

The Parable of the Lord and the Servant: A Soteriology for Our Times

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Abstract: This article presents the soteriology of Julian of Norwich expressed in her *Parable of the Lord and the Servant*. In focusing on Julian's understanding of salvation four dimensions of the soteriology highlighted in the parable are considered: the experience of the fall, the relationship of the lord to the servant during the fall, the central role of the servant in bestowing grace on creation, and hope for eternal union with God. Each of these soteriological dimensions is then appraised in light of contemporary questions about the meaning of salvation.

INTRODUCTION

SOTERIOLOGY ADDRESSES THE PERENNIAL LONGINGS of human beings and asks how salvation can be a reality for Christians in a world that knows so much destructive suffering. Julian of Norwich,¹ a fourteenth century English theologian, has something to contribute to this discourse, for she addressed the same question: *Ah, good Lord, how could all things be well because of the great harm which has come through sin to your creatures?*² In a culture that suffered the horrors of war, turmoil in the Church, and the Plague, Julian gives a vision of hope in her profound book, *The Revelations of Divine Love*. Scholars generally agree that Julian composed the short text after a visionary experience during prayer on 13 May 1373, and the more theological long text after twenty years of reflection on the meaning of these showings or visions. Julian investigates Christian hope for salvation in the long text through theological reflection on the parable of the lord and the servant, which,

1. E. Colledge and J. Walsh, *Julian of Norwich Showings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978). I quote revelation number, chapter number and page numbers. LT represents the long text. All biblical references are from the Vulgate, the biblical translation of Julian's day.

Theologians recently have established the doctrinal import of the *Showings of Julian of Norwich*, for example J. Nuth, *Wisdom's Daughter: the theology of Julian of Norwich* (New York: Crossroad, 1991).

2. LT: 13:29.226.

like a preacher's exemplum, presents theological insights in the form of an allegory.³

INTERPRETING THE PARABLE

The parable of the lord and the servant, Julian explains, is *the beginning of an ABC*,⁴ whereby she gains an understanding of salvation – that, from God's perspective, all will be well. Presenting the parable in revelation fourteen, chapter fifty-one of the long text, she recapitulates the process by which she comes to understand its meaning, explaining that this revelation is manifest in two ways: *spiritually in bodily likeness* and *more spiritually without bodily likeness*.⁵ In other words, the showing has a spiritual dream-like tangible quality which she interprets through prayer.

In keeping with medieval exegesis, in the telling of the vision, Julian impregnates visual imagery with scriptural references. Jean Leclercq explains this methodology:

verbal echoes so excite the memory that a mere allusion will spontaneously evoke whole quotations and, in turn, a scriptural phrase will suggest quite naturally allusions elsewhere in the sacred books. Each word is like a hook, so to speak; it catches hold of one or several others which become linked together and make up the fabric of the expose.⁶

The free interspersing of multiple scriptural illusions into the vision, without references, creates a chain of associations with insights from scripture. Concurrently, interpreting the vision, inspires three levels of understanding: the instruction she understands immediately as she receives the vision, the inward learning that she gradually comes to after the event, and the condensation of the meaning of the whole revelation in the example. In the progression from parable, to inward learning, to theological implications, Julian composes a theology of suffering that is sensitive to the human experience of woe. She gives reasons why such suffering occurs without attributing blame to either God or humankind, while simultaneously extending an understanding of divine pathos.

3. G. Owst, in *Literature and pulpit in Medieval England: a neglected chapter in the history of English letters and of the English people* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1961), gives examples of this popular genre.

4. LT 14:51.276.

5. LT 14:51.267.

6. J. Leclercq, *The love of learning and the desire for God* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1961) 91.

A SUMMARY OF THE PARABLE

On a literal level, Julian describes the vision as she sees it in the present tense. In summary, she identifies two characters in the story in bodily likeness, a courteous and dignified lord and a beloved servant, who dwell peacefully together. There is a respectful intimacy between the lord and the servant. The lord sends the servant on a mission. In his eagerness to accomplish the lord's will, the servant falls into a dell, suffers grave injury (a metaphor for sin) and becomes powerless to fulfil the lord's wishes. His injuries are so severe that he cannot get himself out of the dell. The greatest pain is his inability to see the love of the lord. The lord watches this event with tender regard for the servant. He assigns no blame to him for this unfortunate situation.

Towards the middle of the parable, Julian identifies the lord as God and the servant as Adam, the representative of humankind. Consequently, Julian turns her attention to the lord as she receives a teaching about how God looks on humanity in sin: *I understood that the lord who sat in state in rest and peace is God. I understood that the servant who stood before him was shown for Adam.*⁷ She sees that the consequence of sin creates pain that does its own blaming and punishing, whereas the lord is kindly and loving, longing to bring human beings to bliss. The handsome, dignified lord, clothed in luxurious azure blue, waits patiently with loving regard for the servant because he wants to make the servant's soul his city and dwelling place.

Meanwhile, toil in the dell makes the servant's clothes worn out from hard work.⁸ Subsequently, as Julian observes *a treasure in the earth which the lord loved,*⁹ the servant becomes a gardener who labours tirelessly to find the treasure that will become food for the lord. This leads to her comprehending the servant as human nature, both Adam and Christ. Adam who falls into the dell and experiences sin in the fall, and Christ who because of the eternal union with human nature, willingly falls into the womb of the maiden. The eternal union between Adam and Christ is so complete that *Jesus is in all who will be saved and all who will be saved are in Jesus.*¹⁰

The parable closes as the scene transposes to a beatific vision of heaven. Now the lord is truly God the Father, the servant God the Son, and the joy and delight that exudes from the relationship, the Holy Spirit. Because of this generous labour, the lord does not sit alone on the ground, nor does the servant stand before the lord partially clothed.

7. LT 14:5.270.

8. LT 14:51.272-3.

9. LT 14:51.273.

10. LT 14:51.276. Julian addresses her entire writing to *those who will be saved*, for she sees no one else.

To the delight of all in heaven, the lord has a rich and precious crown which Julian identifies as humankind. Now the servant joyfully sits at the lord's right hand.

As Julian unravels the mysteries hidden in the revelation, four significant issues contribute to a theology of suffering: the experience of the fall, the relationship of the lord to the servant during the fall, the central role of the servant who bestows an abundance of grace on creation, and hope for eternal union with God. I will consider each of these in turn.

THE EXPERIENCE OF THE FALL

Before we concentrate on the central role of the servant in the salvation event, in which the experience of alienation from God occasioned by the fall into sin is transformed into union with God that is even more complete than it would have been had the fall not occurred, we need to explore how Julian characterises the human condition in need of salvation because of sin. In the parable, she does not ask why the dell existed, why God allowed the fall to occur, nor why human suffering exists; nor does she distinguish between suffering that results from sin and other suffering. While we can only speculate as to why Julian did not address these questions, what becomes obvious as the parable unfolds is her indifference to ultimate speculation and her concern to ground her insights about God's relationship with humankind in human experience. For Julian all suffering finds its source in loss of union with God. Her starting point then, is the state of blindness that human beings experience in the dell. Although Julian begins with the human experience of loss of union with God, her emphasis is fundamentally different from those soteriologies concentrating on a punitive theology originating in Augustine's interpretation of Genesis 3 and Romans 5.¹¹ Julian's interpretation of salvation in the lord and the servant creates a theology of hope because it concentrates on God's gracious love for human beings expressed in Christ, a love that ceaselessly works to restore humankind to perfect union with God.

In Julian's allegory of the fall the motive that leads to the fall is significant: *Not only does the servant go, but he dashes off and runs at great speed, loving to do his lord's will.*¹² The parable presents a poignant picture of the anguish that ensues when the fall in the dell interrupts the servant's deepest longing to do the will of the lord. Overcome by woe, the servant becomes unwise and blind to the comforting presence of the

11. See D. Nowakowski Baker, *Julian of Norwich Showings: from vision to book* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994) 85-8, for a summary of this doctrine of retribution in comparison to Julian's opposition to a punitive theodicy.

12. LT 14:51.267.

lord. Moreover, he is powerless to change the situation by turning to the lord, the only one who could change the situation. Although the seven capital vices that give rise to sin – pride, avarice, lust, anger, envy, sloth, and gluttony – dominated Medieval culture, Julian in contrast concentrates on the seven specific dimensions of the servant’s suffering that emerge: severe bruising, clumsiness of body, weakness, blindness in reason, an inability to rise from the dell, and an awareness that the place is narrow, comfortless and distressful. Most astonishing to Julian *was that he lay alone*.¹³ Julian identifies both bodily and spiritual woes that indicate the effect isolation from the lord has on both the bodily and spiritual aspects of the human being. Isolated and trapped in self-pity, blindness becomes pervasive and prevents the servant from recognising his *godly will*, which made in the image of God, can never be eradicated from human beings.

Julian’s shift of emphasis from a stress on the one act that condemned all humankind towards the great pains the servant experiences after the fall, has its biblical precedents in Romans 7. Julian views the fall as resulting in the experience of limits and an inability to live a life in God. Echoing Rom 7:15, “For I do not understand what I do, for it is not what I wish to do, but what I hate to do”, she creates a confronting depiction of the suffering caused by sin which leaves human beings prone to doing the very things they do not wish to do. Disoriented by sin, human beings forget their natural love for God, become prone to despair and experience loss of peace in both body and soul.

THE RELATIONSHIP OF THE LORD TO THE SERVANT

Julian turns her attention to the lord, who embodies how God is with human beings in suffering. In the parable God experiences heartfelt compassion while waiting patiently for the servant to complete his task. Immediately, Julian identifies multiple qualities of mercy in his demeanour which is *compassion and pity, joy and bliss*.¹⁴ Upon further reflection she also sees spiritually in her understanding that the lord exhibits pleasure as he is actively restoring the servant: *I saw him greatly rejoice over the honourable restoration to which he wants to bring and will bring the servant by his great and plentiful grace*.¹⁵ The lord then explains that he is a courteous lord. He gives meaning to the experience of suffering and the sense of isolation that the servant experiences when he falls. The lord will reward such faithfulness in wanting to do his will: *Is it not reasonable that I should reward him for his fright and his fear, his*

13. LT 14:51.267-268.

14. LT 14:45.271.

15. LT 14:51.272.

*hurt and his injuries and all his woe?*¹⁶ Subsequently, Julian receives a spiritual insight about the lord's meaning:

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.¹⁷

The fall in the dell does not limit the love the lord has for the servant. Rather, it initiates a loving response that exposes the endless patience, endless concern and endless resourcefulness of God, who gladly and generously showers plenteous grace which can raise the servant to more glory than he received before the fall. A teaching becomes clear: *only pain blames and punishes, and our courteous lord comforts and succours, and always he is kindly disposed to the soul, loving and longing to bring us to his bliss.*¹⁸ The experience of sin creates its own punishment. Therefore, in contrast to sin that can only create suffering, God who is all goodness never attributes blame for sin, but rather constantly offers healing love. The lord sits beside the servant courteously, leaving him free to respond to the offer of strength, comfort and hope. The lord endows grace that can help the servant bear the consequences of sin and fend off despair. The lord affirms love where wrath was expected and offers the hope of a better future. Julian's choice of the verbs *comforts* (*comfertyth*) and *succours* (*socurryth*) does not mean that God eliminates all pain; rather it reflects the *con-forto* (*fortis*),¹⁹ to strengthen much by standing beside those who need strength, enabling humanity freely and responsibly to participate meaningfully in life, confident of God's providential presence in life, death and destiny.

The image of the lord waiting on the dry, barren earth for the beloved servant illustrates how God relates to humankind in times of suffering. Julian creates a portrait of a courteous, compassionate man who possesses the qualities of *compassion* and *pity*, *joy* and *bliss* as he waits longingly for the servant to complete his task:

The compassion and the pity of the Father were for Adam, who is the most beloved creature. The joy and the bliss were for the falling of the dearly beloved Son, who is equal with the Father.... And his pity and mercy abides with mankind until the time that we come up to heaven.²⁰

Compassion and *pity* reaffirm the comforting presence of God as human beings labour through life. Palliser points out that Julian uses this statement of God's *compassion* and *pity* nineteen times in connection

16. LT 14:51.268.

17. LT 14:51.269.

18. LT 14:51.271.

19. C. Lewis, *A Latin dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984) 416.

20. LT 14:51. 271-272.

with the parable.²¹ The semantics and etymology of “compassion” lead back to the Hebrew *rahamin* (trembling womb),²² the Greek *oiktirmos* (the feeling of compassion) and *splanchna* (the bowels or seat of the emotions),²³ and the Latin *compassio* (denoting fellow sufferer, feeling sympathy and agreement).²⁴ In Middle English *compassion* (*rewth*) conveys a sharing of suffering with another, sympathy and feeling sorry for another’s troubles and involvement in an infliction as in 1 Cor 12:26, “If one member suffers all suffer together with it”.²⁵ *Compassion* and *pity* carry with them elements of tenderness, pity, graciousness, pathos, steadfastness and faithful love. Divine compassion is God’s love metaphorically felt in the womb or the bowel of God that becomes tangibly expressed for human beings in acts of grace, comforting human beings in the midst of pain. The great act of divine compassion occurs when the Father joyfully sends his Son.

Even the physical details of the lord’s clothing denote dimensions of this heartfelt love:

The blueness of his clothing signifies his steadfastness; the brownness of his fair face with the lovely blackness of the eyes was most suitable to indicate his holy solemnity; the amplitude, billowing splendidly all about him, signifies that he has enclosed within himself all heavens and all endless joy and bliss.²⁶

This is not a portrait of an impassible God, but of a God of pathos who is steadfast in love, sincere and empathetic, who encompasses hope for heaven and endless joy and bliss.

THE CENTRAL ROLE OF THE SERVANT IN ENDOWING CREATION WITH AN ABUNDANCE OF GRACE

While the lord waits in the desert, the wise servant sees that there is a special task that he could accomplish that would please the lord. Dressed for labour, he begins to till the garden. The character is identified at this stage as Adam who represents all humankind. The dress of the servant reveals that he is a conscientious labourer, with a loving demeanour. Inwardly he has: *a foundation of love, the love which he had for the lord, which was equal to the love which the lord had for him.*²⁷ Just as the suffering servant in Isa 11:2, the servant, endowed with the spirit of wisdom, takes no account of himself and resolutely sets out to honour the lord. While the tatters of the outer garment remind us that

21. M. Palliser, *Christ, our mother of mercy* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1992) 167.

22. P. Tribble, *God and the rhetoric of sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978) 31-59.

23. Palliser, *Christ, our Mother of Mercy*, 212.

24. Lewis, *Latin dictionary*, 387.

25. H. Kurath, and S. Kuhn (eds.), *Middle English dictionary* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press) 460.

26. LT 14:51.272.

27. LT 14:51.273.

the servant is *a constant labourer and a hard traveller for a long time*, he is also *newly appointed*.²⁸ The servant brings time and eternity together as he represents the eternal Son of God, wisdom of God made flesh and the ongoing work of Christ in creation.

On a literal level, the servant is a gardener who reveres the earth by caring for it so that it might bear fruit. The earthiness of this activity speaks of the goodness of creation especially prevalent in the creation myth of Genesis 1 and the garden of paradise (Gen 2), and of holy ground (Exod 3:5). The emphasis on the preciousness of the earth reinforces the value the earth has for God, for *there was a treasure in the earth that the lord loved*.²⁹ As Julian wonders what the treasure might be, in her understanding she perceives: *it is food which is delicious and pleasing to the lord*.³⁰ The treasure in the earth is indispensable to God.

Metaphorically, Julian points out, the treasure describes *human nature which is mixed with the earth*,³¹ which God's grace will restore through the Incarnation. It speaks of something absolute within humankind and creation that will satisfy the quest for the union with the divine. The ground the servant cultivates represents the human sensuality, while the treasure is the human soul *in a marvellous depth of endless love*.³² This metaphor of the human person as a garden has many biblical precedents, such as Cant 4:12: "You are an enclosed garden, my sister, my bride." The treasure of love in the earth is humankind made in the image of God at one with God. Grace, operative in Christ, enables human beings to be touched by Christ's ground of love and to come to know ourselves as we truly are. The effort and pain of this labour in the garden and the holiness of this life of toil have their rewards in uncovering the treasure. The servant engages in the work of caretaker of the human soul that is like a garden, enabling humankind to become co-creators in the work of creation and to continue God's labour of crafting creation into God.

After reflecting on the servant as garden dweller, Julian identifies why the servant seems to embody contradictions. The servant is not only Adam, he is Christ: *In the servant is comprehended the second person of the Trinity, and in the servant is comprehended Adam, that is to say all men*.³³ Because Christ is in union with human beings, when God looks on humanity God sees Christ: *our Father may not, does not wish to assign more blame to us than to his own beloved Son Jesus Christ*.³⁴ Julian then expands how the second person of the Trinity relates to humanity. Echoing

28. LT 14:51.273.

29. LT 14:15.273.

30. LT 14:51.273.

31. LT 14:51.272.

32. LT 14:51.274.

33. LT 14:51.274.

34. LT 14:51.275.

imagery from Col 1:15, she indicates that Christ is the one who communicates both the transcendence and relationality of God by conflating two significant Pauline images of Christ as *the wisdom of the Father*,³⁵ and Christ as head of the mystical body: *he is the head, and we are his members, to which members the day and the time are unknown when every passing woe and sorrow will have an end and everlasting joy and bliss will be fulfilled*.³⁶ The wisdom motif³⁷ indicates that there is no separation of creation and redemption. Christ, as the incarnation of the wisdom of God, manifests how creation and incarnation are intrinsically connected in the one divine plan. Paradoxically, just as in 1 Cor 1:24-25, the falling of Christ reveals the wisdom of God.

The metaphor of the mystical body expresses how the wisdom of God becomes embedded in humankind in the movement of creation and recreation. With Christ as the head, humankind participates in the life of Christ so that the body of Christ becomes the body of the community.³⁸ The union is so complete that: *Jhesu is in all that shall be safe, and all that (shall) be sa(fe) is in Jhesu*.³⁹ These metaphors of Christ as the wisdom of God and the head of the mystical body of all who will be saved suggests to Julian that God makes no distinction between Christ and humanity.

HOPE FOR ETERNAL UNION WITH GOD

The parable concludes with a beatific vision that results from the gracious outreach of God attaining its irrevocable climax in the servant. In a tableau reminiscent of an image of the Trinity from a Breviary or Book of Hours – where Christ sits to the right of the Father and the Holy Spirit, in the form of a dove, nests lovingly between them – the saved servant reflects an ambience of glory. Cloaked in splendour, he is adorned with a precious crown that he shares with the Father.⁴⁰ Julian describes the crown: *For it was revealed that we are his crown, which crown is the Father's joy, the Son's honour, the Holy Spirit's delight, and endless marvellous bliss to all who are in heaven*.⁴¹ The crown of humankind founded in love, rewards Christ for all the pain he endured in his labour of love. The image affirms the necessity of humankind for the joy, honour and delight of God.

35. LT 14:51.276.

36. LT 14:51.276. See 1 Cor 12:12; 1 Cor 6:15a; 12:12-27; Rom 12:4-6; Eph 4:12-13.

37. Julian expands this metaphor when she develops the theme of the deep wisdom of the trinity, our mother.

38. See 1 Cor 12; Gal 3:28.

39. LT 14:51.276.

40. See "The Trinity" in Bedford Hours, London, British Library MS Add. 18850 in M. Manion and B. Muir, *Medieval texts and images, studies of manuscripts from the Middle Ages* (Sydney: Harwood Academic, 1991) 41.

41. LT 14:51.278.

The final scene of the parable presents hope for salvation. Reminiscent of the Cantic of Canticles, the image of the soul as a garden and Christ as the gardener transposes: *Now the spouse, God's son, is at peace with his beloved wife, who is the fair maiden of endless joy.*⁴² Julian uses bridal imagery to show how the love of Christ enables humankind to approach final union with the divine. The exchange of love that transpires between Christ and human souls is a spiritual marriage; Christ takes humankind as his bride and in union with Christ humanity experiences God's promise of final transformation. In the embrace of divine love we become one in joy.

The grace of the mystical marriage with Christ leads to a vision of the Trinity: *Now the Son, true God and true man, sits in his city in rest and peace, which his Father has prepared for him by his endless purpose, and the Father and the Son, and the Holy Spirit in the Father and in the Son.*⁴³ The whole process of salvation rehearsed in the parable bears witness to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. For union to be complete, the whole person and the triune God become one. The entire work of creation and redemption is the work of the triune God.

The parable teaches Julian the faithfulness of God and the providential care that will not cease. The imagery unveils the pain of the fall into blindness and the longing of believers finally to see and to be open to experience God's love. Paradoxically, the experience of fallenness becomes an experience of grace. Human woundedness, occasioned in the fall, reveals the transforming power of God's healing love made tangible through the labour of Christ. In the parable, the pain of weariness of life disconnected from God gives way to a deep joy of being always in the presence of the merciful love of the triune God who is ever renewing and recreating human life in Christ. The example thus discloses that while believers know sorrow and suffering, this is part of the living out of truth of being one with Christ. Sustained by this union with Christ we can wait peacefully and live in hope-filled expectation that the union depicted in the parable is partially possible in a life centred on Christ and is a foretaste of the joy of heaven.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE SOTERIOLOGY EXPRESSED IN THE PARABLE OF THE LORD AND THE SERVANT FOR CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGY

The parable leaves us with the question: what does the soteriology expressed in the exemplum have to offer contemporary theology? Julian's place as a theologian is pivotal in the continuity of theologians from Patristic sources to contemporary times in reflecting on the meaning of divine love. Because she roots her theological reflection in a

42. LT 14:51.278.

43. LT 14:51.278.

mystical core, she enables us to experience knowledge that, while it did not come directly from the academy, was of significance to the church. This helps us connect theological reflection with lived experience, interpreted through the eyes of a woman devoted to Christ and the church. In light of questions about salvation which are a focus for contemporary theologians such as Schillebeeckx, Edwards, O'Collins, Johnson, and LaCugna, as well as for Vatican II documents, I propose to give examples of how Julian's insights can be inspirational to contemporary theology by examining the significance of the exemplum under the four themes developed in the exegesis: the experience of the fall, the relationship of the lord to the servant during the fall, the central role of the servant who bestows an abundance of grace on creation because of the fall, and hope for eternal union with God. Mindful that Julian is a woman of her day with many traditional Medieval doctrines embedded in her text, and with due concern not to make Julian into someone else simply to justify contemporary interests, I wish to show how Julian has something to contribute to the inquiry in the tradition for a soteriology that concentrates on the value of human beings, the free gracious love of God for creation through Christ and the hope that all will be well.

THE FALL

In her imaging of the experience of the fall, Julian examines two principal themes: the good will of the servant who does not anticipate the fall; and the pain that the servant encounters after he endures loss of union with God after the fall. The servant's consistent desire to do the will of the lord affirms for Julian the essential goodness of humankind. Possibly describing her own experience of trying to live the will of God, Julian attributes the fall to an unanticipated event that interrupts God's plan that human beings would exist in full union with God. Although the fall intrudes and causes disharmony in the union between God and creatures, God's perseverance in a total commitment to creation ensures that human beings are not abandoned because of the fall. We can therefore see how contemporary theologians, whose concern is to highlight a Christian legacy that emphasises the innate goodness of human beings and the love of God that motivates the incarnation, derive this insight from a tradition exemplified by Julian's emphasis on the love of God for the servant and the initial good will of the servant.

Within Christianity there are two predominant interpretations of the underlying motive for the incarnation, namely God's providential plan that initiated the incarnation as God's reaching out in love to human beings, and the incarnation as God's response to human sin. Edwards summarises the positions clearly:

Many Christians assume that it is church teaching that the incarnation comes only, or primarily, as a result of human sin and as

a remedy for sin. In fact, of course, this represents only one school of theology, one of two traditional ways of seeing the relationship between creation and the incarnation.... The alternative Christian theology sees the incarnation as flowing from God's free love for creatures. The incarnation is not dependent on the fall.⁴⁴

With similar concerns, O'Collins warns of the danger of viewing the incarnation only as a response to human sinfulness: "It is to our peril that we reflect on central biblical versions of redemption as reconciliation, adoption, and covenant without appealing to the divine love."⁴⁵ Julian can contribute to this enquiry because the starting point for her soteriology is the abundance of divine love for human beings; she never leaves this perspective out of her consideration. During the parable, she shows how the union in love expressed in Christ becoming human was always part of God's plan, and in the divine perspective God never distinguishes between the Son and all human beings. When the lord sends the servant on a mission before the fall, the servant is both Christ and humankind.⁴⁶ This eternal union was so complete that, when human beings fall, Christ experiences all the pain that human beings feel as a result of the fall. When the servant falls, the love of the lord increases as gracious, free compassion for humankind.

Although Julian's attitude towards human beings obviously appeals to theologians wishing to affirm that the incarnation flows from God's love, we cannot ignore the limitation of her ideology. Julian's primary theological method is not to argue against either the thread more common in the tradition based on a literal interpretation of Genesis 3 that stresses the wilful disobedience of human beings, or the later interpretation of the need for the Son to save humankind from sin. She simply illustrates her position in the parable. The meticulous care Julian takes to align herself with the church in the *Showings*, suggests that this perspective was theologically feasible as there is no indication of accusations of heresy associated with her viewpoint.⁴⁷ Perhaps this is because her emphasis on the good will of the servant gives an accurate description of genuine Christians struggling to live the will of God.

Nevertheless, Julian acknowledges the shadow-side of the human condition in the blindness of the servant and his inability to know himself. Her emphasis on the seven pains the servant experiences reflects the Pauline thrust of humankind divided against itself. *Gaudium et Spes* follows this tradition. The attempt to concentrate on the brokenness of the human condition separated from God takes

44. D. Edwards, *Jesus the Wisdom of God, an ecological theology* (Homebush, NSW: St. Paul's, 1995) 70-71.

45. G. O'Collins, *Christology*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) 282-3.

46. Julian makes this point even clearer after the parable in chapter 53.

47. "...but in everything I believe as Holy Church preaches and teaches": LT 1:9.192.

attention away from an historical fall that transmits a static state of sin, towards considering the forceful physical and spiritual pain of sin that becomes a consequence of seclusion from God. This can assist a post-Vatican II church with a pastoral concern to encourage in its people an ever deepening relationship with God.

Furthermore, Julian's concentration on the painful effect that isolation from God has, both on the body and soul of the human being, can contribute to an appreciation that God's free love for creatures occurs in the context of the whole of human experience. Likewise, Julian's relative lack of emphasis on the destructive potential of the body indicates a theological attitude that values the whole human being. She accentuates the true nature of human beings as intended by God to be God's dwelling place. Her appreciation of the human body as God's dwelling place can contribute to the theological articulation of the value of the human person and help counteract the tendency in the Christian tradition to spiritualise the human being. Julian's perspective can also encourage a condemnation of all that dishonours the whole human person and support a healthy reinterpretation of the significance of the body and the sacredness of human sexuality.

THE RELATIONSHIP OF THE LORD TO THE SERVANT DURING THE FALL

The second major theme that develops in the parable is the relationship of the lord to the servant during the fall. Julian is deeply concerned whether God is able to relate to creatures, to care for humanity in times of suffering. In this century that emulates many of the horrors of the fourteenth century namely wars, disease and famine, and the assault on the environment, theologians are reflecting on the nature of the divine-human relationship. Schillebeeckx articulates this concern:

The Christian message does not give an *explanation* of evil or our history of suffering. That must be made clear from the start. Even for Christians, suffering remains impenetrable and incomprehensible, and provokes rebellion. Nor will the Christian blasphemously claim that God himself required the death of Jesus as compensation for what *we* make of our history. This sadistic mysticism of suffering is certainly alien to the most authentic tendencies of the Christian tradition, at the very least.⁴⁸

As theologians such as Schillebeeckx confrontingly point out, the challenges of the problem of evil and of our history of suffering defy a rational explanation. Rather, the focus becomes how we relate to God in times of such suffering. Classical theism's model of a God who,

48. E. Schillebeeckx, *Christ* (London: SCM Press, 1980) 728.

while being impassible, requires recompense for sin through the death of the Son is no longer convincing. Reflecting similar criticisms, Elizabeth Johnson shifts the focus away from "a sadistic mysticism of suffering" towards the God-human relationship:

A different interpretation becomes possible when the root metaphor is taken from personal reality that is constitutionally relational. Then the essence of God can be seen to exist in the motion of personal relations and the act that is love. With this in view it is possible to conceive of suffering as not necessarily a passive state nor a movement from potentiality to act. Rather suffering can be conceived of ontologically as an expression of divine being in so far as it is an act freely engaged in as a consequence of care for others. The personal analogy makes it possible to interpret divine suffering as Sophia-God's act of love freely overflowing in compassion.⁴⁹

Johnson is not suggesting here that a powerless suffering God will help support those who suffer; rather, her position aligns with Julian's identification of a compassionate God articulated centuries earlier in the parable. Awareness of a responsive God, who unites with those who suffer through divine compassion, to transform suffering without justifying its evil, can bring an inexplicable consolation and comfort.

Julian employs the image of a feudal lord to hold together a respect for God's mystery and transcendence, and the self-giving compassion of a responsive God ceaselessly working until the pain that results in the human condition as a result of the fall becomes transformed. In spite of limitations on this feudal imagery for a contemporary world, Julian manages to impart God's relationality. This concentration on the relationality of God exemplifies a way of returning to a biblical view of God who has a rich emotional life, and who feels love, compassion, pity, delight and concern for the suffering of the world and who pours out an abundance of grace in response to the situation we find ourselves in. This image of a responsive, compassionate God offers hope from despair and the discouragement we feel in the light of evil and suffering. The fidelity of God's compassion calls for trust and confidence that all will be well; it enables human beings to withstand enormous hardship and to extend compassion to others.

THE CENTRAL ROLE OF THE SERVANT IN ENDOWING CREATION WITH AN ABUNDANCE OF GRACE

The third theme that becomes clear to Julian during the example is the central role of the servant in communicating God's favour. Before we consider the feasibility of the centrality of Jesus in salvation we need to note that Julian would never ask the question as to whether Christ is

49. E. Johnson, *She who is* (New York: Crossroad, 1992) 265.

the universal saviour, for in a Christian Medieval world, the uniqueness of Jesus as the definitive word of God for all people for all time is an *a priori*. Nevertheless, while the central role of Christ in the salvation event is a fundamental tenet of Christology, today theologians are wanting to refresh their understanding of this significance in light of Christ's relationship with humanity. Catherine LaCugna depicts this position:

The mystery of God is revealed in Christ and the Spirit as the mystery of love, the mystery of persons in communion who embrace death, sin, and all forms of alienation for the sake of life. Jesus Christ, the visible icon of the invisible God, discloses what it means to be fully personal, divine as well as human. The spirit of God poured into our hearts as love (Rom 5:5), gathers us together into the body of Christ, transforming us so that "we become by grace what God is by nature", namely, persons in full communion with God and with every creature.⁵⁰

Julian's Christology can contribute to an understanding of how creatures, as part of the body of Christ, become people in full communion with God. Her central theme is the role of the servant as Christ in achieving this union. Three significant facets of Christ's role in uniting humanity in full communion with God reveal how Christ bestows an abundance of grace that will unite humanity with God: his work as gardener, his double identity as Adam and Christ, and his role as the wisdom of the Father and the head of the body of Christ.

In the first role of the servant as gardener, Julian situates the work of Christ on earth, giving the work of redemption an ecological perspective. The servant cares for the treasure in the earth, and the earth itself. As gardener, Jesus displays a vulnerability to human experience that reflects such solidarity with human wellbeing, that he labours with humanity to restore harmony to the garden. The focus on human nature as the treasure in the earth that is essential to God's happiness expresses the conviction that we can only comprehend human nature in relation to God, and we can only regard God in relation to human beings. It also emphasises that human beings are a body-spirit unity with matter just as important as spirit. This perspective on Christ's work of salvation as a gardener who cultivates a garden appeals to contemporary theology which respects the unique dignity of each human being and the intrinsic value of all of creation.

The double aspect of the servant, both as Adam – who represents all humanity – and as Christ, is central to Julian's understanding that God never blames human beings for the condition we find ourselves in, because when God looks at Adam, God sees Christ. The union of God

50. C. LaCugna, *God for us* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1992) 1.

with humanity in the incarnation is so complete that God cannot distinguish one from the other. By twinning Adam with Christ, Julian attributes three restorative functions to Christ. First, the servant shows that God constantly cares for humankind because the moment human beings fell, the Son fell into the womb of the maiden, revealing that creation and incarnation are intrinsically linked. In God's providential plan, creation could never be left separated from God. Secondly, as humanity is in Christ, the fall becomes a *felix culpa* because there is a new creation (2 Cor 5:17), which recreates humankind even more fully in union with God than we were before the fall. Thirdly, the servant experiences all the pain and degradation of the human condition as he works in the garden. In meeting humankind in suffering, the Son offers a share in transformation to glorified life.

These Christological acclamations that elaborate on the union that exists between Christ and all creatures assist our interpretation of the incarnation as an absolute act of divine love where Christ maintains eternal union with human beings even in the experience of the fall. He works ceaselessly in order to restore the union between God and humankind. Julian's shift in emphasis, away from a model of divine retribution that leaves human beings feeling guilty and powerless, towards the unique bond of love between the Father and the Son and the Son and human beings that is the source of our salvation, is theologically viable in a world that more than ever needs encouragement to align itself with God's love. The concentration on the bond of love between Christ and us empowers Christians to want to strengthen this union; it offers hope for an evolving, mutual, satisfying God human relationship that draws humanity into resurrection life.

The third important image that Julian presents in the parable that points to the definitive role of Jesus in salvation is the depiction of the servant as the wisdom of the Father and the head of the body of Christ. This image leads the way for a fuller development of how the servant reveals the deep wisdom of the Trinity our mother in chapter fifty-four. Within the parable she simply infers that grace is so active in the work of Christ restoring and recreating that God can make no distinction between Christ and us. This inference suggests a movement in Julian's thinking from a static understanding of how Jesus saves to a more evolutionary and existentialist understanding of humankind in union with Christ, participating in ongoing creation and redemption.

HOPE FOR ETERNAL UNION WITH GOD

The parable ends with a beatific vision that confirms that all will be well. Julian has something to say about hope for salvation that is partially realised in this life and fully realised in eternity. Her image of the beatific vision does not convey a sense that this life is unimportant

and human reward will only be found in heaven. The attention to the earthly nature of the salvation event indicates that the beatific vision is an extension of the life lived on earth in union with Christ. This integration between this life and heaven aligns with the teaching of the Second Vatican Council in *Gaudium et Spes*:

We do not know the time for the consummation of the earth and of humanity. Nor do we know how all things will be transformed. As deformed by sin, the shape of this world will pass away. But we are taught that God is preparing a new dwelling place and a new earth where justice will abide, and whose blessedness will answer and surpass all the longings for peace which spring up in the human heart.

The document continues:

For after we have obeyed the Lord, and in his Spirit nurtured on earth the values of human dignity, brotherhood and freedom, and indeed all the good fruits of our nature and enterprise, we will find them again, but freed from stain, burnished and transfigured.⁵¹

Julian testifies that God's whole existence is tied up with the redemption and liberation of human beings and that God is affected by the anguish experienced by broken humanity. Against a background of a history of human injustice and suffering, the image of God faithfully relating to human beings through the incarnation can be a critical symbol for contemporary times. What is unique about Julian's interpretation of the beatific vision is the stress on the joy which God experiences in our salvation when we become the glory of God, the crown of Christ and his reward. This discourse facilitates a theology of hope that every tear will be wiped away and that all will be sisters and brothers in the household of a God who is at home with human beings. In a world which cries out for hope, Julian affirms that the one thing human beings can be sure about is the constancy of God's love.

51. *Gaudium et spes*, no. 39, in W. M. Abbot (ed.), *Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Guild Press, 1966) 237.