the contrast between that bright blue-and-white Christmas tree ornament and the black sky, that infinite universe, really comes through, and the size of it, the significance of it. It is so small and so fragile and such a precious little spot in the universe that you can block it out with your thumb, and you realise that on that small spot, that little blue-and-white thing, is everything that means anything to you – all of history and music and poetry and art and death and birth and love, tears, joy, games, all of it on that little spot out there that you can cover with your thumb. And you realize from that perspective that you've changed, and there is something new there, that the relationship is no longer what it was.³

Once we go through the door of Julian's cell, we must be prepared to open our eyes and to become focused to a different vision. For a different vision is just what Julian gives us. It is a multicoloured stereoscopic vision, unlike the two-dimensional black and white picture we have come to think is real. Accepting this was hard for Julian, too. She was unswervingly loyal to the Church's teaching and had to understand that it was being extended, not abolished. She is not a rebel, she is a mystic.

We routinely call Julian 'a mystic' without stopping to think what that means. The best definition I have found is by G. K. Chesterton in his book *Orthodoxy*, where he writes:

'The ordinary man has always been sane because the ordinary man has always been a mystic. He has permitted the twilight . . . He has always cared more for truth than for consistency. If he saw two truths that seemed to contradict each

other, he would take the two truths and the contradiction along with them. His spiritual sight is stereoscopic, like his physical sight; he sees two different pictures at once and yet sees all the better for that . . . The whole secret of mysticism is this: that man can understand everything by the help of what he does not understand.⁴

It is Julian's refusal to jettison what she can't fit into a neat picture that is one of the many things that commend her to us today. Her view is not either/or, but both/and. But we have to leave the shelter of our trenches and venture into no man's land if we are to understand it. And there we discover it contains a minefield we have to negotiate. Julian talks about whether or not we should pray to the saints:

Then the way we often pray came into my mind and how, through lack of knowing and understanding of the ways of love, we make use of intercessors. Then I saw truly that it gives more praise to God, and more delight, if we pray directly to him in his goodness and cling to it by his grace (with true understanding and true belief) than if we made use of all the intercessors that heart can think of. For if we create all these go-betweens it is too little and not full worship to God, for his goodness is whole and entire, and it lacks nothing. (Chapter 6)

But then she continues:

And this came into my mind, at the same time. We pray to God asking him to hear us for the sake of his holy Passion, and his precious death and wounds. But the all endless life we have from these comes from his goodness. And we pray to him to hear us for the sake of the love of his dear mother who bore him. But all the help we get from her, it comes from his goodness. And in the same way, all the help we get from special saints and all the company of heaven – the wonderful

love and endless friendship we have with them – all this comes from his goodness. God in his goodness has ordained many blessed ways and means to help us. And so it pleases him that we seek him and worship him through intercessors – and also that we should understand that he himself is the goodness that is in them all.

(Chapter 6)

When we begin to talk about praying to the saints, we once more hear the rumble of the guns. But Julian's answer is always both/and. 'If we create all these go-betweens it is too little and not full worship to God,' and, 'It pleases him that we seek him and worship him through intercessors – and also that we should understand that he himself is the goodness that is in them all.' And later in her book she writes:

He looks on us with love and wants to make us his partner in good deeds. And so he leads us to pray for what it is his pleasure to do. And he will reward us, and give us endless recompense for these prayers and our goodwill – which are his gifts to us. And this was shown in the words: 'And you ask.' In these words, God showed such pleasure and such great delight, as if he were in our debt for every good deed that we do. And yet it is he who does them. And because we ask him eagerly to do the things he loves to do, it is as if he said: 'What could please me better than to ask me – eagerly, wisely and willingly – to do the very thing I am about to do?' And so, by prayer, the soul is attuned to God. (Chapter 43)

If God wants to make us his partners in good deeds, how much more likely is it that he should want to make Mary, and all the saints, his partners, too? Not because he lacks the power, but because he delights in giving them a share in the work. And their prayers are helpful because, unlike us, they know just what it is we should be praying for: Julian is shown the saints are workers



St John emerges from beneath the overpainted Ten Commandments at Binham Priory

together with God, and that he wants us to enjoy 'the wonderful love and endless friendship we have with them'.

We celebrate this friendship with the saints at every Eucharist when we say, 'And so with angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven.' The painted screens in our Norfolk churches celebrate this friendship, but they bear the scars inflicted by those who believed that praying to the saints meant creating a whole pantheon of mini gods. They defaced the glorious images, sometimes covering them with whitewash and overpainted with the Ten Commandments. At Binham Priory, where my great, great grandfather was vicar until 1855, St John (see left) is now emerging from behind the text on the damaged screen.

It is a joy to know we pray with all the company of heaven, and it can also be comforting to know we have company here on earth in our prayers. The bell at St Julian's church is engraved with the words 'AVE GRACIA PLENA DOMINUS TECUM' ('Hail full of grace, the Lord is with you'). It is called Gabriel, and still rings the Angelus to recall the angel's message to Mary. It dates from the 1400s, when people still alive would have known Julian. The joy of the Angelus is that at 6 a.m., noon and 6 p.m. you can be certain, wherever you are in the world, that someone, somewhere in your time zone, is praying the same prayer with you. The final line is one of the best short prayers I know:

Pour forth, we beseech you, O Lord, your grace into our hearts, that as we have known the incarnation of Christ your Son by the message of an angel, so by his passion and cross we may be brought to the glory of his resurrection, through the same Christ our Lord.

Members of religious orders say the offices of the Church each day at their appointed hours and, as an anchoress, Julian would have done the same. Clergy also have an obligation to say certain prayers at certain times. But, useful though it is to link our prayers to special times of day, Julian says prayer itself is timeless, and that it never ends:

Our Lord himself is the first to receive our prayer, as I see it. He takes it, full of thanks and joy, and he sends it up above and sets it in the treasury, where it will never be lost. It is there before God and all his holy ones – continually heard, continually helping our needs. When we come to heaven, our prayers will be given to us as part of our delight – with endless, joyful thanks from God.
(Chapter 41)

It's a new thought that our prayers are stored up in heaven, and it's challenging, too, when you think of how few of them there may be. So we shall explore more of what Julian tells us about prayer in the next chapter.

Questions for discussion

- 1 Julian sees prayer from the receiving end when she writes, 'Our prayer makes God glad and happy? Does this shift of viewpoint change your own?'
- 2 When you feel you cannot pray, does it help to know that God says, 'When you are dry and empty, sick and weak, your prayers please me – though there be little enough to please you' (Chapter 41)?

Reflection

'The Way of the Cross with Julian of Norwich', page 85. Read and reflect on:

- (1) Jesus has supper with his friends
- (2) Jesus prays in the garden.

While you are reading these, can you still believe that all shall be well?