

Our Help Comes From the Lord: Studies of Spiritual Care in Hospital Guided by Christian Mysticism

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Abstract

It is often thought that all spiritual direction is long term, but in a hospital setting, between a patient and a chaplain, this cannot be so. Most individuals in hospitals seek the ministry of a chaplain because they have had a recent experience that they want to make sense of or because they are experiencing a difficulty or crisis in their spiritual life on which they want to gain some perspective. For the chaplain, there are few specifics about how to offer spiritual care and there are even fewer descriptions of specific interventions that could be used. The great Christian mystics help fill this gap. Spiritual writers like Walter Hilton, Julian of Norwich and the author of the *Cloud of Unknowing* provided world class spiritual care to people in their own time and, still have something to teach us about the art of spiritual and pastoral care today.

Study One

Situation

A chaplaincy volunteer asked me to visit a patient on the Cardiac Care Unit. The patient wanted to speak with a chaplain about his prayer life. I visited Bill, as I shall call him, later that day. Bill was an elderly man, who had been admitted into hospital following a bout of severe angina. Bill shared with me how he had been a life-long bachelor. Bill had become a Christian whilst he was a teenager and, throughout his life, had enjoyed charismatic worship in various Pentecostal churches.

Over the years, Bill had remained faithful to his charismatic roots. However, now that he was in hospital, Bill had growing concerns about his faith. In the past, Bill 'knew' he had a connection to God because, in Bill's words, he 'felt' it. But recently these feelings had left Bill and now, poorly in hospital, he was very concerned. Bill told me: "I still believe in God but I don't feel anything when I pray!" His churchmanship had placed great emphasis on spiritual feelings and religious experiences. Now that Bill was not feeling anything, he was deeply worried.

Bill's story is a common one and his account resonated with me. Like Bill, I came from a charismatic church background and often 'felt' the presence of God in prayer and worship. Although I still experience God in this way from time to time, these experiences are not as frequent as they once were. When these experiences first began to wane, like Bill I became worried. One book which helped me through these times was the mystical work, *The Ladder of Perfection*, written by Walter Hilton. I gently shared with Bill some of *The Ladder's* insights.

Reflections:

Issues

A number of issues arise from my encounter with Bill relating to the nature of hospital chaplaincy. Firstly, Bill asked to see me, as the chaplain, recognising a chaplain to be a spiritual teacher; somebody available and able to offer guidance and teaching in spiritual

and religious matters. Bill saw the chaplain as a spiritual director, a soul friend; somebody who would accompany him on his spiritual journey, mindful of his difficulty in prayer, and help him grow closer to God.

Theological Question

Western culture today places great emphasis on feelings and emotions. This is how the media and advertisers convince us to buy things – whether it is new music, new shoes, or a new mattress. From childhood the media use clever images, jingles and stories to stir up pleasant emotions within us. We then associate those emotions with the product being advertised and we buy it, subconsciously thinking that the product will make those emotions a permanent part of our lives. Sadly, this is not true; no emotion lasts forever. Emotions can come and go without any reasonable explanation. Good or bad feelings can be triggered by the weather, by our hormones or even by something we ate. Sometimes our prayers can console us at the level of feelings and emotions, but, as Bill found out, sometimes they do not. The presence of God often creates an emotional response within us, at least when God permits it. But because God knows us so intimately and loves us so absolutely, sometimes our prayers have to go deeper than feelings alone.

One man who knew a lot about this was Walter Hilton. Ironically, little is known about Hilton's life, except that he joined the Augustinian Canons at Thurgarton Priory near Nottingham in 1386. His most famous work, *Scala Perfectionis (The Ladder of Perfection)* was published in 1494. Here Hilton describes the *soul* being reformed to the image and likeness of *God*, first in *faith* only and then in *faith* and feeling. Hilton denies any personal experience of God, declaring that he has not the grace of contemplation himself "in feeling and in working, as I have it in talking" (Sitwell trans.1952: p.xii).

Hilton denounces feelings as a reliable gauge of spiritual progress. But for Bill, and others like him, how can we pursue prayer that is emotionally engaged without our becoming dependent on our particular affective states? Hilton neither endorses emotions nor rejects them but instead asks us to interpret them, discipline them and redeem them:

You do not know yourself and are unaware that your delight should be in the food of angels. So you go out by your bodily senses and seek your nourishment and your pleasure like the beast of the flock... The thoughts and affections which you foster are unclean as goats... Therefore come home again to yourself and keep within and beg no more outside for the food of the swine. If you will still be a beggar, beg within of your Lord Jesus, for he is rich enough, and readier to give than you to ask... And if you do this, your Lord Jesus will fulfil all your desires. He will take you to his wine cellar and make you taste of his best wines, for he has many casks (Sitwell trans. 1952: p.123-124).

Personal Engagement

Hilton writes only of his life experience and what he has reflected upon. He encourages us to rely on God for all our needs as we seek to do God's will. Hilton tells us that, if we let him, God will do everything in and through and for us:

As long as Jesus finds not his image reformed in you, he is strange, and the farther from you. Therefore frame and shape yourself to be arrayed in his likeness, that is in humility and charity, which are his liveries, and then will he know you, and familiarly come to you, and acquaint you with his secrets. Thus says he to his disciples: whoso loves me, he shall be loved of my Father, and I will manifest myself unto him (Sitwell trans. 1952: p.74).

This does not mean everything and everybody is immediately perfected. Like Bill, poorly in hospital, we only have to experience an upset of any kind and notice our emotional response to it to see that we are not yet 'reformed' in our feelings. God's transformation of us is ongoing; cleansing our desires and delusions, memories and prejudices. This ongoing transformation is made all the more thorough for not depending on the strength of our feelings. Our part is only to be open and available to God's healing. To better help 'reform' our feelings and go deeper into prayer, Hilton recommends that we give a framework to our prayer life:

When you go about to pray, first make and frame between you and God in your mind, a full purpose and intention in the beginning to serve Him then, with all the powers of your soul by your present prayer, and then begin and do as well as you can. Though you be never so much hindered contrary to your former purpose, be not afraid, neither be angry at yourself, nor impatient against God, because He gives you not the savour, and spiritual sweetness in devotion, as you think He gives to others. But see therein your own feebleness, and bear it patiently, deeming it to be (as it is) feeble, and of no worth in your own sight, with humility of spirit; trusting also firmly in the mercy of our Lord, that He will make it good and profitable to you, more than you imagine or feel (Sitwell trans. 1952: p.207-208).

With this in mind, Bill and I agreed to give a framework and shape to his prayer life. Each day, Bill and I shared Morning Prayer together. After a couple of days, Bill told me he felt better for having someone pray with him. He also came to the hospital Communion service. Bill felt his most important discipline was daily prayer. He found the written Order of Service we used helpful as the words carried him along in prayer even if he wasn't directly 'feeling' anything. He asked to keep the Order of Service so that he could continue his new way of praying once he had been discharged.

Hilton teaches that our relationship with God does not depend on how we may or may not be feeling, but rather our will to pray. As Bill and I discovered, Hilton's insights find a resonance today in Western culture that is so orientated towards personal experience. Even more delightful is the prospect of the transformation of our emotions, and Hilton shows how affectivity itself is redeemed. As Hilton taught us, nothing is lost and our feelings and emotions – an integral part of our humanity – are cleansed and renewed.

Study Two

Situation

I was contacted by a concerned staff nurse working in the Accident and Emergency

Department. A patient had been admitted into hospital as an emergency case. She was vomiting blood and was suffering from potential liver failure. Joan, as I shall call her, was a chronic alcoholic and was now facing the potentially terminal consequences of her actions. Although the medical staff were standing by ready to intervene, the nurse told me that Joan would not allow any doctors near her nor any medical treatment to happen until she had seen the chaplain and been given absolution for her sin.

In the Accident and Emergency Department I found the medical staff huddled in a group close to Joan, but Joan would not let them treat her until she had spoken with me. Fearing for Joan's life, I managed to convince her to let the staff stabilise her so we could better talk. This was done and Joan briefly shared with me how her drinking had driven away her husband and two children. Joan was only in her late-middle age and she was alone and homeless. Now she was in hospital, Joan was also faced with her own mortality.

Our encounter was by no means a formal confession; indeed Joan did not see herself as being particularly religious. But Joan wanted an assurance of God's forgiveness for where she felt she had gone awry, and the assurance of God's love for her should she die. I gave Joan that assurance of divine love and the forgiveness and absolution she was so desperately seeking.

Reflections:

Issues

Certain issues arise from my encounter with Joan. Firstly, my role and ministry as hospital chaplain was of overwhelming importance to Joan. To Joan, my intervention as chaplain took priority over her medical treatment. Joan saw the chaplain as a representative of the Divine. Joan had alienated herself from her family because of her alcoholism. She needed the assurance that at least God still loved her and that God was there for her. The hospital chaplain embodied that for Joan.

Joan sought forgiveness for her sin. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines 'sin' as "an act regarded as a serious or regrettable fault, offence, or omission; an immoral act considered to be a transgression against divine law"¹. Joan needed the presence of a chaplain not only as a representative of God, but also as a kind of moral guide. In our brief encounter, there was no time to delve deeply into Joan's history. Joan needed urgent medical attention. I did not know what had driven her to drink. Perhaps Joan had been unhappy at work or miserable at home. Perhaps she had personal or financial problems. Perhaps Joan just liked a drink but her drinking had spiralled out of control. Whatever the cause, with the possibility of death looming, Joan realised just how much damage her actions had caused and she was sincerely sorry. Absolution from a chaplain was Joan's first step in making amends for her sin.

Theological Question

After our encounter with Joan, the staff nurse asked why I thought God allowed sin, a question that has taxed theologians throughout the ages. One person who had thought and prayed a lot about the theology of sin was the fourteenth century Christian mystic, Julian of Norwich. Aged thirty, Julian suffered a severe illness and Julian believed she would die. During this time Julian received a series of visions, or 'showings' as she called

¹ (<http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/sin>)

them. These became the source of her *Revelations shown to one who could not read a letter*, written in 1373. Julian lived during the dark and difficult times of the Peasants' Revolt and the Black Death, yet her revelations remained optimistic, always speaking of God's love as joy and *compassion*. Unlike her contemporaries, Julian believed that God did not punish the wicked, but loved and wanted to save everyone.

In her showings, Julian saw that God does everything and that everything God does is well done and in all that God does, sin does not appear. She concluded, "I did not see sin, for I believe that it has no kind of substance, no share in being, nor can it be recognised except by the pain caused by it" (Colledge and Walsh trans. 1978: p.224). Julian saw sin as the cause of all the sufferings we endure. As Julian experienced in her time, and Joan experienced through her alcoholism, sin harms us, our families and our friends. Like the staff nurse, Julian asks why sin is allowed. Jesus responds, telling Julian, "Sin is necessary, but all will be well, and all will be well, and every kind of thing will be well" (Colledge and Walsh trans. 1978: p.224). Sin is foul, Julian is told, but necessary; and the pain and suffering wrought by sin will be put right:

We need to fall, and we need to realise this. If we never fell we should never know how weak and wretched we are in ourselves; nor should we appreciate the astonishing love of our Maker. In heaven we shall really and eternally see that we sinned grievously in this life; yet despite all this we shall also see that it made no difference to God's love, and that we were no less precious in his sight. By the simple fact that we fell we shall gain a simple and wonderful knowledge of what God's love means... Through it, as we know, we shall be raised up to heaven: but such exaltation might never have been ours without the prior humbling. We have got to see this. If we do not, no fall would do us any good. Normally, we fall first and see afterwards – and both through God's mercy (Colledge and Walsh trans. 1978: p.61)

Like the staff nurse, not only is Julian puzzled but she also saw the very real ravages of sin and the pain it causes. There are so many deeds, Julian wrote, which are so wicked that it seemed impossible that any good will come of them. But what is impossible for us is not impossible for God. As God revealed to Julian, sin is necessary; we all need to be broken to be remade, purged to be cleansed, and humbled to be restored.

Personal Engagement

Like many mystical writings, Julian's revelations predate modern psychology yet find affirmation amongst many psychologists today. Her showings do not portray us as being guilty of every evil whilst being incapable of any good. Julian believed that in order to learn and grow as people, we must fail. She taught that sin is necessary because it brings us to a state of self-knowledge which, as with Joan, leads us to an awareness of God. We sin because we are naive, not because we are evil.

The staff nurse and I talked about Julian's revelations and we reflected on our encounter with Joan. Joan, in the midst of her sin, had come face to face with herself and her failings. None of us live charmed lives, not all of the time. At some moment we glimpse a different reality, the true reality that we are mortal, vulnerable, and frail human beings. This reality confronts us all in time, just as it did for Joan when things had gone

badly wrong and events had defied her control. Like with Joan, it is in our failings that truth is discovered and we learn what it means to be mortal human beings eternally loved by God. Joan's sin was necessary and allowed by God as it brought about self-realisation for Joan and a renewed recognition of her dependence on God. For Joan, her illness, her sin, contained its own healing. Joan sought and received forgiveness and absolution and she was put right with God.

Joan, and all of us, will continue to rise and fall, but in our rising and falling, Julian says, we will come to know and understand God's love, mercy, and compassion: "In God's sight we do not fall, in our sight we do not stand. As I see it both of these are true. But the deeper insight belongs to God" (Colledge and Walsh trans. 1978: p.280). Julian of Norwich offered a beacon of hope in the darkness of the Accident and Emergency Department that day. Julian helped remind us that hope and healing does exist and that sin, though necessary, can be overcome. God remains close to us and through Julian, God assures us that despite all our failings, finally all will be well.

Study Three

Situation

I was contacted by a nurse on an orthopaedic ward to visit a patient. The patient wanted to speak to a chaplain as he was concerned about his meals whilst he was in hospital. Jack, as I shall call him, was an elderly and devout Anglo-Catholic. Church had always been an important part of his life. As a baby he had been baptised and as a boy he had ministered as an altar server and a member of the choir. He had been confirmed and, as a young man, was later married in church. Sadly, a few years ago Jack had had to say good bye to his wife at her funeral in church. Every Sunday and major feast day Jack had made his Communion. Practising his faith had been at the centre of his world.

However, now Jack was concerned because his devotional practice had come into conflict with practicalities. Jack had never really been ill in his life, not in a major way. But now he was in hospital following a fall. He was having tests and now it was Lent. Lent is traditionally a time of preparation for many Christians, marked by fasting from foods and festivities, and Jack always made sure he fasted in Lent. Upon his admission to the ward, Jack had been given a menu sheet to enter his requests for meal times. Knowing that Jack was poorly, the nurse had advised him to eat well and be nourished, but Jack was concerned about breaking his fast and he was uncertain about **what** to do for the best.

Reflections:

Issues

A number of issues arise from my time with Jack. Firstly, there is the issue whether Jack should fast or not during Lent whilst he is ill and in hospital. Some people can be harmed by fasting if they are hypoglycaemic or diabetic for example. Jack had no such complications. His concern was instead a religious issue and for support and guidance Jack and his nurse sought out the hospital chaplain. Jack and his nurse sought the chaplain's help as a kind of spiritual director and also as a figure of religious authority; a representative of the Church who could give or withhold approval on any decisions Jack made. There are also theological questions to be asked, such as considering the meaning

and importance of fasting in a Christian context, against issues of best practice when you are ill. Jack and his nurse needed the chaplain as a practical theologian to help unpack Jack's religious traditions and interpret them in the light of Jack's present circumstance and situation.

Theological Questions

The theological question was whether Jack, as a Christian, should fast or not. One person who contemplated such matters was the author of the *Cloud of Unknowing*. I talked to Jack about *The Cloud*, a book Jack had heard about in his years of going to Church, but one he had never read or studied. *The Cloud* is an anonymous work of Christian mysticism written in the 14th century. The book counsels a young student to seek *God*, not through knowledge or intellect or traditions, but instead through contemplation, motivated by love and stripped of all thought. The title of *The Cloud* comes from the author's image of contemplative prayer as struggling to get beyond a 'cloud of unknowing' which separates us from experiencing God's presence. He dismisses the idea of using understanding as a means of reaching God, since God is unfathomable. Instead, the author suggests, we embrace God with our love. Having established that love is the means of going through 'the cloud', the author urges the reader to "beat upon that thick cloud of unknowing with a sharp dart of yearning love" (Armstrong 1994: p.67).

Because Jack was free to make his own choice about fasting, he felt uncertain about which course of action to take. For this reason he sought experienced direction from the chaplain. *The Cloud* presented Jack with a new answer, that fasting is in itself unimportant. To *The Cloud*, silence and speech, fasting and eating, solitude and company are all good, yet none are really the goal of our lives. In the turmoil of emotional decision making, like Jack, we can be apt to forget how relative these matters are. Instead the author of *The Cloud* points to something between them, which is God:

For silence is not God, nor speaking; fasting is not God, nor eating; solitude is not God, nor company; nor any other pair of opposites. He is hidden between them, and cannot be found by anything your soul does, but only by the love of your heart (Wolters trans. 1980: p.34).

In the emotional turmoil of decision making, *The Cloud* reminds us how relative some things are. What matters most is not the fasting itself but rather the intention and focus - God - behind it. Since God is neither 'this nor that', we are freed from making absolute any of our day to day decisions. Only God can be our absolute choice and when we have God, we will have the wisdom to govern ourselves in the rest: "You will know where to begin and to end all your activities with great discretion," says *The Cloud* (McCann 1952: p.52).

Personal Engagement

Jack's dilemma was one of practical discernment, a common problem in spiritual direction. Some things never change, including the human need to connect with our Creator. Prayer and meditation on the divine are techniques that have been used for millennia to grow in the knowledge of God. *The Cloud* documents timeless techniques used by a medieval monastic community to build and maintain that contemplative knowledge of God. The author urges the reader to dispense with knowledge, intellect or traditions etc in order that

we may be present to God alone. The author suggests the use of a short word, like 'God' or 'love', to bring us back to being alone with God in prayer whenever distracting thoughts intrude. This practice of loving attentiveness, this method of 'centering prayer', has been rediscovered in our time by the Cistercians William Meninger (1997), Thomas Keating (2002) and Basil Pennington (2007). Pennington (2007 p. 62) distils this way of praying into three simple steps. I shared these steps of prayer with Jack:

- **Step One**

We took a minute or two to be still and become more aware of God with us and within us.

- **Step Two:**

We took a single, simple word that expressed our response and began to let it repeat itself within.

- **Step Three:**

Whenever in the course of our prayer we become aware of anything else, we simply, gently, came back by use of the prayer word.

Jack found these steps for centering prayer brief enough to remember and helpful enough to be of use. Over the next few days, as Jack worried less about the rigours of his Lenten traditions. Focussing instead on his new way of praying, Jack found that he was soon *doing* prayer and devotion, rather than just *thinking* about it. Jack told me he would continue using this method of centering prayer at home and that he would also obtain a copy of *The Cloud* to read.

Jack sought out the ministry of a chaplain as a practical theologian and a spiritual director. Spiritual direction is a time-honoured term for a conversation, usually between two people, in which one consults the other, more spiritually experienced person about the ways in which God may be touching her or his life, directly or indirectly. It is often thought that all spiritual direction is long term, but in a hospital setting, between a patient and a chaplain, this cannot be so. Like Jack, most individuals in hospitals seek the ministry of a chaplain because they have had a recent experience that they want to make sense of or because they are experiencing a difficulty or crisis in their spiritual life on which they want to gain some perspective. For a chaplain, there are few specifics about how to offer spiritual care to patients like Jack and there are even fewer descriptions of specific interventions that could be used. The great Christian mystics help fill this gap. Spiritual writers like Walter Hilton, Julian of Norwich and the author of the *Cloud of Unknowing* provided world class spiritual care to folk in their own time and, in my experience, still have something to teach us about the art of spiritual and pastoral care today. All the great mystics have experienced God's overwhelming love in their lives, even in the most tumultuous of times. Their insights assure us of the reality of God's care and give us a basis for hope in the future.

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