

Prayer of the Month • November 2013

Ah, dear God, I have not loved you for all my life, and now I bitterly regret the time when I ignored you. I ran away from you. Yet you ran after me, so now, for all my impurity, you have given me hope.

Margery Kempe, c.1373–after 1438

This is a very simple and direct prayer. It uses no special ‘religious’ language. We might call it conversational. Although a short prayer, we can sense that it must be surrounded by a lot of dialogue. Behind this particular piece of text we can also sense a history – a life lived without reference to God. Margery Kempe lived a carefree life as a girl and indulged in fine clothes. If we examine our own lives we can perhaps see something similar, when the temptations of the world have pulled more strongly than the love of God. It is good to be honest, but not to dwell on failures. Rather, to look ahead. A life with God is always infused with hope.

Margery Kempe was a contemporary of Julian of Norwich, and even visited her in her cell (Julian was an anchoress). Margery Kempe is relatively unknown in comparison with Mother Julian because her writings, lost for centuries, only came to light in 1934. Her writings, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, is considered by some to be the first autobiography written in the English language and recounts her remarkable life, from her marriage onwards. It is essentially a record of forty years of conversations with Christ. Margery was born in King’s Lynn around 1373. Although the daughter of a former mayor of the town, and so fairly well-off, she could not read or write. At about the age of twenty she married John Kempe. During her first pregnancy she was very ill, to the point of thinking she might die, and after giving birth suffered from depression, receiving disturbing visions. After about six months she had a vision of Christ sitting at her bedside and her sanity was restored. Following this experience she felt a strong calling to the religious life. Her husband was unsympathetic and she ended up having fourteen children. She undertook a number of pilgrimages, including to Walsingham, Santiago de Compostela, Assisi, Rome, and Jerusalem. She was someone to whom tears came easily, at both opportune and inopportune moments. It was a gift that Julian believed to be physical evidence of the presence of the Holy Spirit in her. Margery was illiterate, but she dictated her *Book* to a scribe from the 1420s onwards. She returned to Lynn to nurse her husband through his final illness. The last record of her is in Lynn in 1438, but it is not known when and where she died. The Church of England commemorates her on 9 November.



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