

## The Spiritual and Devotional Life of Margery Kempe

As a product of the later Middle Ages Margery Kempe was very much part of a religious trend, particularly strong among laypeople, which emphasised personal religion, the pursuit of virtue, the performance of good works and above all a direct encounter with God through prayer. The impetus for this had come partly from a growing sense of disillusionment with the institutional church, its abuses and corruption, its formalism and stress on outward observance, but also from an increasingly educated, independent and literate laity, who aspired to understand and interpret the Bible and the Christian message for themselves. Further impetus came from the reforming zeal of John Wyclif, a stern critic of the church, a champion of the laity and the instigator and supervisor of a translation of the scriptures into the vernacular. The later Middle Ages also saw a proliferation of devotional writings and spiritual handbooks of various kinds, such as studies of the life of Christ, the Virgin Mary, the church's feasts and festivals, the virtues and vices, the Ten Commandments, the creeds, the Mass, and books on prayer and the art of meditation.

Although these works were often addressed to religious professionals, to clergy, monks, nuns and anchorites, they became extremely popular among devout lay people. The mention of them in the numerous wills of the period confirms the ownership of them by a variety of lay folk: by great ladies and patronesses of religion, by wealthy merchants and traders like Margery's father and by ordinary literate lay men and women. Some of these books dealt with the more exalted types of prayer: meditation and contemplation to which Margery Kempe was specially attracted. It was the practice of this kind of prayer which distinguished the mystic and contemplative from the ordinary devout Christian. In

the Preface of her *BOOK*, Margery tells us that the adversity she suffered at the hands of her enemies only served to draw her closer to Christ and to these supernatural kinds of prayer, in which her mind was elevated above the ordinary levels of consciousness to perceive divine mysteries.

The more slander and reproof she suffered, the more [Proem]  
 she increased in grace and devotion, in holy meditation  
 and high contemplation, and the more wonderfully did our  
 Lord converse with her in her soul, showing her how she  
 would be despised for love of him, and how she should  
 have patience and put all her trust in him, and give all her  
 love and affection to him only.

Margery's meditations follow the traditional pattern recommended by all the foremost exponents of the spiritual life. The meditator was instructed, at the time of prayer, to adopt a posture of bodily comfort and composure, to pray first for the guidance and illumination of the Holy Spirit, then to reflect in stillness and silence upon some devout subject: a verse from Scripture, a saying of Jesus, an episode from his life, a passage from the Psalms and so forth. With the mind concentrated and wholly given to the selected topic one was then to allow the mind to be receptive to the guidance and instruction of the Holy Spirit.

To bring an episode into sharper focus one was encouraged to imagine oneself present as an observer or participator in the event, as did Margery when she was meditating on Christ's nativity, imagining herself helping to bind the Christ-child in swaddling clothes. Lastly, with the mind enlightened and the heart stirred, one was exhorted to make a firm resolution of will connected with the meditation: to serve God with heightened endeavour, to imitate Christ in this or that virtue, to emulate the humility of our Lady. In this way the emotions elicited by the meditation led the soul to spiritual action and had some kind of practical application.

It was upon the sufferings of Christ that the great teachers of the spiritual life particularly exhorted their disciples to meditate. 'At about midday if possible, if not then at some other time, meditate as fervently as you can on God's cross and on his grievous suffering' said the author of the *Ancrene Riwe*<sup>1</sup> Margery's medita-

tions on the cross follow the events described in the gospel narratives and are interspersed with personal messages from Christ.

‘Daughter, these sorrows, and many more, I suffered for [Ch 79]  
love of you, and many pains, more numerous than anyone  
on earth can tell. Therefore, daughter, you have great  
cause to love me much, for I have bought you at a high  
price indeed.’

Margery meditates on the sorrows of Mary and her grief at parting with her son as he goes to the cross.

‘Alas, my dear Son, how shall I endure this sorrow, [Ch 79]  
for I have no joy in all the world except in you only ... I  
would that I might suffer death for you, my Son, so that  
you would not have to die, if by that means men’s souls  
might be saved ...’

Then our Lord took his mother into his arms and kissed her most sweetly. ‘Ah blessed mother, be of good cheer’ he said, ‘for I have often told you that I must suffer death, otherwise no one would be saved or ever come to heaven. It is my Father’s will that this should be so. So let it be your will also, for my death will turn to my honour and glory, and you, and all who trust in my Passion, and work in its cause, will profit by it and have great joy ...’

So now I pray you, beloved mother, bless me and let me go and do my Father’s will, since it is for this cause that I came into the world and took flesh and blood of you.’

Margery proceeds to meditate on the various incidents relating to the Passion. Following Christ’s death, his mother returns to her own home, and Margery, in her imagination, tries to comfort her and prepares warm gruel for her. But our Lady’s grief is so profound she will take no food. She speaks only of her Son, and in what she says there is a beauty, a lilt and a pathos which make her words sheer poetry.

‘Ah, daughter, I tell you truly there was never a woman [Ch 81]  
on earth, who had such great cause to sorrow as I have,  
for there was never a woman in this world who bore a  
better child, nor a meeker child to his mother, than my  
son was to me.’

Margery laments the indifference of many people to the sufferings of Christ. They weep and sorrow greatly at the loss of their friends and possessions, but they do not mourn the death of their Saviour.

Every day we see men and women crying and roaring and wringing their hands, as if they were out of their minds, because they have lost their worldly goods, or a friend or relation, or because they are preoccupied with some earthly love or carnal affection ... Alas, alas, that the death of a creature, who has frequently sinned and trespassed against his Maker, should be so greatly mourned, while the compassionate death of our Saviour, who has restored us to life, goes quite forgotten and unheeded by us unworthy wretches. [Ch 28]

If Margery in her *BOOK* writes in greater detail of her meditations than her contemplations it is because the latter are of an altogether more lofty and spiritual nature than the former, and therefore more difficult, if not impossible, to describe in human language. Blessed Angela of Foligno, the thirteenth century mystic, gropes for words in an attempt to convey to her readers what her vision of God was like and what she perceived of him in her contemplations. 'I beheld God who spoke with me. But if you seek to know what I beheld, I can tell you nothing, save that I beheld a fulness and a clearness, and felt them abundantly within me. ... I beheld beauty so great that I can say nothing concerning it, except that I saw Supreme Beauty which contains within it all goodness.'<sup>2</sup>

Margery Kempe speaks also of the inexpressible nature of her mystical experiences and her encounter with the Divine Being while engaged in contemplation.

They were so holy, so exalted that she hesitated to speak to anyone about them. They were so high above human reason that she could never express in words what she felt in her soul. [Ch 28]

Experts in the spiritual life tell us that although meditation is of great profit to the soul, contemplation is a more elevated form of prayer. It is a state in which the soul yearns and thirsts for God and

aspires to union with him. The devout soul is often compared to the human lover who longs to be in the presence of the beloved and in close union with him or her. The soul, on fire with love for God, desires to be wholly in his presence and to be one with him. The Psalmist cries, 'As the hart panteth after the water brooks/So panteth my soul after thee, O God./My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God.' (Ps. 42.12).

Mystics insist that the initiative is with God. It is he who implants the desire in the soul for himself, draws the soul to himself, takes possession of it, infusing it with his grace and love, and after purging and purifying and illuminating the soul, he enraptures it in mystical union with himself.

Thus the mystical experience of union with God is a pure gift. It cannot be deserved or achieved by human effort. The Holy Spirit pours down upon us a diversity of gifts and the gift of contemplation and union with God is but one of them. In the prayer of contemplation the soul has a foretaste of that bliss which is its ultimate destiny, to be united with God who is the source of its being and for whom it was created.

Those who experience such union of the soul with God declare that all awareness of the body, with its desires and senses, is lost, as is all sense of time and all sense of place, for the soul has been exalted to the realm of eternity. In this sublime state, the soul's rapture may last for seconds or for hours. One is unaware how long it has been. So Margery Kempe informs us that her union with the spirit of Christ so transported her soul that, when she had been at prayer for five or six hours, she thought only one had passed.

**It was so fervent and sweet that it seemed to her that she was in heaven. She never thought of the time, nor did it trouble her how long she had been at prayer. She was unaware of how the time passed.** [Ch 87]

Jesus converses with her in her soul in a homely and intimate fashion.

**This woman lay very quietly in the church, hearing and understanding the sweet words of Christ in her soul as clearly as when one friend speaks with another. And when** [Ch 87]

she heard the great promises he made to her, she thanked him and wept and sobbed and had many holy and reverend thoughts and said, 'Lord Jesus, Blessed may you be, for I never deserved such promises as these. I wish I were in heaven where I should never displease you from this time forward.'

By this kind of speech and homely conversation, she was made strong and mighty in the love of our Lord, and greatly stabilised in her faith. And she increased in meekness, in charity, and in other good virtues.

Strongly attached as Margery was to the prayer of meditation and contemplation, she did not omit to engage in the more traditional types of vocal prayer: Praise, thanksgiving, confession, intercession and petition. In a lengthy eulogy of praise to God at the close of her *BOOK*, she offers thanks to Jesus for all manner of mercies and blessings.

'Lord Jesus I thank you for all health and wealth, for riches and poverty, for scorn and hostility and all wrong, and for all tribulations that have befallen me ... and I thank you most highly for letting me suffer pain in this world for the remission of my sins and the increase of my merit in heaven.'

[Ch 10]

[Bk II]

Penitence and confession figure conspicuously in her religious and devotional life, her confessions being made mostly to a priest but sometimes direct to God.

This woman was very sorry for her sins and felt much grief and shed many tears and sobbed bitterly and loudly because she had been so unkind to her Maker ... When she saw her own wickedness she could only sorrow and weep and pray continually for mercy and forgiveness.

[Ch 3]

It would seem that Margery was prey to what the moral theologians called 'scrupulosity', that is over-anxiety about their sins, always doubting whether they had truly been forgiven. Jesus therefore assures her that her sins have been entirely forgiven.

On a Friday before Christmas Day, as this woman was kneeling in the chapel of St John in St Margaret's church in Lynn, crying bitterly and asking mercy and forgiveness for her sins and trespasses, our merciful Lord Jesus Christ

[Ch 3]

... enraptured her soul and said to her, 'Daughter, why do you weep so bitterly? It is I, Jesus, who have come to you. I died on the cross for you and suffered grievous pains and torments for you, and I am the very same God who forgives your sins to the uttermost point, and you will never come to hell or to purgatory, but when you pass from this world you will come to the bliss of heaven within the twinkling of an eye.'

Intercession, that is prayer for others, occupied a key role in the religious devotions of all devout Christians. 'During the day sometime, or at night, gather in your heart all the sick and sorrowful who endure misery and poverty, the pains that prisoners endure and feel where they lie, heavily fettered with iron ... Have pity on those who are under severe temptations. Set all their sorrows in your heart and sigh to our Lord that he take pity on them.' So wrote the author of the Rule for anchoresses.<sup>3</sup>

Margery offered intercession for all manner of people: for the pope, the king of England, lords and ladies, clergy of all ranks, sick and needy folk, heretics, thieves, adulterers, prostitutes, prisoners, bed-ridden folk and lepers. She shows particular sympathy for those who, like herself at a time of pregnancy and childbirth, suffered mental derangement; she provides us with a vivid account of one such woman.

As Margery was saying her prayers in St Margaret's church, a man came in and knelt behind her, wringing his hands and showing signs of being distraught with grief. She, perceiving his distress, asked him the cause of his trouble, to which he replied that things were going badly for him, since his wife had recently been delivered of a child, and now had gone out of her mind. [Ch 10]

'And, lady, she does not know me or any of the neighbours. She roars and shrieks and terrifies everyone. She bites and lashes out, so much so that manacles have to be put on her wrists to restrain her.'

Margery proceeds to recount how, in response to the man's entreaties, she visited his demented wife, who, when she saw Margery, welcomed her gladly, though when others visited her she cried and gaped at them as if 'sche wolde an etyn hem'. Each day and sometimes twice a day Margery visited this poor creature

and prayed earnestly for her that God would 'restoryn hir to hir wittys a-gayn'. And indeed God did mercifully restore her, for afterwards she went to the church like other women for her purification, and all those who knew about it said that a great miracle had occurred, and the priest who wrote Margery's *BOOK* said he had never seen anyone so alienated from her wits as this woman was, and so difficult to control.

Margery offers her intercessions for the salvation of the world, that Christ would have mercy on the people's sins. To this he replies.

**'You say, daughter, that I have great patience with the sins of the people, and what you say is true, but if you saw the sins of the people as I see them, you would marvel all the more at my patience, and you would have much more sorrow because of the transgressions of the people than you do have ...** [Ch 20]

Then she prayed, "Merciful Lord Jesus Christ, in you is all mercy, grace and goodness. Have mercy, have pity, have compassion on the people. Show them your mercy and goodness and help them. Send them true contrition of heart and do not let them die in their sins."

Our merciful Lord answered, "I may do no more for them, daughter, than I do do, according to my righteousness. I send them preachers and teachers, pestilence and battles, hunger and famine, the loss of their goods, great sicknesses and many other tribulations, and yet they will not believe my words, nor do they recognise me when I visit them. Therefore I will say to them, 'I made my servants pray for you, but you despised them, their lives and their works.'

Teachers on the art of prayer traditionally refer to prayer for oneself as petition, to distinguish it from intercession, though petition merely means 'asking' or 'making requests' only in this case it is for oneself. On all sorts of occasions Margery offers up prayers for herself. For example when confronted by a hostile crowd at Canterbury she prays,

**'Lord, I came here for love of you. Help me and have mercy on me dear Lord.'** [Ch 13]

At once, as soon as she had uttered this prayer to our



Lord in her heart, two good looking young men came forward and said to her, 'Are you a heretic or a Lollard, young woman?'

'No, sirs, I am neither a heretic nor a Lollard,' she replied.

Violent storms at sea cause her to pray for herself and for her fellow pilgrims.

'Now blessed Jesus, remember your manifold mercies and fulfil your promises to me. Let me know that you are truly God and that no evil spirit has brought me here, and to these dangers on the sea ... Help and succour us, Lord, before we perish or fall into despair.' [Ch 3] [Bk II]

Good works, in imitation of Christ who went about doing good and healing all manner of disease among the people, was a vital ingredient of Margery Kempe's spiritual and devotional life. Bernard of Clairvaux, though greatly devoted to solitude and contemplative prayer, was compelled, as abbot of the monastery, to teach and train, and attend to the pastoral needs of the monks and novices. 'The embrace of divine contemplation must often be interrupted in order to give nourishment to the little ones' he wrote.<sup>4</sup> Meister Eckhart too emphasised the need for contemplatives to pay attention to the practical needs of their fellow men. 'If one were in a rapture, like that of St Paul, and a sick man needed help, it were better to come out of the rapture and show love by serving him who was in need.'<sup>5</sup>

Margery Kempe was not lacking in this respect. She visited lepers and other sick folk in Lynn and ministered to the dying. She cared for an aged and destitute woman in Rome, sharing her squalid hovel, being without a bed to lie on or covers to keep herself warm. She fetched water for the poor woman and carried sticks on her back for the fire, and begged food and wine for her.

On one occasion she was urged in her soul to go to Denny Abbey near Waterbeach in Cambridgeshire to comfort the ladies there, who belonged to a house of Franciscan nuns, or Poor Clares, a journey of some thirty miles by boat from Lynn. Strict enclosure was observed by the nuns, no casual visitor being admitted, though the sisters made an exception for the mystic and

visionary of Bishop's Lynn, since they derived much comfort and encouragement from her words of spiritual wisdom.

Margery's particular brand of spirituality may be said to be profoundly 'incarnational'. That is, just as God became incarnate in his Son, living on earth among people, immersed in the ordinary everyday affairs of human life, so Margery, everywhere, sees the divine in the human. 'Every ordinary incident in daily life, every commonplace thing, was spontaneously linked with a recollection of the Sacred Humanity. From this, Margery developed the technique of recollecting the presence of Christ, and holding colloquy with him.'<sup>6</sup> The ordinary task of cooking stockfish, for example, brought Christ to her mind, since when the fish is boiled, the skin has the habit of sticking to the hand which reminded Margery of her closeness to Christ and her abiding union with him. And as she reflects on this ordinary event she hears Christ speaking to her.

'Daughter, you are compliant to my will, and cleave to me as closely as does the skin of a stockfish to a man's hand when it is boiled. No shame that anyone can cause you, will ever make you forsake me. Therefore I say to you, my most dear daughter, that it is impossible for any soul who is so meek and charitable towards me, to be damned or separated from me.' [Ch 37]

Incidents in the streets of Lynn or Rome immediately bring Jesus to her mind.

Sometimes when she saw a crucifix, or a wounded man, or a man beating a child, or a man beating a horse or some other animal with a whip ... she imagined that she saw our Lord and how he was beaten or wounded. [Ch 28]

When she saw women in Rome carrying their children in their arms, and ascertained whether they were male children, she would weep and cry aloud as if she saw Christ himself in his childhood. And if she could have had her wish she would often have taken them from their mothers' arms and kissed them as if she were kissing Christ himself.

And if she saw a good looking man, she found it painful to look at him, lest she might see in him the one who was both God and man.