

**Fourth International Conference of the
British Association for the Study of Spirituality**

(23-26 May 2016)

Can Spirituality Transform Our World?

New frontiers in understanding and exploring contemporary spiritualities

Morning Meditations

Each morning of the conference opened with a 30 minute period of meditation for those who wished to participate. They were led by the Venerable Arthur Hawes

Introduction

It is not without significance that each day of our conference begins with a period of meditation. It is my privilege to introduce the meditations and, after the introduction, there will be 20 minutes of quietness and stillness for you to develop your own thoughts and reflections which may or may not have been stimulated by the introduction. The end of each of the three meditations will be marked with a short refection in the style of a prayer.

An inner stillness is at the heart of spirituality because it nourishes our desire to understand humanity in all its complexity and simplicity, helps to clarify our values and addresses our need to discover the purpose of what it is to be human. I hope you will understand and forgive me for turning to my own faith tradition for inspiration and material for the meditations.

First Meditation (Tuesday 24 May 2016)

Julian

There are, in the world, some very special places - places with an atmosphere and nuance all of their own. Often such places are to be found in churches. It is the poet Philip Larkin who refers to them as 'serious places on serious earth'. One such a place is to be found in Norwich near the river. Here is St Julian's Church.

Julian was a 14th Century divine. In the year 1373, when she was thirty years old and suffering from what was considered to be a terminal illness, a woman of Norwich, whose own name is unrecorded, experienced a series of sixteen visions, which revealed for her aspects of the love of God. Following her recovery, she spent the next twenty years of her life pondering their meaning and recorded her conclusions in what became the first book written by a woman in English, 'The Revelations of a Divine Love'. At an unknown point in her life, she became an anchoress attached to the Church of St Julian in Norwich, and it was by this name of Julian that she came to be known to later generations. She died around the year 1417

In the Church of St Julian is the cell where she lived. There is no doubt about it that this is a very
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special place - a serious place. I have been fortunate enough to have had the privilege to celebrate Holy Communion there. There is a window in the cell through which she had access to the church and through which she would receive her communion.

There is a stillness, an otherness and a great depth to the atmosphere in this place. This small room on the south side of the church and the cell is where Julian lived out her life. It is where she slept and ate, where she said her prayers, where she wrote her divine revelations, where she read her bible, where she meditated and reflected, and where she enjoyed the stillness and the presence of God. This place was at the centre of her spiritual life, her inner life, her life with God. In her cell she was free to dream, to imagine, to have visions, to let her mind drift beyond the immediate and the visible to the eternal and the hidden. These devout practices nourished and kept alive within her, her Christian faith and the divine spark. This was all part of the inner life of Julian of Norwich which she lived out within the confines of the four walls of her cell.

In the cell is another window that looks onto the riverside. This was her link with the outside world and it was here that people would gather for her counsel and advice. They would make their way to the cell window from the bustling city and the busy riverside port. It would have been a cosmopolitan group of people who came to visit Julian, who came to receive her wisdom, who came to her with their hopes and anxieties, their problems and their joys. Norwich was a very busy port, a place of hustle and bustle where imports from far away countries were stored before onward transportation to the hinterland. It was here that the wool from East Anglia was gathered to be bartered and traded for other goods. Outside it was noisy and bustling, inside it was quiet and still.

This inner and outer life is a metaphor for our spirituality today and so we mirror the life of Julian. Our outside life is often busy, tense and noisy; at the same time, we seek an interior silence and tranquillity. Like Julian we are here to serve a bustling world resourced and strengthened by our own inner stillness.

[Silence for private meditation]

*We acknowledge the need to shape our history,
form our inward eyes
to see the shadow of all that gives life
in the turbulence of our time.*

Second Meditation (Wednesday 25 May 2016)

Healing and wholeness: Legion

In chapter 5 of the gospel of Mark we are introduced to the Gadarene who had been excluded from his local community because he was too difficult to manage. He had broken loose from the chains which were used to restrict him and he lived among the tombs in the graveyard. He also self-abused using sharp stones to cut himself and shouted out to the bystanders and anyone who came near. His name was Legion because 'there are so many of us'. This might refer to a multiple personality or to voices he heard. Today he would be classified as suffering from a psychotic illness or a personality disorder. His own inner life was in turmoil and he was constantly confronting his demons which plagued him day and night. Into this scene steps Jesus who earlier had himself been accused by the doctors of the law of being possessed. He arrived with his apostles by boat from the other side of Lake Galilee. As he approached Legion, he showed no fear. Fear is a common reaction when people meet mental illness for the first time. Rather Jesus engages Legion in conversation, asking him his name. He then heals him and Legion's inner chaos is transferred to a herd of pigs which careers down the hillside. What follows is one of the most beautiful descriptions in the whole of the Bible. There was Legion, we are told, 'sitting clothed and in his right mind'. Understandably, Legion asks Jesus if he can join him, but is told to return to his own people - the very ones who had excluded him!

There are three lessons to be learnt from this miracle. The first is the teaching when dealing with mental illness. Do not be afraid; and treat the person with dignity and respect by relating to them, using their name and engaging them in a conversation. The second is the healing offered to Legion for his broken spirit and troubled mind. As well as care and support, there is often healing and certainly enough help to enable a person with a mental health problem to participate fully in day to day living.

Lastly, Jesus returned Legion to his own community. This is perhaps the first recorded example of community care.

In the healing of Legion we are offered a pattern of care to help support people with mental health problems. First we are to overcome fear and educate others to do the same. Secondly we are to engage with the healing process by caring for the sufferer and extending the hand of friendship. Part of the healing process is to engage people in conversation and enable them to keep in touch with reality. Lastly we are to promote community care and help to overcome often deeply held prejudices.

The three lessons are just as relevant today. Education, healing and community care are all part of an integrated whole. There is an increasing interest in the relationship between mental health and spirituality. Many psychiatrists include spirituality in the diagnostic process because it enables them to understand better the whole person. A holistic approach takes account of every aspect of a person's life - their cultural background, spirituality, family constellation, personality, in fact everything that impinges on a person's health. Before his untimely death from MND, Professor Peter Gilbert was an international figure promoting spirituality and mental health. Some of his books on the subject are available at the conference, including 'Crossing the River' which honours his work.

The impact of treating the whole person is that with care, support and listening, a person is enabled to come to terms with themselves, their condition and the reality of their particular situation, all of which is crucial for a successful recovery.

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There is increasing evidence that people with faith and with a strong spirituality cope better with mental illness. This is not surprising because spirituality usually incorporates a purpose for living, a set of values, the meaning of what it is to be human, a vision that has endless horizons, and an acceptance that embraces each person as an individual.

[Silence for private meditation]

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Third Meditation (Thursday 26 May 2016)

Healing and wholeness: *Sozo*

My third meditation focuses on an unknown woman who wanted only to touch the hem of Jesus's robe. She had suffered for years from continuous loss of blood and she was desperate to find a cure. She had heard about the Jewish healer who had brought wholeness to many people. Yesterday it was the man called Legion.

The reading about the woman is to be found in St Luke's gospel and it is not without significance that he was a doctor. Throughout his gospel the themes of mercy and healing predominate. However, something which is critical, especially for the times in which we live, is the word which is used by Jesus when he says to the woman "Your faith has made you well." The word that was used in the original Greek is *sozo* and it has two meanings which are to bring healing and salvation.

Historically there are people who emulate the double meaning of this tiny word. For example, living in a convent or monastery is dependent upon a call to the religious life. A monk or a nun will always be ready to describe their calling and sense of vocation to the monastic life of prayer and contemplation. There continue to be nurses who feel called to the work they do and describe it as a vocation. The sense of vocation is particularly apparent in some of nursing specialisms like hospice care, care of older people and people with learning disabilities. Nor is vocation limited to religious orders, clergy or nursing, but extends to many of the caring professions like teaching, medicine and social work. These are people, it seems to me, who understand the double meaning of that word which translated "your faith has made you well".

I said earlier that the little Greek word *sozo* means both healing and salvation. What this means is that Jesus was saying to the woman who touched his cloak "Your faith has healed you and your faith has saved you." The two are inseparable, two sides of one coin. It would, I think, be interesting to ask your general practitioner when you next see him or her whether, when they are involved in healing, they ever think they are also involved in a redemptive process. In the same way, you might ask clergy whether the ministry of the laying on of hands is also a healing process. It seems to me that the people I have been talking about who have a sense of vocation, do understand how healing and wholeness fit together.

In a very different genre, Stanley Spencer, the twentieth century artist from Cookham, painted a picture in the First World War entitled '*Travoys arriving with wounded soldiers at a dressing station at Smol*'. 'From the darkness of battle to the light and salvation of the operating theatre, Spencer said 'it was a scene of redemption'. This is another expression of *sozo*.

If the world of spirituality and the health services are to work more closely together, then the truth that healing and salvation are inextricably linked together must be promoted. It is a vital and important area that needs to grow so that those in need can receive both healing and salvation.

[Silence for private meditation]

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