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Judgment Without Wrath: Christus Victor in "The Servant Parable"

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The Paradox

The earliest credal statement in the church is clear, simple and uncompromising: "Jesus Christ is Lord."[1] Because "Jesus Christ is Lord" Paul believes the church can and should stand fast against temptation, sin, and all the principalities and powers of evil, even as it rejoices in the sure hope of salvation.[2] Persuaded that Christ's triumph over death is the historical beginning of an eventual and total healing of the cosmos, Paul triumphantly proclaims:

> For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.[3]

Yet in the same letter Paul warns of condemnation and judgment as real possibilities for people, saying that "the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth."[4] Thus Paul, in keeping with the rest of the New Testament, reflects a mysterious tension, a paradox between the hope of universal redemption and the possibility of hell.

This paradox has been the source of endless debate ever since. The debate is not trivial. Eschatology is the final outworking of the rest of theology. It is, to borrow a concept from the business world, the "vision statement" which charts the theological course for everything from evangelism to ethics to personal piety.

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Eschatology which attempts to resolve the biblical paradox between universal redemption and the possibility of hell usually requires a diminishment of either divine mercy or divine justice, or an over-emphasis on human depravity or human innocence.[5] To be true to biblical revelation eschatology must maintain the tension of the paradox, exploring the implications with a "both/and" mindset. Thus Berkhouwer, for example, acknowledges the doxological potential in universalism, yet soberly questions the motives behind it[6]: "How much does this universalism reflect a concern for solidarity in the common dangers that confront humanity and how much of it reflects a minimizing of the gravity of sin?"[7] Does universalism inevitably lead to "cheap grace"?[8]

Berkhouwer's question was *the* central theological dilemma for Julian of Norwich, an extraordinary theologian and mystic of the 14th century whose thought is increasingly vital to contemporary eschatology.[9] Julian's theology, while rooted in scripture and tradition, arose from numinous experience. Julian was, first and foremost, a "pray-er." During a series of 16 visions ("showings")she experienced while seriously ill, Julian saw to her astonishment that God's judgment is without wrath, and that it will heal the entire cosmos and make *all* things well. How could it be, Julian wondered, in light of sin, the devil, and traditional teaching of the church, that God's judgment would be without wrath? Julian wrestled with God, unafraid to question the seeming contradictions, unwilling to settle for superficial answers:

> The first judgment, which is from God's justice, is from his own great endless love, and that is that fair, sweet judgment which was shown in all the fair revelation in which I saw him assign to us no kind of blame. And though this was sweet and delectable, I could not be fully comforted only by contemplating it, and that was because of the judgment of Holy Church, which I had understood before, and which was continually in my sight...And by the same judgment I understood that sinners sometimes deserve blame and wrath, and I could not see these two in God.[10]

Bewildered by the absence of God's wrath in her visions as well as God's silence concerning the damned, Julian reports crying and begging God to give her some way to reconcile the tension. She believes in damnation but cannot see it. The revelatory experience she has had is utterly real.[11] Julian is fearful of relinquishing her belief because it might lead to theological error or sin, and because it would contradict Holy Church. God's only answer to

Julian's dilemma[12] comes wordlessly, in the form of a vision, "the Servant Parable," which though incomprehensible at first, becomes the central metaphoric image in Julian's thought. This parable remains vivid in her mind for the rest of her life, providing an unlimited source for theological reflection.[13] The fruit of Julian's contemplation is her only extant writing, *Showings*, a profoundly christological, trinitarian theology. Julian wrote it because God showed her, literally, that "Jesus Christ is Lord."

In the discussion that follows I present an overview of the Servant Parable and Julian's interpretation of it, followed by an analysis in light of scripture and tradition, concluding with a discussion of Julian's relevance to contemporary eschatology.

The Parable[14]

As Julian looked with the eye of her spirit she saw a handsome lord dressed in expansive, blue clothing. His pale brown face and lovely black eyes bespoke compassion, mirth, mercy, wisdom, and love. Though stately and regal his presence was welcoming, most "familiar" and "courteous." The lord sat in a vast, empty place, alone except for one servant. The servant wore a thin, shabby tunic, tattered from much hard labor, yet the servant himself was youthful and fresh as if he had never worked. The servant's sole delight was to serve his lord.

The lord asked the servant to carry out a special task--to till the earth, grow a special food that is hidden in the earth, and bring it back to the lord. Julian marveled that the lord would want anything from the earth since within himself he contained everything, including "all the heavens." The servant, eager to carry out his master's bidding, ran happily to fulfill the task. In his haste the servant fell into a dell, causing him seven great pains: severe bruising, bodily clumsiness, physical weakness, mental blindness and confusion, the inability to rise again, profound loneliness, and confinement to a narrow, comfortless place. The most astonishing pain to Julian, was the servant's utter aloneness in his fallen state. The servant did not know his lord could see him.

The lord looked on with great compassion, aware of his servant's fall, deeply moved at the suffering of his beloved servant. The lord did not blame his servant for the fall because the servant fell from sheer eagerness to serve his lord. Rejoicing over his servant's love, the lord planned a reward for his servant that surpassed what the servant would have received had the fall never occurred. Julian records the unexpected words of the lord:

> See my beloved servant, what harm and injuries he has had and accepted in my service for my love, yes, and for his good will. Is it not reasonable that I should reward him for his fright and his fear, his hurt and his injuries and all his woe? And furthermore, is it not proper for me to give him a gift, better for him and more honorable than his own health could have been? Otherwise, it seems to me that I should be ungracious.[15]

> And in this an inward spiritual revelation of the lord's meaning descended into my soul, in which I saw that this must necessarily be the case, that his great goodness and his own honour require 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.[16]

Julian goes on to say that "the wonder of the example never left me, for it seemed to me that it had been given as an answer to my petition."[17] For the next twenty years "less three months" Julian pondered the meaning of the parable which was "full of secrets," as is the case "with every showing."[18] God told her to pay attention to every detail of the showing, no matter how small, for every aspect of it had revelatory significance. God urged her to contemplate this vision no matter how "mysterious and ambiguous" it seemed, for in due time she would gain insight from it.[19]

Over the years Julian came to understand that the lord in the parable represents God, who sits in a barren place while he patiently awaits the perfecting of his city. The city is all people who will be saved,[20] for God's intent has always been to dwell within his people, just as his people dwell within him. Like a vivified Rorschach image the servant is simultaneously Adam (all humanity) and Christ. At one level the servant's fall represents the fall of humanity, who in the depths of their heart did not intend to transgress against the Lord they loved. The seven pains reflect the results of the fall--alienation, blindness, fear, suffering, humanity's inability to extricate itself from its falleness. At another level the servant's fall represents Christ "falling into the Virgin's womb" and then into death and hell in order to redeem humanity.[21] Julian marvels because "in all this our good Lord showed his own Son and Adam as only one man."[22]

God would no sooner assign blame or wrath to us, Julian argues, than

he would to his own beloved Son, who has taken into himself for all time, the fallenness of the world. In his utter solidarity with all humanity Jesus experienced crucifixion and death, then descended into hell where he performed a mighty deed: "he raised up the great root out of the deep depth, which rightly was joined to him in heaven."[23]

The beginning and end of Julian's theology is the infinite love of God, a love that is deeper than sin, a love that literally unites God to humanity forever. While Julian never fully resolves the paradox of God's mercy and justice co-mingled, she interprets the mystery she does not understand in light of the truth she knows. God may be trusted with the unknown, because God is trustworthy with the known. God is love. This is the basis for everything else.

Julian's eschatology is filled with hope for all people, for God does not reveal any details to her about the damned.[24] His overwhelming message is one of security for the saved. Julian becomes persuaded that no persons will be lost in the end, even though she believes in the genuine possibility of hell for persons.[25] Christians can be confident in the saving love of God even though they can never fully overcome sin in this life:

> In this endless love we are led and protected by God, and we never shall be lost, for he wants us to know that the soul is a life, which life of his goodness and his grace will last in heaven without end, loving him, thanking him, praising him.[26]

A "great deed" will take place in the future, a mysterious act that could never be guessed and that Julian herself does not understand.[27] This deed will consummate the final healing of the cosmos. Because of this hope Christians should not preoccupy themselves with questions about the damned. Instead they should contemplate God, whose love is sure:

> And so long as we are in this life, whenever we in our folly revert to the contemplation of those who are damned, our Lord tenderly teaches us and blessedly calls us, saying in our souls: Leave me alone, my beloved child, attend to me. I am enough for you, and rejoice in your savior and in your salvation.[28]

Every aspect of Julian's eschatology is woven through with the Servant Parable. Her concepts of purgation, penitence, and bodily resurrection are to be understood in the context of the parable. Indeed the entire *Heilsgeschichte* is found in the parable although this was not apparent to Julian

for many years. Because of the centrality of the Servant Parable to Julian's theology, and because the parable is first and foremost her subjective experience of God, its content must be plumbed in light of scripture and tradition. This kind but critical analysis was Julian's self-assigned task. To that task let us now turn our attention.

Analysis

Due to the breadth of the parable, which is beyond the scope of this paper, I will limit the remainder of my discussion to two themes most pertinent to the paradox under consideration. These themes are the perfection of the city and universal redemption.

The work of Christ the Servant is to perfect the City--"all who will be saved."[29] Christ carries out this work by becoming one with Adam, so that in God's sight there is no distinction between Adam and Christ. The literalism of this aspect of Julian's parable is quite consistent with Pauline theology:

> For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ...The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. As was the man of dust, so are those who are of the dust, and as is the man of heaven, so are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven.[30]

> For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.[31]

It is clear in Paul's writing, as well, that justification is by grace, through faith, because humanity is incapable of extricating itself from its fallen condition.[32] So the breadth of Julian's conceptualization of Christ's oneness with Adam is consonant with Paul's doctrine of justification.

Julian also draws upon Aquinas'vocabulary using "substance"[33] to explain the inseparability of Christ and those who will be saved. There is an inviolable and divine "substance" in the union of Christ with Adam that is found in the deepest will of those who will be saved. Because of the substance there is an aspect of the will that never truly wants to sin.[34] This deepest will against sin may not be cognizant to the one who sins, as symbolized by the fallen servant's mental confusion and blindness. Yet by grace the divine

substance remains in the will:

> We have all this blessed will whole and safe in our Lord Jesus Christ, because every nature with which heaven will be filled had of necessity and of God's rightfulness to be so joined and united in him that in it a substance was kept which could never and should never be parted from him, and that through his own good will and in his endless prescient purpose.[35]

The maternal grace of God draws and protects the sinful soul from the moment the soul is breathed into the body, Julian writes.[36] Within our very sensuality (physicality) exists an operation of the Holy Spirit which mysteriously inclines us to God.[37]

> For I saw very surely that our substance is in God, and I also saw that God is in our sensuality, for in the same instant and place in which our soul is made sensual, in that same instant and place exists the city of God, ordained for him from without beginning. He comes into this city and will never depart from it, for God is never out of the soul, in which he will dwell blessedly without end.[38]

The concept of the Holy Spirit drawing the soul to God from the moment of conception has its roots in scripture[39] and in certain early patristic writers, most notably that of Irenaeus, for whom the drawing does not cease until the soul is made divine.[40] Irenaeus' doctrine of divinization (which is vital to Eastern Orthodox pneumatology)[41] surfaces in the West centuries later in Wesley's doctrine of sanctification ("going on to perfection").[42] This doctrine together with Wesley's doctrine of prevenient grace[43] arose from his life experience combined with his work as a patristics scholar. Both are compatible with Julian's image of the soul being drawn to and unified with God.

Wesley, however, would scarcely agree with Julian's conclusion that all will be saved despite the possibility of hell. Wesley insists that hell and damnation are realities not only for the demonic but also for people, and that scripture does not endorse apocatastasis.[44] Nor would Wesley accept Julian's teaching that sin is somehow necessary and inevitable in the Christian.[45]

One of the criticisms of Julian's form of apocatastasis is that it minimizes the seriousness of sin for people and for God. Yet we do not find trivialization of sin in Julian's thought. On the contrary, her visions are centered on the passion of Christ, which though completed with glad self-

giving, was incomprehensible agony. Julian acknowledges that "our failing is dreadful, our falling is shameful, and our dying is sorrowful,"[46] yet no matter how dreadful our condition, the "sweet eye of pity is never turned away from us, and the operation of mercy does not cease."[47] Christians should willingly accuse themselves of the sins they commit and genuinely own their falleness, particularly in light of the pain it costs Christ. The reason for such self-examination, however, is not to lead to self-loathing, but rather to appreciation for Christ's great love for us, and to see our tremendous worth in God's eyes.[48]

It was precisely this aspect of Julian's theology--her emphasis on pervasive divine love--that was a much needed corrective to the christology of her day.[49] Julian perceptively writes that it is easy to believe in God's omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence, but hard to truly rest in God's infinite love.[50] Belief in the "three omni's" without trust in infinite love leads Christians to fixate on their sin and remain terrified of God, so that instead of growing in grace they remain stuck. Love, not fear, is the power that enables people to move forward.

For this reason von Balthasar praises Julian as a supreme example of one who rightly hopes "that all men may be saved": "In the Middle Ages, probably no one ventured farther ahead than the great English mystic Lady Julian of Norwich."[51] In the same vein Barth, who resisted presuming the salvation of all people since the biblical revelation is a paradox, muses over the loveless phenomenon of Christians bitterly resisting even a hope for all people.[52] Likewise Rahner simultaneously warns against presumption either toward the damnation of some or the salvation of all.[53] The tension of the paradox must remain.

Conclusion

Julian's voice is gaining an increasingly large and respectful hearing in contemporary theology[54], including among evangelical Protestants.[55] The reasons for her importance are diverse. To begin with Julian offers a genuinely Christian mysticism to a contemporary church immersed in religious pluralism. Her mysticism is profoundly christological and trinitarian. Julian's theology rises from her prayer, yet these originary experiences are shaped by and refined in the purifying light of scripture and tradition. Thus Julian provides for us a holistic model for "doing" theology--a critically important contribution for theology in a post-modern age.

Julian's eschatology is particularly consonant with liberation theologies in that the final outcome for the cosmos is total healing, total

liberation from all oppression. Salvation is for all people because Christ and Adam are one. The people of God are a city. Salvation is thus an experience of healing community, where old divisions no longer exist. For these reasons and because of her rich maternal God imagery Julian is significant to feminist theology.

In the field of pastoral theology Julian's doctrine of the healing, transforming mercy of God is unsurpassed in holding forth hope to broken people. Julian's theology abounds with healing images: Christ as our clothing, our safe place, our kind and tender Mother. Julian does not diminish the existence of sin in the world or its devastating effects. Yet she communicates truth that is almost too good to be true--God's love is deeper than sin, deeper than death itself. And because God's love is that deep, any wound can heal.

Perhaps the greatest theological contribution Julian makes to contemporary theology, however, is her ability to embrace paradox *and* critical thought, simultaneously. Julian is able to balance these two because she is persuaded that behind every theological paradox is the God who is love. Humanity is God's bliss, God's reward, God's honor, God's crown.[56] Love is God's meaning. Because love is God's meaning God can be trusted to be loving even in the face of mystery, paradox, and unknowing. Julian's eschatology is an example, par excellence, of theological balance.

> This is, for her, the heart of theology: Not solving the contradiction, but remaining in the midst of it, in peace, knowing that it is fully solved, but that the solution is secret, and will never be guessed until it is revealed.[57]

Julian saw, literally, that "Jesus Christ is Lord." Yet the Lord of her vision exercises authority by means of kenosis. His power is that of a good mother. When he returns a second time it will be to perform a "great deed," not of damnation, but of redemption. Julian cannot say when or how God will do this, but she is quite certain that all will be well.

Endnotes

[1]Phil. 2:11; Acts 2:36.

[2]Phil. 1:6; Eph. 6:10-11; Col. 2:11-15.

[3]Rom. 8:19-23.

[4]Rom. 1:18.

[5]Consider, for example the contemporary phenomenon of Christians in our pluralistic culture who think that "it doesn't matter what you believe as long as

you're sincere...all roads lead home." This belief is widespread among United Methodists, including those in my parish. My greatest task as a pastor has been to help my parishioners understand that it *does* matter what we believe. Karl Rahner sees a similar need among Catholics. Karl Rahner, "The Hermeneutics of Eschatalogical Assertions," *Theological Investigations* 4, 337. Pelagianism and hyper-Calvinism are other, older examples.

[6]Universalism, or apocatastasis, has several forms, the most extreme being the position that all things including the devil and demons will be redeemed. This is the view for which Origen was increasingly criticized and eventually rejected. C. G. Berkhouwer, *The Return of Christ*, trans. James van Oosterom, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 390. The more temperate expression holds forth *hope* that all people (not the devil or demons) might be saved while recognizing the very real biblical warning against hell. This view has been on the ascendency in contemporary Roman Catholic theology since Vatican II. Hans Urs von Balthazar, *Dare We Hope that All Men Shall Be Saved?* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 143-147; 156-57. Peter C. Phan, "Contemporary Context and Issues in Eschatology," *Theological Studies* 55 (1994), 516.

[7]Berkhouwer, 391.

[8]Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. R. H. Fuller (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1963), 45.

[9]Julian of Norwich was an anchoress of Norwich, England, who lived in a small cell attached to the Church of St. Julian, from whom she took her name. Her writing is masterful, on par with that of Chaucer and other literary contemporaries. Her writing reveals a deep knowledge of scripture and familiarity with standard theological writings of the time, including Augustine and Aquinas. Julian became famous for her wisdom and sanctity and was a much sought-after spiritual guide, though she never left her cell after entering in her early thirties. Grace M. Jantzen, *Julian of Norwich: Mystic and Theologian*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1988). Julian of Norwich, *Showings*, trans. and introduction by Edmund Colledge and James Walsh, (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 257.

[10]Julian, 257.

[11]Ibid., 266-67.

[12]Ibid., 257.

[13]Ibid., 269.

[14]The parable (Chapter 51) is not found in the "Short Text," possibly because of Julian's need to contemplate it for several years before being able to write about it. In any event the implications of the parable, after years of

contemplation, greatly enhanced her understanding of all the other "showings," thereby increasing the length of the "Long Text."

[15]Ibid., 268-69.

[16]Ibid., 269.

[17]Ibid.

[18]Ibid.

[19]Ibid., 270.

[20]Ibid., 272.

[21]Ibid., 270-272.

[22]Ibid., 275.

[23]Ibid., 277.

[24]Julian does see that the devil, whom she calls "the fiend," is already damned, although the final manifestation of his damnation will not be seen until the end of all things (201-2). Thus her vision of hope does not extend to the salvation of Satan or the demons.

[25]Thus Julian maintains the tension of the paradox, yet gives others a profound message of hope and safety.

[26]Ibid., 284.

[27]Ibid., 240.

[28]Ibid.

[29]Julian's communal vision of heaven as a city is in keeping with scripture as well as Eastern, Western, and Reformed faith traditions. See Rev. 21:9-27; Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. by Henry Bettenson (New York: Penguin Books, 1984).

[30]1 Cor. 15:21-22, 47-49.

[31]2 Cor. 5:21.

[32]Rom. 3:20-28; 8:1-11; Gal. 3:13-14.

[33]Aquinas *Summa theologiae*, 1.8.3.

[34]Julian, 283.

[35]Ibid.

[36]Ibid.; cf. 297-300.

[37]Ibid., 287. In this teaching we see Julian's commitment to hylomorphism, also consistent with Aquinas. See Carolyn Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 229-278.

[38]Ibid.

[39]Ps. 139; John 16:7-11; 13-14.

[40]Divinization of the soul is the final outcome of the continuous work of Christ in those who will be saved. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5, Preface. Gonzales suggests that Irenaeus' eschatology, especially his theology of divinization,

ultimately did not carry the day in the Western church because it radically undermined the increasingly hierarchical class system which infiltrated the post-Constantinian church. See Justo Gonzales, *Christian Thought Revisited* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989), 89-90.

[41]See Anthony M. Coniaris, *Introducing the Orthodox Church* (Minneapolis: Light and Life Publishing, 1982), 105-122.

[42]Thomas Oden, *John Wesley's Scriptural Christianity: A Plain Exposition of His Teaching on Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 221-242.

[43]Ibid., 243-252.

[44]Indeed, it was William Law's gradual shift toward apocatastasis that caused Wesley to denounce him, even though Law in his earlier days had been one of Wesley's spiritual guides. Ibid., 356.

[45]Julian, 225-26; 281.

[46]Julian, 262.

[47]Ibid.

[48]Ibid., 281.

[49]Unlike the early church which looked forward to the Parousia because of confidence in *Christus Victor*, the one who overthrows the power of Satan, the medieval church was essentially fearful of Christ the Judge. The overthrow of evil meant the condemnation of *sinners*. See Zachary Hayes, *Visions of a Future*, New Theology Studies, ed. Peter C. Phan, no. 8 (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1989), 168; Gonzales, 152; In the same way Julian's mystical theology can provide a corrective to excessive legalism in the church today. See William Thompson, *Christology and Spirituality* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 126.

[50]Julian, 323.

[51]von Balthasar, 101.

[52]Berkhouwer, 399-401.

[53]Rahner, 340.

[54]This is true of the saints and mystics in general, particularly in light of the relatively recent respect given to spirituality as a strictly theological discipline. See Sandra Schneiders, "Spirituality in the Academy," *Theological Studies* 50 (1989), 688.

[55]Jeffrey Imbach, *The Recovery of Love: Christian Mysticism and the Addictive Society* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 43-66.

[56]Julian, 216.

[57]Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1966), 192.

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