

HOME RETREAT SATURDAY 13 NOVEMBER 2021

ON AN INSIGHT OF JULIAN OF NORWICH

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you. Lord our God. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Good morning and welcome to this home retreat.

In this retreat talk I want to call to mind the story of a lord and a servant told by Julian of Norwich in the Long Text of her Showings. She was a hermit or better ' anchoress', who lived in the late 14th and early 15th centuries. Versions of her showings or ' revelations' have been popular in recent times, though her works survive only in very few manuscripts and largely thanks to English Benedictine nuns and monks of the 17th century. Thomas Merton, the famous American Cistercian monk described her, perhaps quite startlingly, as not only the greatest of the 14th century English mystics but as one of the greatest English theologians of all time.

In this talk I am going to resist the temptation to discuss these claims, which would need a different and longer treatment. As I say I want to focus this morning on one particular part of her ' Revelations'.

Here in a modern translation (it is in the Classics of Western Spirituality series) is the essence of her parable of the lord and the servant, which came to her in the form of a vision, showing or revelation, which she then reflected upon over many years:

From Julian of Norwich Showings Long Text chapter 51

I saw two persons in bodily likeness, that it to say a lord and a servant ... The lord sits in state, in rest and in 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 [ditch] and is greatly injured; and then he groans and moans and tosses about and writhes, but he cannot rise or help himself in any way. And of all this, the greatest hurt which I saw him in was lack of consolation, for he could not turn his face to look on his loving lord, who was very close to him, in whom is all consolation ... I was amazed that this servant could so meekly suffer all this woe; and I looked carefully to know if I could detect any fault in him, or if

the lord would impute to him any kind of blame; and truly none was seen, for the only cause of his falling was his good will and his great desire ... I was brought again to see how greatly he [the lord] rejoiced over the honourable rest and nobility which by his plentiful grace he wishes for his servant and will bring him to ... And in this an inward spiritual revelation of the lord's meaning descended into my soul, in which I saw that this must necessarily be the case, that his great goodness and his own honour require that his beloved servant, whom he loved so much, should be highly and blessedly rewarded forever, above what he would have been if he had not fallen, yes, and so much that his falling and all the woe that he received from it will be turned into high, surpassing honour and endless bliss.

Julian's understanding of this parable came more slowly than the revelation of the parable itself. Some of it is quite obvious, such as her identification of the lord as God, but other aspects needed pondering over a period of years, notably that the servant in the parable is both Adam and Christ. Here is a brief digest of her developed thought again from the Classics of Western Spirituality translation:

In the servant is comprehended the second person of the Trinity, and in the servant is comprehended Adam, that is to say all men'. And 'When Adam fell, God's son fell; because of the true union, which was made in heaven, God's Son could not be separated from Adam, for by Adam I understand all mankind. Adam fell from life to death, into the valley of this wretched world, and after that into hell. God's Son fell with Adam, into the valley of the womb of the maiden who was the fairest daughter of Adam, and that was to excuse Adam from blame in heaven and on earth; and powerfully he brought him out of hell ... For in all this our good Lord showed his own Son and Adam as only one man. The strength and the goodness that we have is from Jesus Christ, the weakness and blindness that we have is from Adam, which two were shown in the servant. And so has our good Lord Jesus taken upon him all our blame and therefore our Father may not, does not wish to assign more blame to us than to his own beloved Son Jesus Christ'.

For the purposes of this retreat talk, I want to emphasize two points. The first is that Julian merges together the figures of Adam and of Christ, so that Adam's fall and Christ's incarnation, death and resurrection, though separate historical events become in some way 'one'. It is particularly important for her that they are somehow 'one' in God's sight. When God looks on Adam, that is all mankind, he sees Christ. For Julian this leads to the second point I want to emphasize, namely

that in God there is no blame or condemnation of Adam, because he does not look with blame or condemnation at Christ but only with love.

This strong identity between Adam and Christ together with the insight that God does not look with blame upon humankind was remarkable for the 14th century and perhaps any age and it is not without its difficulties. Julian herself saw these. It may seem to take too little account of the dreadful nature and consequences of human sin. She herself discusses this, but again, interesting though it is, I am not coming to explore it further now.

I simply want to draw attention to the connection between Julian's point that in God there is no blame but rather an almost desperate love and longing to see his servant come to the fulness of life with two narratives from St Luke's Gospel and this in order to look for the basis of Julian's view in Scripture. The first of these is the parable of the prodigal son. Here are the relevant extracts from this very well-known story:

Luke 15:20-24

While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was moved with pity. He ran to the boy, clasped him in his arms and kissed him. Then his son said, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son.' [in the speech he had practised on his way home he also said 'treat me as one of your hired men' but he does not get this far] But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring out the best robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf, and kill it; we will celebrate by having a feast, because this son of mine was dead and has come to life, he was lost and is found. And they began to celebrate. [Of course this sadly is not quite the end because then the elder son objects with a different take on human sin 'But for this son of yours, when he comes back after swallowing up your property with prostitutes you kill the fattened calf'. In response the father repeats his narrative].

The point I want to draw out and relate to Julian of Norwich has been very clearly made in a book about her thinking by a modern philosopher and theologian Denys Turner. He point out 'the Father offers no word of rebuke at all [to his prodigal son]. He does not even offer forgiveness. The father simply celebrates his son's return, for his repentant return is itself enough, it *is* his being forgiven. He offers no forgiveness after the event, because he does not need to; the forgiveness was always there before the event of the son's betrayal, because forgiveness was in the

very nature of his fatherhood. By contrast it is the dutiful and moralizing elder son who is rebuked.’ The point I really want to emphasize, because it is the same one that Julian is making, equally dramatically is this: ‘the forgiveness was always there before the event of the son’s betrayal, because forgiveness was in the very nature of his fatherhood’.

The second passage in St Luke, which it seems to me makes a similar point comes earlier in his gospel, from chapter 7. Jesus is in the house of Simon the Pharisee; a woman comes in who has a bad name, her sin is not mentioned and nor is her actual name given. She covers Jesus’ feet with her tears, wipes them with her hair, kisses them and anoints them with oil from an alabaster jar. Simon objects thinking Jesus if a prophet should know what sort of woman she is. Jesus replies with a parable asking who will love more, a man forgiven little or one forgiven much. Jesus draws attention to her lavish actions contrasting them with Simon’s behaviour as host and then says this:

Luke 7:47-50

For this reason I tell you that her sins, many as they are, have been forgiven her, because she has shown such great love ... Then he said to her, ‘Your sins are forgiven.’ Those who were with him at table began to say to themselves, ‘Who is this man, that even forgives sins?’ But he said to the woman, ‘Your faith has saved you; go in peace’.

Again the very striking thing is that Jesus seems to say that for the woman the forgiveness is already there and that her acts of service and love simply draw attention to this fact and are as it were response to, not the cause of, the forgiveness.

We love because God first loved us, as St John says in his first letter and in that love of God is his mercy and his forgiveness, as well as our coming to the eternal life of heaven. So I invite you to take such opportunity as you may have today to allow yourself to meet, to be surrounded by, this love and mercy of God, which in Christ goes before you and awaits, always, your return.