‘All Shall Be Well?’
Life, Suffering and the Love of God
with Julian of Norwich

A retreat day with Nick Helm

Resources for today can be found at www.soulspark.online/julian
Julian of Norwich

- born 1342
- died after 1416
- Anchorite in a cell attached to St Julian’s Church Norwich
Julian of Norwich

Socio-political context

- 100 years war (1337-1453)
- Black death Norwich Jan 1349 & 1369 another outbreak - 50% of clergy died in Norfolk
- Famine 1369 worst harvest for 50 years
- Great Schism 1377 - popes in Rome and Avignon
- Peasants revolt 1379 - pillaging of Norwich
- Wycliffe (1328-1384) & Lollard persecution (1385--)
Julian of Norwich

Big questions

- How can a loving God permit such suffering?
- Do we suffer as punishment for sin?
- How can a church that serves a loving God act so violently and unjustly?
- How does God look upon this?
- How do human beings relate to God in all this?
Julian of Norwich

Julian’s prayer for ‘three graces by the gift of God’

- To know of Christ’s passion as if she had been there
- To be close to God through bodily sickness and come close to death
- To have three wounds - (wound of contrition, wound of compassion, wound of longing for God)

The prayer for the wound of longing for God was an unconditional request.
Julian of Norwich

Shewings / Visions / Revelations 8 May 1373

During administration of Last Rites she had 16 ‘shewings’

- Of Christ - his passion, his love
- Of human life - range of well-being and woe
- Of God, the trinity, the incarnation, God’s
- Of the nature of prayer, and of fulfilment of God’s purposes in the bliss of heaven
Julian of Norwich

‘Revelations of Divine Love’

- Short text: record of the visions
- Long text: visions and description of what her prayer and meditation on them over 20 years revealed

Versions used today:

- Julian of Norwich: Showings (Classics of Western Spirituality, 1978)
- Enfolded in Love: Daily Readings (DLT 1980)
- All Shall Be Well, Ellyn Sanna, 2011 (a modern paraphrase)
Julian’s spirituality

- longing for God and devotion to Christ
- active dialogue with God / Christ
- engagement with life, suffering, sin, forgiveness
- profound experience of God of love & compassion
The God who meets Julian

Our good Lord showed a spiritual sight of his familial love. I saw that he is to us everything that is good and comforting for our help.

He is our clothing, who wraps and enfolds us for love, embraces us and shelters us, surrounds us for his love, which is so tender that he may never desert us.

And so in this sight I saw that he is everything which is good, as I understand.
And in this he showed me something small, no bigger than a hazelnut, lying in the palm of my hand, as it seemed to me, and it was as round as a ball. I looked at it with the eye of my understanding and thought: What can this be? I was amazed that it could last, for I thought that because of its littleness it would suddenly have fallen into nothing. And I was answered in my understanding: It lasts and always will, because God loves it; and thus everything has being through the love of God.

In this little thing I saw three properties. The first is that God made it, the second is that God loves it, the third is that God preserves it. But what did I see in it? It is that God is the creator and the protector and the lover. For until I am substantially united to him, I can never have perfect rest, or true happiness, until, that is, I am so attached to him that there can be no created thing between my God and me.

(Showings, Chapter 5, page 183)
Julian of Norwich

Julian’s writing

- Rich imagery
- Intimate & Loving God
- God: Creator, Protector and Lover
- True happiness is Union with God
For reflection

- What needs, hopes, longings do Julian’s images and themes arouse in you?
- Ponder God ‘enfolding you’: Let yourself be ‘clothed by God’s enfolding’. Rest in it – let yourself receive its gift for you., Respond to God from your heart.
- Ponder you as the ‘hazelnut’: Take time with each (or just one) of the three points. God made me; God loves me: Love was his (Christ’s) meaning, God looks after me. Respond to God from your heart.
- Ponder happiness as union with God: Notice desire for this for yourself (or even the desire to have the desire). Find ways of expressing this desire in your own words.
- Are there images that you hold dear that speak similarly to Julian’s?
- Try using creative ways of expressing God’s loving relationship to you.
What is prayer?

- The work of God and the soul

*Prayer is the deliberate and preserving action of the soul, it is true and enduring, full of Grace.*

*Prayer fastens the soul to God and makes it one with his will through the deep inward working of the Holy Spirit*  

(Chapter 41, Enfolded in Love p19)
What does prayer do to us?

• Aligns us and secures us

‘I saw two perspectives on our protector’s meaning: one is the sense of rightfulness, that prayer makes us as we should be, stretched out straight and true toward God; the other has to do with our assurance that through prayer we are totally safe’

(Chapter 41, Sanna p161)
How does prayer work?

- God’s desire initiates our desire.

‘I am the ground of your praying. First, it is my will that you should have this; then I make it your will too; then I make you ask for it, and you do so. How then should you not have what you pray for?’

(Chapter 41, Enfolded in Love p19)
What is the end/goal of prayer?

‘... the whole reason why we pray is to be united into the vision and contemplation of him to whom we pray, wonderfully rejoicing with reverent fear, and with so much sweetness and delight in him that we cannot pray at all except as he moves us at the time’

(Chapter 43 Showings p254)
Key actions in prayer

- **Asking for grace**: ‘longing for God’s presence / closeness / union

Seeking and asking is a true, joyful, and enduring soul-quality, a part of who we are as human beings, a quality that unites us and fastens us tight to the Divine Will at work in Creation by the sweet, internal workings of the Holy Spirit. First, Christ receives each prayer from us, and then I imagine He sets it in the Treasure House, where it will never fade away or perish. Our prayers rest there before God and all the Holy Ones, where they are continually received and endlessly answered, so that our needs become sources of prosperity that send us speeding forward toward God. When we reach Heaven, these prayers will be given back to us, delighting us as we thank God with endless worship.

(Chapter 41 Sanna p162-163) (Chapter 43 Showings p254)
Julian and Prayer

Key actions in prayer

• Questioning God & Listening to the answers
  • Asking questions - why?, how? ...
  • nearly 20 years of questioning and listening
  • Allowing time for responses to emerge
Key actions in prayer

- Being with God: Resting in God’s enfoldling, even when it seems nothing is happening

I realized now that God is worshipped—and delighted—when we simply turn to the Divine One, trusting totally in that Unity and clinging to Divine grace. This attitude reveals a deeper understanding of God and creates in us an unshakeable love, far more than any method of prayer our minds could contrive. Even if we were to practice all the prayer techniques ever used, they would never be enough to connect our souls to God with utter wholeness and fullness, for God’s goodness is the entire whole of reality, a unity that lacks absolutely nothing. By focusing our attention here—on the absolute Unity that never fails—we achieve the truest form of prayer.

(Chapter 6 Sanna, p. 39)
Key actions in prayer

- Being with God: Resting in God’s enfolding, even when it seems nothing is happening

‘Pray wholeheartedly, though you may feel nothing, though you may see nothing, yes, though you think that you could not, for in dryness and barrenness, in sickness and in weakness, then is your prayer most pleasing to me, though you think it almost tasteless to you. And so is all your living prayer in my sight.’

(Chapter 41 Showings p249)

Julian comments ‘God accepts the good will and the labour of his servants, however we may feel, and therefore it pleases him that we work in prayer and in good living.

(Chapter 41 Showings p249)
Julian and Prayer

For Reflection

• How does Julian’s image of prayer encourage you in your own prayer life?

• Let yourself rest upon God as the ‘ground of your praying’

• Think about the place of ‘asking, questioning, listening and being’ in your prayer life. Are any of them drawing you deeper?

• There is much collected wisdom on ‘contemplative prayer’ that suggests the human experience is of frequent letting go of distractions and returning to focus on God. As one wise guide responded to a pray-er complaining about being beset by a thousand distractions - ‘wonderful - that’s a thousand times you have returned to God’!

• Try focusing not on what is happening in your prayer, but just on being centred on God’s goodness.
All Shall Be Well?

Why is there sin?

Our Lord brought to mind the longing that I had for him before and I saw that nothing hindered me but sin, and I saw that this is true of us all in general, and it seemed to me that if there had been no sin, we should all have been pure and as like our Lord as he created us. And so in my folly before this time I often wondered why, through the great prescient wisdom of God, the beginning of sin was not prevented. For then it seemed to me that all would have been well.

(Chapter 27, Showings p224)
Jesus’ response

Jesus, who in this vision informed me about everything needful to me, answered with these words and said ‘Sin is necessary, but all will be well, and all will be well, and every kind of thing will be well’.

(Chapter 27, Showings p225)
Julian Reflects further on this response

All this was showed to me in no more than a touch and then it was quickly passed over.

Our good Protector did not want us to be terrified by this; He wants our comfort. But through it all, I saw no sin, for I believe sin has no substance, no being. In effect, it does not exist, for it can only be known through the pain it causes. This pain, as I understand it, is something that purifies us, that teaches us about ourselves, and that makes us rely on God’s mercy. But our Protector’s Endurance is meant to comfort us in the midst of this pain; that is what He wants. Because our good Protector loves us so tenderly, He is quick to comfort, saying, “Granted, sin has caused you all this pain, but all shall be well, and all shall be well, and absolutely everything shall be well.” ...
These words were said with so much love, with no hint of blame. So if God does not blame me for my sin, I would be rude to blame Him for it!

We are a family, connected by intimate bonds, and guilt and blame have no part in such a relationship.

In these words I saw a marvellous and lofty mystery that is hid in God, a mystery that will be laid out for us to see in Heaven. Then we will know the true reason why God allowed sin to come into the world, and the sight will fill us with endless joy.

(Chapter 27 Sanna, p. 125)
All Shall Be Well?

For Reflection

• Notice your own instinctive response to the pain of sin and your questioning / challenging of God - can you let Julian encourage you in your questioning / challenging God

• Ponder Julian’s description of sin as behovely, of God’s non-blame, of the ‘nothingness’ of sin, the pain as purifying - what is your response to God.

• Hold one or other of your greatest fears / pains from the fallenness of life and let yourself hear the words spoken to Julian from God “Granted, sin has caused you all this pain, but all shall be well, and all shall be well, and absolutely everything shall be well.”
How do I resolve the contradictions? (Chapter 50)

This chapter reveals again how genuinely pained and confused Julian is by the seeming contradictions between the Church’s teachings and what she has seen in her vision. Nevertheless, the thoughts she expresses in this chapter indicate the security we have in God, the sense of comfort we should feel in bringing our questions and doubts openly into the Divine Presence.

(Sanna, Introduction to Chapter 50, p192)

Julian’s words to God are these:

‘Ah, Lord Jesus, king of bliss, how shall I be comforted, who will tell me and teach me what I need to know if I cannot at this time see it in you?

(Chapter 50, Showings, page 267)
God’s response: A parable (Chapter 51)

‘Then our courteous Lord answered very mysteriously, by revealing a wonderful example of a lord who has a servant, and gave me sight for the understanding of them both.’

‘The lord sits in state in rest and peace. The servant stands before his lord, respectfully, ready to do his lord’s will. The lord looks on his servant very lovingly and sweetly and mildly. He sends him to a certain place to do his will. Not only does the servant go, but he dashes off and runs at great speed, loving to do his lord’s will. And soon he falls into a dell and is greatly injured; and then he groans and moans and tosses about and writhes, but he cannot rise and help himself in any way.’

(Chapter 51, Showings, page 267)
Seeing Through God’s Eyes

Julian sees consequences for the servant from this fall, these include:

- the fall has limited their ability - to fully serve - they are enfeebled and their pain limits their awareness.

- the fall means that the servant lies isolated unable to see the Lord’s response to their plight - the servant fears the Lord is angry that the task is not being carried out

- the servant can’t recognise their own motivation - the good desire in their heart when they set out, and so they are not to blame for their situation.
Seeing Through God’s Eyes

Then she is shown the lord’s view of the situation, looking ‘with pity not with blame’.

‘All this time, his loving lord looks on him most tenderly, and now with a double aspect, one outward, very meekly and mildly, with great compassion and pity, and this belonged to the first part; the other was inward, more spiritual and this was shown with a direction of my understanding towards the Lord, and I was brought again to see how greatly he rejoiced over the honourable rest and nobility which by his plentiful grace he wishes for his servant and will bring to him.

(Chapter 51, Showings, page 268)

‘In falling and in rising we are always preciously protected in one love. For we do not fall in the sight of God, and we do not stand in our own sight; and both of these are true, as I see it, but the contemplating of our Lord God is the higher truth.’

(Chapter 82, Showings, page 338)
Seeing Through God’s Eyes

Do you recognise your own experience of the servant’s fallenness?

- How you can focus on your own limitations, weaknesses, woundedness...
- Your anxiety about God’s anger at your failure
- Your inability to recognise your good motivations

Let yourself see God’s gaze of ‘pity not blame’ resting upon you

- Ponder the wonder at how in the sight of God you do not fall.
- Acknowledge how in your own sight you do not stand.
- Let yourself accept God’s higher truth
In Conclusion

From the time that it was revealed, I desired many times to know in what was our Lord’s meaning. And fifteen years after and more, I was answered in spiritual understanding, and it was said:

Do you wish to know your Lord’s meaning in this?  
Know it well, love was his meaning.  
Who reveals it to you? Love.  
What did he reveal to you? Love.  
Why does he reveal it to you? For Love.  
Remain in this, and you will know more of the same.

So I was taught that love is our Lord’s meaning.

In this love we have our beginning, and all this shall we see in God without end.

(Showings, Chapter 86, page 342)
Closing Prayer

God the ground of our being, you enfold us in your love. Like hazelnuts, tiny and fragile in your creation, we rest in your sustaining hold.

God of mystery, the ground of our praying, keep drawing us to ask for your grace, to question you and listen to you, that your divine grace may bring us into union with you.

Crucified Christ, whose passion enables us to dare to believe that all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well, draw us into the depths of your presence in the mystery of sin and suffering as we await the revelation of heaven.

Holy Spirit, who revealed to Julian the compassionate gaze of God, help us to lift our eyes to receive this gaze, that its love and truth may shape our service.

Amen