

**Julian of Norwich**  
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No one today underestimates the importance of childhood experiences on the way in which people's inner and outer lives unfold. And yet when the story of Julian of Norwich is told it is not always remarked that she was a child when the city of Norwich was ravaged by the plague. The year was 1349. Little Julian was six years old. Norwich was the second largest city in England with a population of about 13,000 people. That summer, about half of that population died of the plague, known then as 'The Great Pestilence'.

It must have been a wretched time to be a child. The very nasty symptoms of this terminal disease were there to be seen on the faces and bodies of people in the household and on the streets. Young Julian would never have been able to forget those dreadful days – and indeed she would have been reminded of them when subsequent waves of the disease erupted during the course of her life.

There are those who believe that when she grew up, Julian became a nun at the convent in Norwich, but recent scholarship suggests that it is more likely that she was married when about fifteen and had one or two children, of whom one or both died, and that she long outlived her husband. So here was a woman who lived an ordinary life at an unusually unpleasant time.

So – why do we even mention her today?

The main reason we know anything about Julian is because of her writing. She wrote two books. This is more remarkable than it sounds because they were the first to be written by a woman in English and also because they were just the sort of books that could get a writer into real trouble with the authorities – and by real trouble I mean possibly being subject to the death penalty. Because Julian wrote theology.

That anyone should write theology and not write in Latin, is itself a matter of significance. That the writer should be a domestic woman with no ecclesiastical authority and some startling ideas makes it quite remarkable. It is one of the puzzles of the history of English theology and religion that for centuries Julian's books were of relatively little influence, or for that matter interest. In the twentieth century, however, her work was rediscovered and T.S. Eliot quoted some of it in his poem *Little*

*Gidding* which became one of the most formative texts in English spirituality of the twentieth century. 'Sin is behovely' she wrote, and he quoted without translating the word behovely which means 'necessary' or 'inevitable' – 'but all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well'. *Little Gidding* would not have had the power and influence it had if Julian's words had not been included.

I have said that she wrote two books. However she did not write two *different* books. She wrote the same book twice – twenty years apart. The first, or short, book was written in about 1413, and it describes the experiences that Julian had when, at the age of 30, she was so critically ill that she and everyone else believed her to be on her deathbed and she was given the last rites.

In the first book she tells us about a series of visions that she experienced as she lay on that deathbed. This is not the place to list them all, but the first vision was of the Christ's head bleeding under the crown of thorns. And one of the more famous ones was of a hazelnut or, rather, 'a little thing the quantity of a hazelnut lying in the palm of my hand'. Seeing this she is puzzled, as puzzled as you are, perhaps, in hearing the preacher suddenly move from a deathbed scene to talking about a hazelnut. And, being puzzled, she kept asking herself questions. She asked herself what this *little thing* might be, and the astonishing answer occurred to her, 'it is all that is made'. Her reflection didn't stop there, however, because she went on to wonder, 'how it might last – for it seemed to me it might suddenly fall into nought for its littleness.'

Today we are very used to thinking of the huge scale of the universe. We are familiar with the view of planet earth from outer space. We are also able to pose sophisticated questions about 'existential risk', that is questions about the possibilities for the survival of our race or our planet. I think that Julian was in this sort of intellectual territory, you could call it 'existential wonder', as she lay on her deathbed thinking about something as insignificant as a hazelnut. And her thinking developed further – 'It lasteth and ever shall, because God loveth it. And so hath all things being by the love of God'.

There are many ways in which Julian's life and mind and soul can seem strange and alien to us today, not least the final phase, where she was walled up an anchorite at the Church of St Julian – after which she has retrospectively been named. But the main reason that I wanted to include her in this series was because of her pioneering and exemplary audacity

in writing her experiences and reflections down, and also to honour her place in our culture as the first woman author in English. But I also wanted to talk about her as superb example of a *theologian*.

Julian wrote in the aftermath of devastating social and personal experience, and in all she wrote she sought to be true to the realities of life and death as she has witnessed them as well as to her inner and spiritual experiences. She had a deep and intelligent and Christian *curiosity*. She was always seeking a better answer, a more satisfactory way of understanding. You could say that there was in her a *holy restlessness*. Such restlessness is an important part of our spiritual journey. And if we find restlessness in ourselves we might well wonder how to make it holy. The answer is – to formulate the best possible next question and to allow a wise answer to emerge over time.

Julian's writing begins in suffering, embraces vulnerability, seeks truth and ends with a vision of love and hope. Who could ask for more? She was and is an exemplary theologian. But she didn't see theology as something for the few but for the many – writing not for prestige or credit but to inform the ordinary people of her time.

We all have deathbeds to look forward to, and, while the plague may seem like a barbaric medieval memory, our cities could begin to look a little like that if bacteria continue to develop resistance to antibiotics at their current rate, or if an especially virulent form of influenza evolves. And if we think it far-fetched to imagine that a child of six could experience what Julian went through we need think no further than some of the children who are refugees from the devastation in Syria, or who, for no fault of their own, have found themselves in a city or village taken over by Isis. If the theology of the future is not actually written by some these children when they grow up, it must at least be *credible* to them, as it must be credible to us as we reflect on their circumstances.

For it is only after looking such realities in the eye, feeling them deeply and pondering them slowly that we might dare to say 'Amen' to Julian's message of profound hope: 'all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.'

*A sermon preached in King's College Chapel, Sunday 1 May 2016.*