

Julian of Norwich: Anchored Hope

By Jennifer May

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Introduction

4:00 AM, May 13, 1373.¹⁰³ A young woman lies dying in the dark. Two days have passed since she received last rites from the curate, and he stands at her side again, holding his crucifix before her rigid face, waiting for her final breath. Her eyes drift from the ceiling to the pale, pierced body, and she gasps and falls into a reverie that lasts till the afternoon, as she sees fifteen visions of love.¹⁰⁴ She wakes, wonders if she raved in her sleep, encounters demons, and receives a sixteenth vision to confirm her faith.¹⁰⁵ She spends the rest of her life reflecting on this experience.

So few details have survived about the life of Julian of Norwich that we are not even sure of her name¹⁰⁶—yet her brilliant vision remains. How did this obscure woman come to shine out of a century marked by disease and death, in an England overturned by chaos? This paper will argue that Julian's vows put her into a strategic position to translate God's love to

¹⁰³ Father John-Julian, *The Complete Julian of Norwich* (Paraclete Press, 2009), 35–37. Date based on Father John-Julian's calculations.

¹⁰⁴ “Now I have told you of fifteen revelations as God was pleased to convey them to my mind. . . . The first of these fifteen revelations began early in the morning, at about four o'clock, and they lasted . . . until it was well past the middle of the day.” Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, trans. Barry Windeatt (Oxford University Press, 2015), 139.

¹⁰⁵ “And after this the good Lord showed the sixteenth revelation on the following night . . . and this sixteenth revelation was the conclusion and confirmation to all fifteen.” Julian of Norwich, *Revelations*, 139.

¹⁰⁶ Elizabeth Spearing, ed., introduction to *Medieval Writings on Female Spirituality* (Penguin Books, 2002), xxx.

a generation of lay people experiencing plague, flood, famine, and confusing messages about the goodness of God. Spurred by visions of Christ, Julian anchored herself in her community in its turbulence, practiced a polemics of peace in a time of turmoil, and dedicated her life to the portrait of God she had seen. This vision still strikes the heart with the sheer sweetness of its hope in a time of tragedy.

Julian's Chaotic World

Fourteenth-century Norwich hosted a population of twelve to thirteen thousand people, of whom an estimated nine thousand died of plague.¹⁰⁷ The first wave hit in 1349, when Julian would have been about six, and the plague passed through her region six times by the time she was forty-five.¹⁰⁸ Huge numbers of clergy perished; at the Priory of Friars of Our Lady, close to St Julian's, all of the friars died,¹⁰⁹ and in 1349, Pope Clement VI allowed for "four extra ordinations of candidates for both minor and priestly orders" within the year because William Zouche, Archbishop of York, didn't have enough priests to serve his people.¹¹⁰ The Church also took various measures to ameliorate the burdens of souls. Among these: according to John of Reading, due to the severity of the plague in England especially, the pope gave plenary indulgence—full pardon—to anyone dying of plague who confessed sins.¹¹¹

Ian Mortimer describes the tragic effects of the plague in England physically, spiritually, and psychologically:

There is no shadow of a doubt that every one of these people you see in 1348—whether they will die or survive—deserves your compassion. When you see women dragging their parents' and children's corpses into ditches, weeping and screaming—when you listen to a man who has buried all five of his sons with his own hands, and,

¹⁰⁷ Father John-Julian, *The Complete Julian of Norwich*, 385. Father John-Julian gives around 7,000 plague deaths in the first wave, leaving about 5,000 people alive, then another wave in 1361, killing 23 percent of the population, then 13 percent more in 1369 and 13 percent in 1375. If the population started at about 12,000, then these successive waves of plague left about 2,900 of the original inhabitants still alive in 1375. Obviously, this number cannot take into account other deaths and new births.

¹⁰⁸ Father John-Julian, *The Complete Julian of Norwich*, 385.

¹⁰⁹ Father John-Julian, *The Complete Julian of Norwich*, 47.

¹¹⁰ Rosemary Horrox, trans. and ed., *The Black Death* (Manchester University Press, 1994), 273.

¹¹¹ Horrox, *The Black Death*, 74.

in his distress, he tells you that there was no divine service when he did so, and that the death bell did not sound—you know that these people have entered a chasm of grief beyond description . . . As you look around and see ravens flying through deserted streets, and half-wild dogs and pigs eating the corpses abandoned on the edge of a village, you will see something which no historian will ever see . . . Even prayer fades into a mere whisper of horror.¹¹²

Julian and everyone she knew experienced such horror. In fact, she described, among her visions: “At this time I saw a body lying on the earth, a body which looked dismal and ugly, without shape and form, as if it were a swollen, heaving mass of stinking mire . . . The bloatedness of the body signifies the great wretchedness of our mortal flesh.”¹¹³ J. D. Fulloon suggests that Julian was seeing a child who had died of plague, with its deformed flesh a signature of the Black Death.¹¹⁴

In addition to waves of sickness, Norwich also suffered literal waves during the “Little Ice Age.” Father John-Julian notes, “In 1343 forty people were drowned in the Wensum River in Conesford (near St Julian’s Church) when their boat was caught in the flood and overturned. There are accounts of coffins and corpses floated up out of graves by the floodwaters.”¹¹⁵ In 1362, a year after a wave of plague in Norwich killed 23 percent of the population—mostly children¹¹⁶—a huge set of storms swept through the city, with surges up to thirty feet high and winds almost one hundred miles per hour, knocking down the spire of the Norwich Cathedral.¹¹⁷ In such tragedies, Norwich would have been a place of almost unimaginable despair.

The Church struggled to find answers to such misery. Was God perfecting his people’s strength through weakness, as Zouche posited in 1348?¹¹⁸ Was he using “thunder,

¹¹² Ian Mortimer, *The Time Traveler’s Guide to Medieval England: A Handbook for Visitors to the Fourteenth Century* (Touchstone, 2011), 204. This work is for a popular audience, but it is an excellent cultural-social history of the fourteenth century, and beautifully written.

¹¹³ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations*, 137.

¹¹⁴ J. D. Fulloon, “Julian of Norwich’s Mystic Vision as a Site for Rebuilding Societal Unity in the Aftermath of the Black Death,” *Neophilologus* 105, no. 3 (2021): 463–78, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11061-021-09682-w>.

¹¹⁵ Father John-Julian, *The Complete Julian of Norwich*, 383.

¹¹⁶ Father John-Julian, *The Complete Julian of Norwich*, 385.

¹¹⁷ Father John-Julian, *The Complete Julian of Norwich*, 383.

¹¹⁸ Horrox, *The Black Death*, 111.

lightning, and the other blows which issue from his throne to scourge the sons whom he wishes to redeem,” as Ralph of Shrewsbury, Bishop of Bath and Wells, instructed his diocese?¹¹⁹ Was God being “terrible towards the sons of men,” and “terrify[ing] and torment[ing] men” to “drive out their sins,” as the Prior of Christchurch claimed?¹²⁰ Julian would have grown up steeped in tragedy and wrestling with questions of God’s love in a context that sometimes offered neither natural nor sermonic evidence for it.

The anchoress

Ultimately, Julian responded to the questions of her world in simultaneous withdrawal and engagement as an anchoress—a woman committed to living in a cell at a local church for the rest of her life. Unlike hermits alone in the desert, anchorites withdrew from society to be attached to churches—fully devoted to God—and ended up in the center of towns—potentially available to all comers.¹²¹ An anchorite could become something of a magnet for people seeking advice, comfort, or help.¹²² Ideally, these commitments were lifelong. According to the *Ancrene Wisse*, the only vows an anchoress could take were “obedience, chastity and stability of abode, so that she will never change that abode again except only in case of need, such as force and fear of death, obedience to her bishop or to his superiors.”¹²³ Father John-Julian points out that leaving the cell bore the threat of excommunication; Julian’s choice may perhaps have been permanent.¹²⁴

¹¹⁹ Horrox, *The Black Death*, 112.

¹²⁰ Horrox, *The Black Death*, 113.

¹²¹ Anne Savage and Nicholas Watson, introduction to *Anchoritic Spirituality: Ancrene Wisse and Associated Works* (Paulist Press, 1991), 16.

¹²² Though Mari Hughes-Edwards and Joshua Easterling both point out that anchorites were extremely vulnerable to charges of heresy or immorality. They note that the *Ancrene Wisse*, Aelred, and others consistently counsel anchorites to speak as little as possible, beware of questioners, and exercise caution even in giving their own confessions. Mari Hughes-Edwards, “How Good It Is to Be Alone? Solitude, Sociability, and Medieval English Anchoritism,” *Mystics Quarterly* 35, no. 3/4 (2009): 31–61, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20716585>; Joshua Easterling, “Knocking in the Usual Manner: Inquiries, Interrogations, and the Desire for Advice in Anchoritic Culture,” *Journal of Medieval Religious Cultures* 44, no. 2 (2018): 148–69, <https://doi.org/10.5325/jmedirelicult.44.2.0148>.

¹²³ *Ancrene Wisse*, trans. Anne Savage and Nicholas Watson, in *Anchoritic Spirituality: Ancrene Wisse and Associated Works* (Paulist Press, 1991), 49.

¹²⁴ Father John-Julian, *The Complete Julian of Norwich*, 39. Evidence exists that anchorites left the anchorhold and petitioned to be readmitted to their former households, as in the request on behalf of Agnes de Littlemore,

No source indicates when Julian chose to be an anchoress, but one of her contemporaries, Margery Kempe, stated that, near the beginning of her own spiritual journey,¹²⁵ “she was bidden by our Lord to go to an anchoress in the same city [Norwich], who was called Dame Julian.”¹²⁶ Kempe recognized Julian as an established source of spiritual wisdom, bricked up as she was to the side of St Julian’s. In a place where so much of life could literally float away, Julian had opted to become a fixed point on the landscape, available for counsel. Kempe’s testimony indicates that Julian did function as a dependable host and counselor—Kempe spent “many days” with her, recounting her revelations “to know if there were any deceit in them, for the anchoress was expert in such things and could give good counsel.”¹²⁷ She described her time with Julian as a “holy dalliance” and “communing in the love of our Lord Jesus Christ.”¹²⁸ To spend time with Julian was to experience something holy.

Julian’s way of life gave her counsel heft. She had dedicated herself, in a most visible way, to be a lover of Christ. Kempe drew this connection; for her, the people she had consulted in her travels were “God’s servants, both anchorites and recluses and *many other of our Lord’s lovers*.”¹²⁹ Julian was among them.

This passion for Christ had begun early. Julian recalled her youth, when she most wanted three gifts of God: to understand his passion, to get sick enough to die at age thirty,

who “left your house in order to attempt the life of an anchorite, in which she desired to serve the Lord; because she is unable to fulfil her intention in this regard, desires (as she says) humbly to return to the same . . . You should be sure to admit her.” E. A. Jones, trans. and ed., *Hermits and Anchorites in England, 1200–1550* (Manchester University Press, 2019), 96. In Julian’s case, a will by Isabel Ufford left “twenty shillings to Julian, recluse at Norwich,” in 1416, when Julian would have been around seventy-four years old, likely near the end of her life. Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins, eds., appendix to *The Writings of Julian of Norwich: “A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman” and “A Revelation of Love”* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 434. Possibly she died an anchoress.

¹²⁵ “In or around 1413.” Watson and Jenkins, *The Writings of Julian of Norwich*, 435.

¹²⁶ Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Lynn Staley (Medieval Institute Publications, 1996), 53–54. All excerpts from this Middle English text of Margery Kempe are my modernization of Kempe’s words.

¹²⁷ Kempe, 53–54. Whether this was a reputation that drew people to Julian or whether this was Kempe’s conclusion after time with her, the text is unclear.

¹²⁸ Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 53–54.

¹²⁹ Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 39, emphasis mine.

and to receive three wounds — “the wound of true contrition, the wound of kind compassion, and the wound of purposeful longing for God.”¹³⁰ She may have wanted to emulate Christ’s beginning his ministry at thirty, but she wanted most to be numbered among his lovers. As she explained:

It seemed to me that I had some feeling for the Passion of Christ, but I still wanted more, by God’s grace. It seemed to me I wished I had been there with Mary Magdalene and with others who loved Christ, so that I might have seen with my own eyes the Passion which our Lord suffered for me, and so that I might have suffered with him as others did who loved him. And so I longed for a vision of him in the flesh, by which I might have more knowledge of the bodily sufferings of our Saviour and of the fellow-suffering of our Lady and of all those who truly loved him and saw his sufferings at that time, for I wanted to be one of them and suffer with him . . . This is what I intended, for because of that revelation I wanted to have afterwards a truer perception of Christ’s passion.¹³¹

Julian showed a stunning openness to God in the midst of shattering tragedy. She had already experienced a flood and three waves of plague, and yet she most wanted to *continue* suffering—with Christ. The later anchorite vows were a natural progression for someone who wanted to identify with Jesus by experiencing “a living death”¹³² that united them to God. Julian’s dedication gave her credibility with her community. In her confinement, she could speak to people of God’s love and faithfulness as someone who depended on them utterly, and she could describe Jesus’ suffering from the perspective of one who suffered also. This set her in a strategic position to use her words to wage war for peace—in circumstances, with the Church, and with God himself.

Polemics of Peace

In her *Revelations*, Julian argued winsomely for God’s faithful deliverance in every

¹³⁰ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations*, 41.

¹³¹ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations*, 41. In *The Cloud of Unknowing*, the author meditates on Mary Magdalene’s special love and friendship with Jesus — “She was so set in her heart to love Him, that no thing beneath him might comfort her, nor yet hold her heart from Him.” Patrick J. Gallacher, ed., *The Cloud of Unknowing*, ed. (Medieval Institute Publications, 1997), 53, my modernization. Mary Magdalene held a tender place in medieval mystics’ hearts as Jesus’ faithful friend. This relationship must have been an especially attractive entryway for women to relate to Jesus.

¹³² Savage and Watson, *Anchoritic Spirituality*, 16.

circumstance. She spoke as if from the perspective of those who had died by drowning:¹³³

At one time my understanding was guided down to the bottom of the sea, and there I saw green hills and valleys, seeming as if overgrown with moss, with seaweed and gravel. Then I understood this: that if a man or woman were under the broad waters, if he could have sight of God (just as God is constantly with us), he would be safe in body and soul, and come to no harm and, furthermore, he would have more comfort and consolation than all this world can tell. For God wants us to believe that we see him continually, even though it seems to us that we see only a little, and through this belief he makes us to be gaining in grace continually; for he wants to be seen, and he wants to be sought; he wants to be awaited, and he wants to be trusted.¹³⁴

Instead of the horror, chaos, and filth of a violent flood, Julian depicted an underwater countryside, green and mossy, with God on the scene. Body and soul could be safe, translated to safety in God even under the waves. If disasters came as a result of sin—and part of the medieval response to feelings of shame and blame was, as in the words of Margery, “she was often shriven, she wore the hair, and did great bodily penance, and wept many a bitter tear and prayed very often to our Lord”¹³⁵—then Julian’s statement, in the context of seeing God under the waters, that “through this belief he makes us to be gaining in grace continually,” was good news to people who had lost loved ones to the water. Even if they hadn’t received holy rites or confessed, they could have experienced God’s grace under the waters and been saved.

So also with plague. For people to have lost so many to plague and sent them unshriven into the grave—if they had been able to bury them at all—surely must have haunted Julian’s contemporaries. She offered hope again. To return to Julian’s image of the plague-dead child:

And at this time I saw a body lying on the earth, a body which looked dismal and ugly, without shape and form, as if it were a swollen, heaving mass of stinking mire. And suddenly out of this body sprang a very beautiful creature, a little child perfectly shaped and formed, swift and full of life, whiter than a lily, which quickly glided up

¹³³ Father John-Julian, *The Complete Julian of Norwich*, 381. The author contends that the phrase “broad waters” was a reference to the periodic flooding of the Norwich Broads; if so, Julian may have been addressing those who had lost people to these floods. Shipwreck, other forms of drowning, or biblical allusions (Jonah, for example) are of course a possibility.

¹³⁴ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations*, 53.

¹³⁵ Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 28.

into heaven. And the bloatedness of the body signifies the great wretchedness of our mortal flesh, and the smallness of the child signifies the clearness of purity in the soul. And I thought, “None of this child’s beauty remains with this body, nor does any of this body’s foulness remain on this child.” It is more blessed for man to be taken from suffering than for suffering to be taken from man; for if suffering be taken from us it may come back again.¹³⁶

Julian did not shy from the grotesque results of the plague, recalling to her reader the sights and smells of terrible death—a death that truly reflected the wretchedness of *all* flesh—and yet she balanced this death with an invitation to see and smell life and purity—a bright spirit of a child, white like a lily, quick in every sense, darting up to heaven. Somehow, in the spiritual reality, all the foulness of the mortal body had fallen away from the beauty of the soul. For the one dead of plague, Julian recast death as removing a person from pain instead of pain from a person; with healing, pain could come again; with death, the person would be out of reach of pain forever.

Julian finished her meditation on the plague scene, saying, “It is God’s will that we should concentrate our thoughts on this blessed perception as often as we can and continue with it as long as we can, through his grace.”¹³⁷ She invited the hearer to imagine not only one soul springing brightly from a blackened body to fly heavenward, but all souls caught up from miserable flesh in a shining, heavenward rain. Both flood and plague could serve as windows of God’s grace and the brilliant hope of God’s welcome in the world to come.

With such a hope, Julian could call her contemporaries to lean on the Holy Church for guidance,¹³⁸ “For everything helpful for us to know and understand, our Lord will most courteously show us, and what it is, through all the preaching and teaching of the Holy

¹³⁶ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations*, 137.

¹³⁷ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations*, 137.

¹³⁸ Fulloon’s article (see note 12) tends to emphasize harsh church teachings on the plague and argues that Julian was calling people to peace with a church that had only condemned them. Fulloon makes the case that Julian answered the church’s preaching and the societal upheaval that led to the Peasants’ Revolt with her visions, calling the populace to trust its traditional authorities of church and feudal lord. The Peasants’ Revolt and other social upheavals are outside of the scope of this paper and my own areas of understanding, so I have kept to the plague and the floods.

Church.”¹³⁹ According to Abram Van Engen, whether Julian conformed fully to all church teachings or whether she invoked the church to protect herself from charges of heresy due to her innovative theology has been a matter of debate.¹⁴⁰ She may truly have trusted the church; ultimately, she instructed: “For he is Holy church: he is the foundation, he is the substance, he is the teaching, he is the teacher, he is the goal, he is the reward for which every naturally well-disposed soul strives . . . When I saw that God does all that is done, I did not see sin, and then I saw that all is well. But when God gave me a revelation concerning sin, then he said, ‘All shall be well.’”¹⁴¹ For Julian, because God was the teaching and the teacher of the church, its very ground, and its purpose, people had reason enough to trust it. God bore the responsibility for the church. All would be well. To trust the church, however, people needed to be at peace with God.

An Ever-Loving God

At its heart, the *Revelations* was not just Julian’s account of sixteen visions but an argument to “all my fellow Christians”¹⁴² of God’s peaceable good will. For her, humanity’s greatest woe was that “our spiritual eye is so blind and we are so weighed down by the burden of our mortal flesh and the darkness of sin that we cannot see clearly the fair, blessed face of our Lord God.”¹⁴³ In contrast with clerics who had emphasized an angry, vengeful deity, Julian sought to portray a God who could “never have His full bliss in us till we have our full bliss in Him,” who “embraces us and enfolds us entirely out of tender love, such that he may never leave us, and is nearer to us than tongue can tell or heart can think.”¹⁴⁴ This God could not be blamed for sin, and did not blame people for sin¹⁴⁵—he would not have sent

¹³⁹ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations*, 83.

¹⁴⁰ Abram Van Engen, “Shifting Perspectives: Sin and Salvation in Julian’s *A Revelation of Love*,” *Literature and Theology* 23, no. 1 (2009): 1–17, <https://doi.org/10.1093/litthe/frn035>.

¹⁴¹ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations*, 83.

¹⁴² Julian of Norwich, *Revelations*, 52.

¹⁴³ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations*, 147.

¹⁴⁴ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations*, 147.

¹⁴⁵ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations*, 75.

the plague. To help her fellow Christians understand this, Julian offered vivid ways to imagine such a good God.

Julian depicted a God whose love for people stretched back past the beginning of time. “For I saw that God never began to love mankind,” she said, “. . . mankind has been known and loved in God’s foresight, from without beginning in his righteous intent . . . For before he made us he loved us.”¹⁴⁶ She stated at the end of the *Revelations*, “Before God made us he loved us, and this love has never abated nor ever shall . . . In our making we had our beginning, but the love in which he made us was in him from without beginning, and in this love we have our beginning.”¹⁴⁷ This God experienced an endless longing for humanity,¹⁴⁸ and he reached out so that people could know him.

In the *Revelations*, Julian referred to God’s willingness to be known as “friendliness.”¹⁴⁹ To a feudal culture most comfortable with a certain power distance between lord and servant, she offered the image of a king being “homely” with a servant, and she defined this idea as “if he makes it known himself, with true sincerity and a cheerful expression both in private and in public.”¹⁵⁰ That such a king would share his private business and secrets with a lowly servant displayed awe-invoking generosity and intimacy, and Julian’s imaginary servant responded, “Ah! What greater honour and joy could this noble lord give me than to treat me, who am so humble, with this marvellous friendliness? This truly gives me more joy and pleasure than if he gave me great gifts and were himself distant in manner.”¹⁵¹ With this picture, Julian presented a God who wanted most to share his

¹⁴⁶ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations*, 118–19.

¹⁴⁷ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations*, 164–65.

¹⁴⁸ Julian saw God as having an unquenchable thirst to meet his people’s needs, an endless desire to care for people in pain: “And this property of thirst and longing comes from the endless goodness of God, just as the property of pity comes from his endless goodness . . . in this goodness consists the essence of the spiritual thirst, which lasts in him as long as we are in need” (*Revelations*, 79).

¹⁴⁹ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations*, 49. The Middle English text has *homelyhede*, “homeliness,” which contains all the intimacy and familiarity of being at home with someone in its deepest sense. Julian of Norwich, *The Shewings of Julian of Norwich*, ed. Georgia Ronan Crampton (Medieval Institute Publications, 1994), 47.

¹⁵⁰ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations*, 49.

¹⁵¹ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations*, 49.

intimacy with humankind, to *woo* people's hearts, and to invite wonder and delight in response. She explained, "This human example was shown so elevatedly that a man's heart could be ravished and almost forget itself for joy at this great friendliness . . . For the greatest fullness of joy that we shall have, as I see it, is the marvellous courtesy and friendliness of our Father who is our maker, in our Lord Jesus Christ who is our brother and our Saviour."¹⁵² For Julian, all of God's communication served as an offer of homemaking with the human soul, and a dedication of all of his richness to bless his servants, inviting them in as friends and family.

In fact, for Julian, God was more knowable even than a person's own soul. She boldly stated, "And so I saw that it is quicker and easier for us to come to the knowledge of God than to know our own soul; for our soul is so deeply grounded in God, and so endlessly treasured, that we cannot come to the knowledge of our soul until we first have the knowledge of God, the creator to whom it is united."¹⁵³ The human soul could be a murky place, full of confusion and hidden motives; God alone could reveal the depths of the soul, and God alone could show the soul as it ought to be, "naturally rooted in God in endless love."¹⁵⁴ Humanity could only understand itself by going through God, who kept the soul guarded in himself as a treasure.

Just as God treasured individuals, he also treasured humanity's broken world. In her first revelation, Julian described God as "our clothing that out of love enwraps us and enfolds us, embraces us and wholly encloses us, surrounding us for tender love."¹⁵⁵ Her vision broadened out from such warm immanence to a view of a little round ball, the size of a

¹⁵² Julian of Norwich, *Revelations*, 49. Eamon Duffy highlights that Jesus as humanity's brother and representative is "central to the Christological claim of *Cur Deus Homo?*," and that this relationship with Christ gave them "confidence . . . to claim from him the rights of kin." Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400–1580* (Yale University Press, 1992), 235–36.

¹⁵³ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations*, 123.

¹⁵⁴ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations*, 123.

¹⁵⁵ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations*, 45.

hazelnut in her hand. She asked what it was and received the answer: “It is all that is made.” She wondered at its fragility and received another answer: “It lasts, and always will, because God loves it; and in the same way everything has its being through the love of God.”¹⁵⁶ While Julian could not see God, she could see something of the scope of his transcendence in the comparative size of everything ever made, and even his vastness communicated his tender, protective care. The image of the hazelnut, with the repeated question and loving response, powerfully depicted God’s gentle hand on a delicate universe and his concern for its fragility.

An Endlessly Devoted Jesus

Julian’s most radical depictions of God’s good will and kindness in an upturned world, however, came through her view of Jesus Christ. She had passionately desired to suffer with Christ and to understand his love by identifying with his mortality.¹⁵⁷ As she suffered with her Savior, she *met* and communed with a Savior who still stood in solidarity with suffering humanity: “And now he is risen again and no longer liable to suffering, he still suffers with us. And I, contemplating all this through his grace, saw that his love for our souls was so strong that he chose to suffer willingly, and with great longing for that, and meekly suffered with great satisfaction.”¹⁵⁸ This Jesus was no longer pinned to the cross, but neither was he unmoved in heaven. Still he suffered with his people, and still he extended his love to their world in pain.

The imagery in Julian’s visions frequently depicts Jesus’ love either filling the landscape or forming it. Of Jesus’ blood, Julian wrote:

And then it came into my mind that God has created abundant waters on earth for our use and our bodily refreshment, out of the tender love that he has for us, yet it is more pleasing to him that we should very simply take his blessed blood to wash ourselves from sin; for there is no liquid created that it pleases him so much to give us; for it is most abundant as it is most precious, and that is so by virtue of his blessed Godhead. And it shares our nature and washes most blissfully over us by virtue of his precious

¹⁵⁶ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations*, 45.

¹⁵⁷ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations*, 43.

¹⁵⁸ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations*, 67.

love.

The beloved blood of our Lord Jesus Christ is as truly most precious as it is truly abundant. Behold and see! The precious plenty of his beloved blood descended down into hell and broke their bonds and delivered all those who were there who belonged to the court of heaven. The precious plenty of his beloved blood overflows the whole earth and is ready to wash from sin all who are, have been, and shall be of good will. The precious plenty of his beloved blood ascended up into heaven to the blessed body of our Lord Jesus Christ, and is in him there, bleeding and praying for us to the Father—and is and shall be for as long as it is needed.¹⁵⁹

God offered Jesus' blood to wash humanity because it was the most precious liquid he had—so he esteemed the value of his children—and this blood flowed so generously that it filled hell with deliverance, earth with atonement, and heaven with intercession. The blood filled the past and the present and would continue to fill the future. Floods could wreck Norwich, but they couldn't outflow the blood.

So much blood flowed from a massive heart, and Julian depicted the heart of Jesus actually forming the landscape for the faithful. She described how Jesus drew her into the wound in his side, which opened up to “a beautiful and delightful place, large enough for all mankind that will be saved to rest there in peace and love . . . And with the precious vision he showed his blessed heart quite riven in two.”¹⁶⁰ This image invoked a countryside with the cloven heart of Jesus as the sun shining on it, a haven of peace inside himself with room for all. For those who had suffered plague and flood, condemnation and confusion, and even the stink and crush of a medieval city, such a vision of Christ offered a tangible hope and a refuge in the country of his care.

¹⁵⁹ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations*, 57–58.

¹⁶⁰ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations*, 72. Julian's emphasis on blood and on the wound in Jesus' side were familiar tropes in the Middle Ages—for example, over two hundred years before Julian, Aelred of Rievaulx had instructed his sister, a recluse, to meditate on Jesus' blood and side: “Then one of the soldiers opened his side with a lance and there came forth blood and water. Hasten, linger not, eat the honeycomb with your honey, drink your wine with your milk. The blood is changed into wine to gladden you, the water into milk to nourish you. From the rock streams have flowed for you, wounds have been made in his limbs, holes in the wall of his body, in which, like a dove, you may hide while you kiss them one by one. Your lips, stained with his blood, will become like a scarlet ribbon and your word sweet.” Aelred of Rievaulx, “A Rule of Life for a Recluse,” trans. Mary Paul Macpherson, in *Aelred of Rievaulx: Treatises & Pastoral Prayer*, Cistercian Fathers Series, Number Two (Cistercian Publications, 1971), 90–91.

Julian's Jesus also illustrated the largeness of his heart in his delight in seeing people receive him as a good gift. As Julian looked at the Passion scene, Christ asked if she had been well paid by his suffering. To her assent he replied, "If you are pleased, I am pleased. It is a joy, a bliss, an endless delight to me that I ever suffered my Passion for you; and if I could suffer more, I would suffer more."¹⁶¹ Julian did not meet a pathetic victim of sin in her visions;¹⁶² she met a boundless giver delighted beyond measure to give his greatest treasure to his people, ready to suffer more for the joy of giving them of himself. She described this kind of giver:

A glad giver pays little attention to what he is giving, but his whole desire and his whole intention is to please and comfort the one to whom he is giving it; and if the recipient accepts the gift appreciatively and gratefully, then the courteous giver thinks nothing of all his expense and all his trouble because of the joy and delight that he feels at having pleased and comforted the one that he loves.¹⁶³

Julian's Jesus was not counting penances or inspecting hair shirts but freely offering to share himself in his endless bliss and joy. He came looking for lovers who could enjoy the gift of himself.

Conclusion

Faced with a world of inexplicable suffering, Julian of Norwich made choices: to engage suffering through Jesus, to engage her community through vows that pinned her to its heart, and to meditate on her visions and write them down for her fellow Christians, in their shared heart language, English. No one knows whether she wrote her *Revelations* before enclosure or afterward, but, somewhere in the mix of writing and living as an anchorite, she

¹⁶¹ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations*, 68.

¹⁶² According to Duffy, "Though the imagery of the vine had long been applied to Christ and his blood-shedding, the fifteenth century had seen the emergence into new prominence in art and piety of the literalistic image of the cross as mystical wine-press, in which Christ was grotesquely portrayed being pressed or screwed down under the beam of the cross while his blood ran into a wine-vat or a set of barrels . . . Christ is a passive victim" Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, 253. Julian's vision appears to be contemporary to this swing in England, which shows up, for example, in the "Fifteen Oes," with Jesus being compared to a "ripe cluster of grapes . . . on the press of the cross." "The Fifteen Oes," trans. Rebecca Krug, in *Cultures of Piety: Medieval English and Devotional Literature in Translation*, ed. Anne Clark Bartlett and Thomas H. Bestul (Cornell University Press, 1999), 117.

¹⁶³ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations*, 71.

addressed an audience that needed to see God in their suffering. To this audience—all her fellow Christians—she left her greatest treasure, the Jesus who met her on her sickbed, sustained her through waves of flood and plague, and set her mind aflame with visions of divine love.

A tragic irony follows Julian's text, which Eamon Duffy has called the "most remarkable theological achievement of the English late Middle Ages."¹⁶⁴ While Richard Rolle, Walter Hilton, the *Cloud of Unknowing* author, and the author of *The Chastising of God's Children* all wrote for individuals in or pursuing the contemplative life, and many of them for women,¹⁶⁵ Julian's stated audience was the entirety of Christendom.¹⁶⁶ Their texts for individuals spread to wide audiences, but Julian's texts for everyone remained relatively unknown, and her world may have been the poorer for the loss of her particular visions of Jesus.

Julian's Jesus was the kind of God that anyone could approach in love and longing. Indeed, he was the cause of all longing and the instigator of all seeking.¹⁶⁷ This Jesus was the goodness that could transform all pain, and this Jesus could sustain a world in suffering. This Jesus shone, and still shines, in *The Revelations of Julian of Norwich*, all that remains of the anchoress his lover. How powerful her visions must have been in a world lashed by plague; how disciplined she must have been to hold on to them and not forget, to meditate on them and present them with such clarity and sweetness. They still invite devotion to such a love-generous Christ, "the primary recipient of our prayers, as it seems to me, and accepts them

¹⁶⁴ Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, 314.

¹⁶⁵ E.g., Rolle's "Form of Living" *a beato Ricardo heremita ad Margaretam anachoritam, suam dilectam discipulam*. Richard Rolle, "The Form of Living," in *English Writings of Richard Rolle, Hermit of Hampole*, ed. Hope Emily Allen (Clarendon, 1931; reprint, Martino Fine Books, 2017), 85; Hilton's "goostli suster in Jhesu Crist." Walter Hilton, *The Scale of Perfection*, TEAMS Middle English Text Series, ed. Thomas H. Bestul (Medieval Institute Publications, 2000), 31, the *Cloud's* disciple called to "solitary form and maner of levying" [*Cloud*, line 245] and the "religious sister" of the *Chastising*. Joyce Bazire and Eric Colledge, ed., *The Chastising of God's Children and the Treatise of Perfection of the Sons of God*, (Basil Blackwell, 1957), 95.

¹⁶⁶ "All this teaching of true comfort applies in general to all my fellow Christians, as is said before, and it is God's will that it is so." Julian of Norwich, *Revelations*, 143.

¹⁶⁷ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations*, 92.

most gratefully, and highly rejoicing; and he sends them up above and *sets them in a treasury where they will never perish.*”¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁸ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations*, 92, emphasis mine.

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