



EMMA PENNINGTON

AT THE FOOT
OF THE CROSS

with JULIAN OF NORWICH

The Bible Reading Fellowship

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For God's lovers

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CONTENTS

List of plates	7
Preface	9
Introduction: Encountering Julian's written words	11

PART I

1 Entering Julian's world	23
2 Encounter with a crucifix	27
3 Julian's vision of the Passion	33

PART II

THE FIRST REVELATION

4 The crown of thorns	41
5 God is the Trinity	51
6 Great droplets of blood	64

THE SECOND REVELATION

7 The face of Jesus	79
8 The veil of Veronica	97

THE FOURTH REVELATION

9	Flowing blood.....	111
---	--------------------	-----

THE EIGHTH REVELATION

10	Dying for love.....	125
----	---------------------	-----

THE NINTH REVELATION

11	The three heavens.....	141
----	------------------------	-----

	Conclusion.....	153
--	-----------------	-----

	Further reading	155
--	-----------------------	-----

LIST OF PLATES

between pages 96 and 97

- 1 The medieval rood screen at St Helen's Church,
Ranworth, Norwich
© Neil McAllister / Alamy Stock Photo
- 2 Detail of the medieval rood screen at St Helen's Church,
Ranworth, Norwich
© Sid Frisby / Alamy Stock Photo
- 3 Last rites panel in the seven sacrament window of St Michael's
Church, Doddiscombsleigh, Devon
© Stiffleaf photography
- 4 Fifteenth-century crucifix
© Herbert Art Gallery & Museum, Coventry
- 5 The Holy Thorn Reliquary
© The Trustees of the British Museum. All rights reserved.
- 6 Crown of thorns, detail of the Despenser Retable, Norwich
Cathedral
© Paul Hurst
- 7 The Despenser Retable, Norwich Cathedral
© Paul Hurst
- 8 Throne of Grace, from the Carrow Psalter
Courtesy of The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore

- 9 Christ holding a globe, detail of the Westminster Retable
© Dean and Chapter of Westminster
- 10 The Crucifixion, from the Holkham Bible Picture Book
British Library, London, UK © British Library Board. All Rights Reserved/Bridgeman Images
- 11 The procession of the phial of Christ's blood in the Matthew Paris Chronicle
© Parker Library, Corpus Christi College, Cambridge
- 12 The veil of Veronica, detail of the Despenser Retable, Norwich Cathedral
© Paul Hurst
- 13 The flagellation of Christ, from the Holkham Bible Picture Book
British Library, London, UK © British Library Board. All Rights Reserved/Bridgeman Images
- 14 The Vision of Saint Bernard
© Rheinisches Bildarchiv Köln, rba_c002356
- 15 The dying Jesus, detail of the Isenheim Altarpiece
© Chronicle / Alamy Stock Photo
- 16 Christ's foot, detail of the Isenheim Altarpiece
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Preface

I was standing in a circle with about 30 other women. Although we had spent all day together on a training course, we still shuffled in our skins, feeling exposed under each other's flickering gaze. For we had come to a moment in the day, a final moment, which had been tantalisingly held before us as an experience that would empower and enliven each one of us. Nervously we waited for instructions. It was with some relief that our leader and guru invited us to turn to our right. No longer burdened by embarrassment, a sigh softened the room; the worst was surely over. We were then asked gently to place the palm of our hand between the shoulder blades of the person in front of us. After a little shifting and pardoning, the circle tightened as we bound ourselves into one entity. It felt strange, a tickling sensation, and yet at the same time this unseen touch compelled me to relinquish my hard-won independence and join the circle. A horror rippled through me when, in this position, we were then asked to name out loud the women who have been the most significant and influential figures in our lives. As my turn came nearer and nearer, my mind emptied more and more. Who should I say? Who has been influential? My mother, of course, my sister... surely they are not the only women in my life? Who else? Oh no, what are their names? What if I get them wrong, muddled up like so much of my memory? Will I be corrected or laughed at? I'll say nothing. Through my panic I began to hear a single name, repeated again and again by those who stood around me. Surely they don't mean... Yes, it must be... Julian.

Like those around me, Julian has been one of the most influential women in my life, and like so many, it is her voice that has been woven into my history. I was first introduced to her at Exeter University, when I was reading English and Medieval Studies. It was in the second year, when we were studying the rather intimidatingly entitled 'Medieval religious writing', that Julian and her fellow

mystics came to my attention. I had never read such powerful and overwhelming texts before. Even through their Middle English I was inspired and transformed by their words of God. They opened a door; more than a door – a vision and a desire that overwhelmed me. As a passionate and somewhat romantic 19-year-old, I began to consume the spiritual classics, sought out those who lived the contemplative life and dedicated myself to God. Among all the writings that inspired and guided me – Augustine, Richard Rolle, Walter Hilton, Margery Kempe, the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, John of the Cross, Teresa of Ávila, Gregory of Nyssa and so on – it was Julian who lingered most. Time and again I read her words, wrote on her, preached on her and quoted her, but somehow the essence of her words was always intangible and beyond my grasp. Yet each time her texts somehow drew me into an even deeper awareness of the presence and mystery of God.

It was with great joy that, in my mid-30s, I was given the opportunity to study her writings with some of the greatest Julian scholars of our day and weekly immerse myself in the language and multiple meanings of her words. Throughout the ten years it took me to complete my doctoral thesis, Julian's voice continually led me through scholarly discipline and analysis to encounter and prayer. In this book I seek to share with you this experience of encountering God through Julian's words, crystallised within a medieval text. I aim to bring you to that place of encounter through a detailed exploration of Julian's use of language and images, which describe her visions of the cross. This is the beginning of an encounter with her text that seeks to enable you to come to your own place of prayer and contemplation.

Introduction

ENCOUNTERING JULIAN'S WRITTEN WORDS

How is it that a woman from the late 14th century, about whom we know hardly anything at all, comes to be named time and again as one of the most influential figures in some people's lives today? The answer to this question is not necessarily found in history books. There is only one that makes a specific reference to Julian: Margery Kempe's account of her visit to Julian is the only definitive external evidence we have of her historic identity. Who she was, what she was like and how she lived her life are questions that neither history nor her writings can easily answer. It is through the manuscripts of her writings that Julian's voice has spoken directly to so many in this age. However, these writings do not help us to draw an accurate picture of Julian the person. Sadly, they contain no colourful life history interwoven within her words or neat biography to enlighten us. Instead, the person Julian continually evades our gaze, as she frustratingly insists on hiding behind and within her writings. All we can definitely state from her texts, biographically speaking, is that she had a revelatory experience in 1373 which arose from a serious illness; that she was an anchoress attached to St Julian's Church in Norwich; that she wrote two texts based on her experience; and that locally, at least, she held some sort of reputation for her revelations. The rest is conjecture and surmise, however convincing the detective work might be. Yet it is through these same writings, often called *Revelations of Divine Love*, that Julian has spoken so profoundly to so many in this age, making her one of our most influential women.

It is Julian the writer who, through her accounts, descriptions, musings, explanations, reasoning, imagination, ideas, devotion and love, creates a chamber, a liminal space, in which we are invited to step, not to find her but to encounter God. As Julian herself says, 'As for the showing it only makes me good if I love God better, and in as much as you love God better it is more to you than to me' (*Revelations of Divine Love*, ch. 9, lines 1–2). Julian cannot recreate her experience or simulate a mystical encounter for us, but she can take us to the threshold of the ineffable through the use of our faculties and emotions, thereby enabling us to enter an awareness of the divine presence. This book is therefore not about Julian's life, however intriguing that may be, nor does it seek to expound her thinking, despite its illuminating profundity. Instead, it is a work that invites you to enter into the substance and language of Julian's words, to hear her voice, which speaks to us amid the crackles of time and calls us to stand with her at the foot of the cross so we may know and love God the better.

In order to enter more deeply into Julian's written word, we first need to consider what kind of texts Julian has left for us, and the answer to that question begins with where they came from. What is it that Julian writes? The modern extracts, translations, summaries and editions which first introduced Julian to us all flow from five vellum manuscripts held in various libraries in Britain and France. The oldest dates from the 15th century and gathers together a number of different works about the life of prayer. Embedded among these so-called devotional texts can be found what today is commonly referred to as the short version of Julian's work. We cannot say for sure when it was written, but most people agree that this was Julian's first edition of her work. It has the feel of an initial documentation of her visions and her early reflections on them, thus it is often dated to the early 1380s. The other version of her writing is much longer and hence is referred to as the long text. Julian intimated that she spent just under 20 years reflecting deeply on what she saw and experienced on that night in 1373. So it seems reasonable to place the long text at least 20 years after her

visionary experience. None of the manuscripts gives us a clear title page, necessitating the need for scholars to invent a title for both texts. These have varied in time, depending on editorial preference, but now they are generally referred to as *Revelations of Divine Love* for the long text and *The Visions of Julian of Norwich* for the short text, or simply 'the short text'.

Sadly, we do not have Julian's original manuscript of either the short or the long texts. We only have copies of copies, some dating to as late as the 17th century. Scholars have tried to remove the layers of interpretation and modernising that have accumulated over the years, as if there were some original masterpiece hidden underneath just waiting to be revealed. But even painstaking comparisons between the different manuscripts have failed to recover a definitive original or authentic version. One of the reasons why it is so hard to discern an original text from the accretions of time, apart from the human errors that slip in during the copying of the text, is that past scribes and editors approached a person's writing in a very different way from how we do today. There was not the same sense of authorship or even intellectual property. Rather, scribes saw it as their task to update the spelling, add structure to the original work or even give explanations so that a later audience could understand it more easily. In each case the importance of copying the text did not so much lie in the preservation of an original work but in enabling the sense and heart of Julian's writing to be as accessible and helpful to the reader as possible. Modern books of extracts and loose translations of Julian's writings seek to do much the same today, and this is often the way in which Julian's work and ideas have predominantly become known by a wide-ranging audience.

Defining *Revelations of Divine Love*

As anyone who has picked up or been given a complete copy of Julian's *Revelations of Divine Love* will quickly discover, it is not exactly a light summer read. The wonderful paragraphs and phrases

we have come to know so well are all there, but they are embedded like shining pennies within a dense and rich mix of ingredients. It is this complex blend of visionary narrative, interpretation, mysticism, theology and devotional encounter, all expressed in unfamiliar Middle English words that transmute and intertwine with each other in their meaning and expression, which makes Julian's *Revelations of Divine Love* not only difficult to read but also impossible to define. Her text simply refuses to fit neatly into any of the categories of visionary, mystical or theological work we might try to give it. So what kind of a text has Julian left us? This is an important question, because how we approach a text often has more of a bearing on how we understand it than we might imagine.

A visionary work

On the face of it, Julian writes a simple document that describes the series of visions she had in 1373 – hence the choice by one of the earliest editors of the text, Edmund Colledge and James Walsh, to call their edition *A Book of Showings*, a descriptive title that denotes Julian's text as a series of visions or showings. However, when compared with equivalent visionary works of the 14th century, it is clear just how different Julian's so-called visionary work is.

Just up the road from Norwich, in King's Lynn, a somewhat colourful character, Margery Kempe, was compiling a book of her own visionary experiences at the same time as Julian. In a way her *Book of Margery Kempe* is a defence of her extraordinary life, but, interwoven with this biography, Margery gives us detailed descriptions of her visionary experiences, in which she imaginatively enters the world of the gospels and intimately shares in the life of Jesus. In one vision Mary hands her the baby Jesus for her to wash and place in the crib straight after he has been born. Sometimes Margery's visionary participation was rather overwhelming for those around her. Any image of the cross could cause her to break out into such wailing and weeping that she had to be taken from the church. The text Margery wrote can clearly be defined as a visionary work and follows

a form of visionary writing from the 13th and 14th centuries that was predominantly found in the Low Countries.

Julian's writings describe a vision of the events of the Passion, but unlike her visionary contemporaries she did not get emotionally or affectively involved in what she saw. We do not get the sense from her text that she played a role within the narrative of her visions. Instead, Julian stood apart in the more liminal space of observing and interpreting what she saw. Julian did write a visionary work, but somehow this title does not seem to do justice to the extraordinary words that then flow from what she saw.

A mystical work

Ever since Julian's words emerged from their vellum resting places in the 1900s, early editors and scholars have described her writing as a mystical text. Today the term 'mystical' has many different meanings, from union with the divine to altered states of consciousness. Primarily, however, in modern parlance it defines a work that haltingly seeks to articulate an ineffable experience of God in all his mystery. The strange account that Paul gives in 2 Corinthians is seen as the archetypal mystical experience:

I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven – whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. And I know that such a person – whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows – was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat.

2 CORINTHIANS 12:2–4

Paul tries to describe an event that is ultimately a mystery. He speaks in a halting manner and is unable to articulate exactly what was going on or what was heard when in this state; it is both hidden and secret. Yet at the same time there is a grounding of this experience in the words of scripture: both 'third heaven' and the prohibition to

speak are rooted in the biblical tradition of apocalyptic writing found in Ezekiel, Baruch and even the gospels.

Julian similarly describes an experience which happened to her in 1373, when the crucifix that was held before her eyes took on a 'common' light. The subsequent visions of the cross and the description that flows from this event soon spread out into a delta of ideas and even instruction that, especially in the long version of her writing, leaves the mystical experience far behind.

A theological treatise

As Julian's writings have become better known, commentators have come to recognise the profound thinking that makes up much of the body of her work and, as a result, they have sought to identify Julian's texts as a theological treatise and Julian herself as a theologian.

Julian and her texts rightly deserve this heightened respect and the notoriety within the theology faculties that this inadvertently brings. However, any idea that one can easily distil from her complex interplay of language a cohesive theology of sin, or an ecological thesis from a single hazelnut, soon becomes a highly selective and mind-twisting process. I could try to summarise what Julian says on the Trinity or on sin, but Julian was not writing, or even intending to write, a theological treatise that expounded well-thought-out doctrines. She is not an Augustine or even an Aquinas, so trying to read her work as such just doesn't work. That's why you don't find the most interesting research on Julian happening in most theology departments. Instead, it is to the English department you must go.

A literary masterpiece

It is invariably from the many hundreds of books and articles that emanate from a literary approach to Julian that you will find some of the richest and deepest insights on Julian's words, and it is the literary

world that has made her Middle English manuscripts accessible to us today. For it is here that you will find people approaching her work as a piece of crafted engagement, which utilises the devotional and theological landscape of the 14th century to draw the reader into experiencing, for themselves and through her words, what it was that she saw and later came to understand about God and our relationship with him.

Through a literary approach, you will find an appreciation of the nuances and intricacies of Julian's text. Single, simple and everyday words will change and transmute within her writing until they have a powerful theological meaning of their own. Approaching Julian's *Revelations of Divine Love* as a literary masterpiece does not necessarily strip it down through overzealous analysis to its bare bones of form and structure, but it allows the words to speak for themselves, so that we can listen for the voice of Julian coming through her words across the airwaves of time and interpretation.

A devotional invitation

So how are we to approach this text, which defies any simple labelling and refuses to fit into the mould of expectation? When Julian's text first came to public attention at the beginning of the 20th century, it was grouped together with a series of remarkable late 14th-century writings: *The Scale of Perfection* by Walter Hilton; an anonymous work now referred to as *The Cloud of Unknowing*; the writings of Richard Rolle; *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Together they are often given the modern label 'the English Mystics', though at first sight there seems to be very little to link them together as people: Hilton was an Augustinian canon at Thurgarten; we know very little about the *Cloud* author, but it is thought he may have been a member of the Carthusian order; Rolle was a hermit; Kempe was an unconventional visionary who defied the church authorities; and, finally, Julian was an enclosed anchoress committed to a life of prayer in a room attached to St Julian's Church in Norwich.

Yet each, in their own way, wrote to enable others on their search for a deeper knowledge of God. The *Cloud* author, Hilton and Rolle all wrote guides to help women who had devoted themselves to a life set apart in prayer: the enclosed and religious contemplatives. Kempe's book is as much a witness and testimony to the life of a lay woman dedicated to God as it is a visionary work. And Julian's work, while centred around a series of visions of the cross, is intimate in its devotional sharing of the meditations and explanations which arose from them. What brings this eclectic mix of texts together, however, is not necessarily the nature of the writers or even the content of their texts; it is how they have to date come to be used, read and made accessible to a wider public audience.

Each of these works was written at a remarkable time, much like our own, when the search to know God intimately and the hunger for wisdom and guidance on the spiritual path and life of prayer stemmed from the increasingly literate lay section of society as well as the traditional clerics and religious. The writings of both Rolle and Hilton were adapted to meet the demands of this growing group of devout people, most of whom could not read but would gather round a priest or rich friend to hear the expensive vellum books read out loud. Julian also updated her short text and, in the later version, directed her words to 'mine even cristen' rather than those only living the contemplative life. This small alteration suggests a desire by ordinary people to hear more of the wisdom and guidance that Julian would undoubtedly have spoken at her anchorhold window. Along with the other English Mystics, Julian has been preserved, written out in each age, hidden and treasured not just because hers is a visionary work, mystical text, theological treatise or literary masterpiece, but also because it has enabled someone, or some community, to know God better. For this reason, the title 'devotional' text is a helpful way of approaching Julian's writings. It expects her text to be not just a visionary or mystical curiosity, a passive receptacle of learning or a set of literary devices to dissect, but also a place of guidance and encounter.

I once gave a friend of mine a copy of *Revelations of Divine Love*. When I asked her later about how she liked Julian, she sighed and in a guilty manner informed me that a year on she was still only about halfway through. Apologising, I asked her if she had found the whole text too challenging. I have always remembered her reply: 'No,' she said. 'I think it's wonderful, but I can only read a couple of sentences a day. You cannot really read Julian; you can only pray it.' It seems to me that this is why a seemingly insignificant work in her day has become so popular in the 20th and 21st centuries: from her account of 16 revelations, Julian speaks to the spiritual life with which we all struggle in any age. The experience of entering her text leads us into that place where prayer is authentic. Without techniques or spiritual stages or visions of our own, her words simply do what she wanted them to do and what she felt was her mandate for writing – to point us to God.

At the foot of the cross with Julian

It is for this reason that reading Julian's text is such a prayerful experience, for through her words we are invited into a literary-constructed space that scaffolds a place of encounter for ourselves. Her words describe, explain, unfold, emote and deepen our relationship with God. It seems to me that this is why Julian is so often named by those who have read her as being one of the most influential of women in their lives.

This book, therefore, does not so much seek to replace Julian's own words and voice as unpack what she is saying. Part I explores how knowledge of her time and context can help illuminate our reading and allow her words to point the way and lead us to God, whereas each chapter of part II focuses on different aspects of her revelation of the cross: the crown of thorns, the face of Jesus, the blood, Jesus' thirst, the words of the thief, and Jesus' death. The biblical basis for Julian's vision is explored, along with the deeper meaning her vision reveals. This is set within the rich devotional context of the

time in order to more fully understand the significance of Julian's interpretation of her visions and spiritual insight. Each chapter concludes with a guided reading exercise to enable you to enter the silence within Julian's words and with questions for personal devotion or discussion, as well as a verse of scripture for the journey.



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'In this accessible and enthralling volume, Emma Pennington takes us into Julian's world. She gently enables us to engage with Julian in a way which fulfils what Julian felt was her mandate for writing – pointing us to God. Rather than writing a book about Julian, Emma helps us to pray with Julian – whoever we are.'

Brother Stuart Burns OSB

LINGER ON THE WONDER OF THE CROSS...

In this book, Emma Pennington enables us to engage devotionally with Julian's *Revelations of Divine Love*. The introduction gives a general background to Julian, the nature of visions in the 14th century and the type of text Julian gives us.

Each chapter then centres on one aspect or image from the revelations, which seek to make the events of the Passion present to the reader. The commentary incorporates reflection, the biblical narrative and Julian's subsequent teachings to create a meditation that enables the reader to linger on the wonder of the cross. It ends with a prayer that leads to silence and a thought or verse to carry into daily life.



Emma Pennington is canon missionary at Canterbury Cathedral and holds a doctorate from Oxford University on Julian of Norwich. Formerly a parish priest, area dean and spirituality adviser in the Oxford diocese, she has also been chaplain of Worcester College, Oxford and speaks widely on Julian of Norwich and Christian spirituality.



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