

NOTHING BUT THE LOVE OF JESUS

Walter Hilton – the surest of guides on our pilgrimage to God.

A traveller on the A612, heading towards the cathedral town of Southwell in the rural heart of Nottinghamshire England, will, some three miles before the destination, happen upon the delightful village of Thurgarton, nestling between two hills within the gently rolling countryside. The spiritually attuned will immediately sense an atmosphere of peace about the place, even from within the confines of a car on the move. This is not surprising since a detour down a roadway to the left will soon reveal the magnificent Early English north tower of Thurgarton Priory Church, dedicated to St Peter and now serving as the Anglican parish church in the village.

Little remains now, alas, of the vast once – thriving Priory of Augustine Canons, first founded there around 1140. However, vestiges of the original Priory Church are there in the parish church which is still used for regular worship. Moreover, everything round about the setting breathes an indefinable atmosphere of holiness and tranquillity. This is surely to be accounted for not only because of the centuries of prayer and committed Christian service offered there by the Canons in general, but also because of the lasting renown and influence of one of the Canons in particular, Walter Hilton.

Conceivably the name still reverberates somewhere deep down in our Christian memory. He is usually spoken of as one of the great English medieval mystics, together with Richard Rolle, Julian of Norwich and the anonymous author of ‘The Cloud of Unknowing.’ Certainly Hilton’s ‘Ladder (or Scale) of Perfection’ was profoundly influential right up to the time of the Reformation and was one of the first spiritual books to come off the newly – invented printing press. Its great boon was that it was written in the vernacular of the day – Middle English to us – and so was able to reach many more people those in particular unable to benefit from higher education and to whom Latin was basically an unknown tongue.

Possibly this all seems remote from 21st century concerns. We have moved beyond Reformation and Post Reformation, even beyond Post Modernism. But pause, since spiritual truth and wisdom is timeless in its relevance, Hilton has not been forgotten. There are modern transliterations of his texts for our profitable savouring and anyway his era was not so vastly different from our own, despite our usual arrogant self-aggrandisements.

Hilton was born, it is surmised, in the early 1340s and died as a Canon at Thurgarton in 1396, most probably on March 24th. It seems that only the last ten years or so of his life were spent in Community. He was well educated in civil and canon law and might have had a renowned career in either Church or State. All the same, as a man of prayer and deep spirituality, this could not satisfy him. He tried the life of a hermit for a spell but still did not find his niche. Ultimately, it was the mixed life of the Augustinian Canons to which he was destined – a combination of vowed life in Community, without excessive asceticism, and with scope for growth in mystical contemplation, together with opportunity for apostolic work in writing, teaching and the directing of souls, both inside and outside the ranks of his brethren. He was humble and self-effacing, writing for the most part in a simple, homely and direct way with frequent use of scripture, and, in keeping with the growing spirit of his age, was keen that the Bible should be more accessible to lay folk in the language they knew.

Happily, Hilton lived and wrote before the final upheavals of the Reformation era, before Western Christians sent each other to the stake or the gallows for alleged heresy. All the same, the rumblings of what lay ahead were beginning to be felt. Hilton spoke out strongly against some of the excesses of the Lollards for instance, but without undue harshness since he too shared one or two of their more acceptable insights. His occasional references to Jews and Moslems might seem rather harsh to present day ears wisely schooled as they are in a more prudent religious pluralism. Nevertheless, this can never be at the expense of the uniqueness of the Christian revelation.

Perhaps Hilton can bring us all gently back to the core and centre of that inheritance – orthodoxy in the faith (his Community was renowned in the church of his day for this very thing) but a faith not only expressed in words, rather in a life of increasing disciplined holiness with LOVE as its quest and aim. In this Hilton stands squarely in the ascetical, mystical tradition common through the ages to the West and East alike.

Limited space precludes detailed analysis of Hilton's works and teaching. All that must be left for the reader to explore. We shall instead say something about his best-known work, 'The Ladder' as a means of whetting the appetite for more.

'The Ladder (or Scale) of Perfection' appears in two distinct parts, nowadays usually printed under one cover. The first 'Book' was probably written earlier in Hilton's life and the second towards the end thus letting us glimpse something of Hilton's own spiritual development. This most self-effacing of men spoke rarely of himself so we must read between the lines. Book One is addressed to an anchoress, a solitary woman living a life of dedication to God in asceticism and contemplation. However, this should not frighten us away. Hilton writes for all Christians whatever their status or sex as is only too evident throughout his words. Part One of the Ladder is mainly concerned with the mechanics of living a life of devotion and self-discipline in pursuit of God and his will. It is in line with the church's teaching through the ages, though stamped of course with Hilton's unique understanding and interpretation of it for his time, though still meaningful for our own, as we have said.

The anchoress must travel the rugged way of self-discovery, tasting something of her fragility and her total dependence on God to overcome sinful tendencies and so grow in virtue. The early ways of prayer and contemplation are explained and analysed with deep psychological insight yet are simply and clearly expressed. Hindrances and difficulties are dealt with. The process is termed the 'reformation of faith'. Hints are given already, though, of something even more profound – the 'reformation of feeling' when the whole being will be transformed into the likeness of God who is absolute LOVE.

Book Two, is totally concerned with this latter quest and fulfilment. It is addressed, it would seem, more generally to every sincere Christian believer, since the vocation to union with God in love is not restricted by any humanly conceived barriers as has been noted earlier. The whole book is a rich spiritual mine and **must** be explored in individual depth for the discovery of those treasures.

Here we will at least consider something of the striking image of pilgrimage which Hilton famously uses to illustrate how the true seeker after the LOVE OF GOD and the city of Peace, Jerusalem, can begin to approach the desired End, through prayer and contemplation and the genuine 'reform of feeling' which he describes. The main references can be found in chapters 21, 22 and 25 in Book 2 of the Ladder.

A pilgrim hoping to reach such a lofty destination must be prepared for great hardships on the way. Temptations will assail him (or her) from every side so there must be resolute determination not to give in either to the excuses we ourselves make or the false enticements or blandishments others might offer to dissuade us, even to the point at times of physical attack. The pilgrim must stop for nothing and must constantly keep humility and charity in mind, as he aspires to his goal. "That is", Hilton says, "I am nothing, I have nothing, I desire only one thing - -humility says, I am nothing, I have nothing, charity says, I desire only one thing and that is Jesus".

Opposition will come however not only from our fellow human beings but sometimes, more alarmingly, from spiritual forces. We might find ourselves inwardly derided for our alleged pride. How can wretched sinful creatures like ourselves aspire to such heights. Our very sacramental confessions and repentances seem suddenly hollow and totally invalid yet Hilton counsels, 'continue on your way and say, "Not because I am worthy but because I am unworthy, I desire the love of God; for if I had it, it would make me worthy. And since I was created for this end, I will seek it even though I never attain it, and will pray for it and believe that in the end I may come to it". If your enemies see that you are growing bold and confident in your effort, they will begin to be afraid of you'.

All the same, they don't give up but increase their attacks in manifold ways. "Many unknown dangers may overwhelm you," they claim. "Return therefore and give up this desire, and act like other people" - - - 'Do not believe them,' we are advised. 'Continue in your desire - - - They will see that you seek only one thing, that you keep firmly to your prayers and other spiritual exercises without any relaxation'. Yet, importantly, as Hilton warns 'with discretion according to the advice of your spiritual director'. Above all, whatever happens, we are to maintain our peace of mind and not grow angry or despondent. It is always the love of Jesus that we seek as we keep steadily on our way to Jerusalem.

How Benedictine this teaching is – the journey both to God through obedience, to the steps of humility, preferring nothing to the love of Jesus who will bring us all alike to our heavenly country. The beginning of the journey for the Benedictine is said to be strait and difficult but at length such a pilgrim soul is assured that it will find itself hastening towards God in the unspeakable sweetness of love – the gift of God's grace responded to by the dogged perseverance of the disciple. Such synergy was dear to Hilton's heart too.

And what of ourselves? We have the same enticing offer presented to us. We don't have to make a literal pilgrimage along the A612 to Thurgarton, but Hilton beckons us from journey's end and, if we will, is at hand to help us on our own hazardous but more than worthwhile way to the ONE THING NECESSARY. Why not probe further into his writings and take him as a guide?

Quotations are taken from 'The Scale of Perfection' by Walter Hilton, translated into Modern English by Dom Gerard Sitwell O.S.B.

London – Burns Oates 1953

See also:

Walter Hilton: The Ladder of Perfection.

The Penguin classics 174, translated by Leo Sherley-Price 1957

The standard text (in 1996) was said to be:

Walter Hilton: The Scale of Perfection, edited by J.P.H. Clark
& R. Dorward (Paulist Press 1991)

See also:

Joseph E. Milosh 'The Scale of Perfection & the English Mystical Tradition' (University of Wisconsin Press 1966)

And various articles by J.P.H. Clark.