

Week 1

God the Father Almighty

Creation Through the Eyes of Julian of Norwich

**We believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is, seen and unseen.**

Begin the session with a period of quiet reflection and/or prayer.

A Bible Reading

Matthew 11. 25-30; John 17

Reflection by Dr Claire Gilbert

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An audio version of this reflection is available in the Lent 2025 section of the Diocesan Website:

How do I write of God when God is beyond all imagining? How can one who is made by God depict the One who made her? We could suggest that every attempt to write of God is a failure, every word or image of God a lie. Do we therefore, with due reverence, simply put down our pens, stop using our minds and eyes - our creative tools - and remain silent

in front of the greatest mystery there is? Some choose to do so. Often, I do, and then my prayer is apophatic ('without words'), a listening for what is beyond, not staying with a single image or sound or word.

In all prayerful attempts to see and hear God, in all our words and images and sounds, we have to know that we will never succeed in capturing God, will never speak or write or portray something of which we can say: 'That's it! That's God!' Even the expression 'the Word of God' is a metaphor, a word which is not the unfathomable truth, but points us to it. In so remembering we might fall to our knees each time it is spoken or thought, in reverence for what it signifies. We might allow it to bring us closer to God, and so transform us. Our words and images of God can bring us closer to God.

'God the Father' is a metaphor which has not brought me closer to God. I have always struggled with it because it is so indefatigably male, which makes it partial, and because my relationship with my own father was problematic, so 'father' is not an easy concept for me. Picturing God as father, usually the classic image of an old man with a beard, doesn't work. If reaching into my own hinterland to allow the metaphor to bring me closer to God has not been fruitful, how can I speak these first words of the Nicene Creed?

Julian of Norwich has helped me. In the Creed, the phrase 'God the Father' expands immediately into 'maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen'. For Julian, this act of making is an act of love. She famously had a vision of 'all that is made', in which she saw a thing no bigger than the size of a hazelnut - which I imagine to be unshelled - lying in her palm:

In this he showed a little thing, the quantity of a hazel nut, in the palm of my hand; and it was as round as a ball. I looked on it with the eye of my understanding and thought: 'What may this be?' And it was generally answered: 'It is all that is made.'

Julian wondered at what she sees, for though it is all that is made, the whole of creation, she could not believe that it could survive. It is so very fragile:

I marveled how it might last, for I thought it might suddenly have fallen to nothing for its littleness.

She was shown that it survives through God's love:

And I was answered in my understanding: 'It lasts and ever shall, for God loves it; and so all things have their being by the love of God.'

God who has fathered creation loves what He has made. He loves, we might say, every nanometre, every minute movement. Pondering this brings us to a deep sense of the sacred ground upon which we stand and walk. Every footfall is placed into holiness. Our journeys are never simply from one place to another, where everything we pass is either a means to arrival or an obstacle in the way or, if neither of those things, of no significance at all. There is nowhere called 'away' where we can throw things. No one and no thing is 'other', merely a means to our ends. All that we move through, handle, use, eat, drink, rest upon, clothe and shelter ourselves with, is loved by God. How do we interact with the things of creation with due acknowledgment of their sacred origin and beloved state? The Eucharist is our exemplar. In the prayers of preparation, we say:

Blessed are you, Lord God of all creation:

through your goodness we have this bread to set before you,

which earth has given and human hands have made.

It will become for us the bread of life.

Such an understanding has deep ecological implications. We interact with creation not as lords and masters of nature, but gratefully, reverently, prayerfully, for it too signifies God. Harming creation that is loved by the One who fathered it becomes unthinkable.

And yet we do harm it, even in our anxiety to think and act aright, especially if we are in a hurry. But the love of the father, in Julian's visions, remains unstinting. If it did not, we would cease to be.

Her fourteenth revelation is of an enacted parable, in which a seated lord is faced by a standing servant. The love between the lord and the servant is tangible. The lord speaks to the servant, asking him to do something, which Julian later learns is to dig a garden and bring his lord the fruit of the garden. The servant turns and rushes to respond. In his eager haste, he trips and falls into a deep ditch. He lies where he has fallen, unable to move, moaning and groaning, in great pain. But his worst pain is that he has fallen in such a way that he is facing away from his lord, and he cannot see that his lord regards him still with unbroken love. The love of God is unstinting, whatever we feel or see.

My own feeling of unstinting, unconditional love is that it is motherly. 'It's the mothers never give up visiting their sons in prison,' reflected a priest in his homily, when I was at Mass in Ireland a while ago. When everyone else has given up on me, including myself, my mother does not. But my hinterland is intruding again: while my relationship with my father was complicated and his love felt anything but unconditional, my mother died when I was twelve, and my memories of her are idealised. Julian recognises this motherly quality of God's love. God is father of creation, but he is also mother. She writes:

This fair lovely word mother, it is so sweet and so kind in itself, that it cannot truly be said to any, nor of any, but to him and of him who is very mother of life and of all.

She explicitly attaches the qualities of motherhood to God/Godself:

To the property of motherhood belongs kind love, wisdom and knowing; and it is God... the kind loving mother understands and knows the need of her child. She keeps it full tenderly, as the kind and condition of motherhood will.

For Julian, God is creator-father by means of his love and that love is also Mother. It flows unconditionally, it is creative force, it sustains and it has nothing to forgive because it sees no wrong in what it has made. After her visions come to an end and Julian recovers from the illness during which they took place, she asks repeatedly to understand what it was that God sought to show her by means of them, what he wanted her to understand. Fully fifteen years later she learns this: quite simply, love was his meaning:

And from that time that it [the revelations] were shown I desired often to know what was our lord's meaning. And fifteen years after and more I was answered in my inward understanding, with the words: 'Would you like to know your lord's meaning in this thing? Know it well: love was his meaning. Who showed it to you? Love. What did he show you? Love. Why did he show it? For love.'

And Julian learns that she will never reach the end of this creative love on which all that is made wholly depends:

'Hold yourself therein, and you shall know more of the same love; but you shall never know therein any other thing, without end.'

And so in Julian's seeing, the words - and she has so many words, 86 chapters of her text Revelations of Divine Love - are not closure. They are not definitions which make sense, which tell us who God is and how he works in a way that means we can tie up our theories and put them neatly in a box marked 'God', so that if we look in the box we will know God. For Julian there is no end and even though she sees and muses and writes and writes she does not, cannot finish. Right at the end of her long book she declares:

'It is not yet performed' for God will have it known more than it is.'

Thus Julian shows the humility that all writing of and about God must display. 'God the Father' is not, cannot be, the last word. It is an opening.

Podcast

A short podcast of Bishop Martin in conversation with others will be available on the Diocesan Website from Ash Wednesday.

This may help your individual reflection or group discussion on this theme.

It will be available on the Diocesan Website a week before Ash Wednesday.

Questions for reflection and discussion

- Do words come easily for you when you pray?
- Thinking of God as Father, the old man with a beard image, isn't obviously helpful to everyone. Does Julian's writing about God as creator help you to imagine or conceive God?
- How do we interact with the things of creation with due acknowledgment of their sacred origin and beloved state?
- For Julian there is no end to discovering the extent of God's love as it is revealed. You cannot say "that's it" and put it in a box. Surely this is part of a lifelong pilgrimage as we daily encounter God?

A Time of Prayer can follow.

Some Hymn Suggestions

All my Hope on God is founded

God of mercy, God of Grace

God be in my head