



Everyday Mysticism

During today's sermon we touched briefly on Julian of Norwich. We will look at her life in a little more detail [here](#).

Julian of Norwich was an English anchoress in the Middle Ages who received in 1373 a series of visions or "shewings" of the Passion of Christ. Her writings on the subject, *Revelations of Divine Love*, are thought to be the earliest surviving English-language work by a woman.

Julian is one of the famous Fourteenth Century English mystics. There is a rich tradition of mysticism within Christianity, although it is seldom discussed. Given our impulse to make rational arguments in support of faith, we are naturally wary of anything that might be seen as contrary to cool logic. If there is to be a renewal of Christian faith however, it will require an acceptance of the limit of our understanding of God and an embrace of wonder.

We might perhaps think that Julian's visions are the natural byproduct of an unsophisticated and uneducated mind, characteristic of a bygone age. To have religious visions at that time however would have been positively dangerous. Encounters with God were to be mediated by religious officials and those seen to be breaking the rules were burnt as heretics. They were extreme times: the 100 Year War raged in Europe and a third of the population of England was wiped-out in two waves of plague.

For Julian, the religious life was not about having fantastical visions, but rather a transfiguration of how the every day world is encountered. This was not something for an elite clique, but open to everyone.

Philip Sheldrake writes, "*Great mystical writers such as Julian are not interested in visionary experience as such nor in the status it gives them. What concerns them is what such privileged experiences reveal and enable them to teach for the benefit of others. While visions and other paranormal phenomena are by definition extraordinary, to exclude the 'extraordinary' automatically from our considerations runs the risk of setting aside anything that seems peculiar or that makes us uncomfortable because it does not fit with our contemporary cultural assumptions.*"

Reflections

- What does the word 'mysticism' mean to you?
- How comfortable are you with the idea of mystery in your faith?
- Martin Laird wrote, "*We have a way of bringing into the unchartered land of prayer a false map of what prayer should be like.*" How true do you find this claim?
- English mystic Evelyn Underhill wrote, "*If God were small enough to be understood, He would not be big enough to be worshipped.*" Is our own spiritual journey about understanding God or coming to accept the limits of our understanding about God?

Resources

A natural place to start with Julian of Norwich is her own writing: [Revelations of Divine Love](#) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

If the prospect of plunging into the writings of a medieval mystic is a little too much to face, this year's 650th anniversary of Julian's 'shewings' has given rise to some great historical fiction in her honour that might be more digestible. Victoria Mackenzie's beautiful book [For Thy Great Pain Have Mercy On My Little Pain](#) (London: Bloomsbury, 2023) is well worth including in your summer reading. In the voice of Julian, she writes, "*God is not a being on high, to whom we must raise our eyes. God is everywhere, in all things, including us. We are clad in the goodness of God, so closely that our souls and God are one thing, and that this one-ing is the most important thing to understand. For if we are oned with God, we can never be divided from him.*" (page 108)

An interview with Mackenzie on the [Most Books Meets](#) podcast is worth a listen.

A great guide to Julian's life and times is Emma Pennington's book [At The Foot of the Cross with Julian of Norwich](#) (Abingdon: BRF, 2020). Pennington's recent appearance on the [Hesperides](#) podcast provides an ideal introduction to the Christian mystical tradition.

A more general introduction to mysticism can be found in Philip Sheldrake's recent book [A World Transfigured: A Mystical Journey](#) (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2022).

Finally, given the focus on fashion in the sermon, I have to acknowledge a debt to Robert Covolo's book [Fashion Theology](#) (Wake: Baylor 2020).

Links to these resources are imbedded into the electronic copy. Just click on the underlined words.