



Alison Morgan writes

Visions and Dreams in the Christian Middle Ages

In the year 1149 an Irish knight named Tundale decided to pay a visit to the city of Cork. He celebrated his arrival with a magnificent meal, in the course of which he collapsed and died. As his soul left his body, he was greeted by his guardian angel who, instructed by God, led him on a three day visionary journey through Hell and Paradise. The journey begins in Hell, where Tundale finds himself standing at one end of a high, arched bridge paved with sharp nails. Beneath the bridge is a lake infested with savage beasts. Tundale watches as a soul struggles up the bridge laden with a sack of wheat; the angel explains that he had stolen it, and this was the appropriate punishment. 'Now,'

At the top of the page is *The Bridge of Trial*, from a manuscript of the *Vision of Paul*, 13th-14th century,¹ a recurring motif in the medieval otherworld visions.

continues the angel, 'you remember that cow?' Tundale pales, and finds himself pushing the cow he had stolen up onto the bridge. The pain is excruciating; whenever he stops the cow nearly falls off, and whenever the cow stops he nearly falls off. Tundale sighs with relief as he approaches the apex – only to find to his horror that there is someone coming the other way. At this point the angel rescues him, reminding him of Jesus's warning that those who laugh will one day cry.² The journey continues with other similarly instructive experiences, concludes with an inspiring visit to a beautiful walled garden Paradise, and ends with Tundale's reluctant return to his body. He responds to this experience by selling all he has and giving it to the poor, devoting himself for the first time to the word of God, and telling his story to a monk named

Marcus who wrote it down in Latin. It spread like wildfire all over Europe.

The Middle Ages is rich in dreams and visions. Abbess Hildegard of Bingen became well known for her frequent raptures, as did her contemporary Elizabeth of Schonau; but most were experienced by ordinary lay men and women whose sole contribution to history this was. Pope Gregory the Great began to record them in the 6th century, and many collections were made in the centuries which followed. In a biblical age visions and dreams carried authority, so much so that they were often subtly adapted for political purposes – nothing more useful than to see your local ruler or even priest suffering in hell, and preferably surrounded by the evidence of his crimes

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Visions and dreams of the Middle Ages

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Many of the visions which have come down to us from the Middle Ages concern the afterlife. From the 3rd to the 13th century peasants, boys, monks and ordinary householders had vivid visions of the other world, many of which were recorded by local clerics and used as teaching tools or testimonies. Many of the details (or was it the other way round?) found their way into the wall paintings of local churches, and some can still be seen today, in Holy Trinity Coventry, or the parish church at Wenhaston in Suffolk, for example. In many ways they are a precursor of the modern near-death experience: Tundale's vision is not dissimilar from that of Ian McCormack, who in 1982 died after being stung by a box jellyfish, visited hell and paradise, and returned to live a reformed life; or from those reported by many patients experiencing near fatal accidents and cardiac arrests.³

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Maybe it is the hidden memory of these visions which has led to the common modern day accusation that the Christian faith is focussed on damnation; I remember watching an extraordinary BBC programme on the Eden Project in Manchester in which the interviewers seemed far more interested in getting the leaders of the project to say that they believed half the estate would go to hell than they were in interviewing those whose lives had been changed. But at the time visions such as Tundale's were given a high profile. Perhaps they satisfied the interest now invested in reality TV – would the protagonist achieve celebrity status or suffer eternal rejection? But what was certain was that Tundale's own life was transformed by what he saw and heard.

The most famous of all the medieval visions of the other world is the



Dante in the Empyrean, Drinking at the River of Light by William Blake. Taken from *Illustrations to Dante's 'Divine Comedy'* it shows Blake's depiction of Dante's final vision; as he drinks from the river of light it is transformed into a heavenly rose. Blake was remembering his own vision of a river of light experienced 25 years earlier on a beach in West Sussex. See www.tate.org.uk

Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri. Born in 1265 in Florence, active in the literary and political circles of the day, Dante was exiled when his party was ousted from the city in 1301. He spent the next twenty years wandering, complaining and writing one of the greatest works of Christian literature ever composed, the story of his visionary journey through Hell, Purgatory and Paradise. Usually regarded as fictional, and best known for the vivid, compelling descriptions of suffering which make up his journey through hell, it's actually the climax to over a thousand years of visionary writing. Like Tundale, Dante begins, aged 35 and at the peak of his powers, with the nightmare discovery of his own lostness. Struggling

through the dark and tangled wood of his own sin, he is taken on a journey of spiritual education, descending into the pit of human depravity and meeting a curiously ridiculous caricature of Satan at the bottom – no grandiose Miltonic hero here – and then beginning a process of rehabilitation as he ascends through the terraces of Purgatory. Life, he learns here, is all about love – not enough, or too much, and you fall short of God. It's the old scheme of the capital vices, first popularised by the same Gregory the Great who was so interested in visions and dreams, and used by every medieval priest as he heard the confessions of the faithful and prescribed appropriate penances; and it changes him.

Learning to handle visions and dreams is vital if we are to live in full harmony with God's purposes

But then comes Paradise. Ascending through the seven heavens (a poetic convenience, Dante is at pains to point out), he finally loses consciousness as he is swept into the presence of God. The *Paradiso* glitters with light from beginning to end. Souls swim up to him like pearls in mist, or sparkle like diamonds on a cross-shaped ribbon whose central figure is Jesus himself, or move in the perfect circle of a dance of wisdom, or ascend as lights on a ladder of contemplation, ruffling their feathers as jackdaws do when they circle a tower in the chill of a winter morning. Drawn finally into the presence of God through a prayer of St Bernard, like many before him Dante sees people he knows, bathed in the glory of the light of God, arranged like the petals of a heavenly rose in a glorious amphitheatre; angels dip in and out like bees in the summer sun. In the centre of the amphitheatre is Christ, who squares the circle of Dante's mind, erupts from rainbow to rainbow, and explodes in a revelation of the Trinity which scatters the leaves momentarily gathered in his understanding as if by a gust of wind.

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It's one of the greatest Christian journeys ever undertaken, as inspiring now, once you've got used to the medieval packaging, as it was then. My own understanding of the greatness and glory of God is rooted in the attempts of one of the greatest poets the world has ever known to describe it.

It's always hard to tell if a vision or a dream is 'real' – if it's from God or not. It's even harder to disentangle the contribution made to even a genuine vision by our own unconscious minds; for we can, like Dante, experience God only through the mechanisms of our own psyche and the lens of our own experience. It's clear too that visions and dreams can, now as in the

Middle Ages, be used to confirm what we want to believe. But we should not dismiss them, for all the difficulties.

Visions and dreams find a solid foundation in Scripture. Prophecy and apocalypse have been part of the way God has spoken to his people from the earliest times; visions and dreams guide the characters of the Bible from Jacob (whose ladder prefigures Dante's) to Peter and Paul as they find themselves taking on board things which their conscious minds could never have comprehended, and finally to John whose immense vision of eternal reality is known to us simply as the Book of Revelation.⁴

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Learning to handle visions and dreams, to submit ourselves and what we see and hear to God, to seek discernment and to share our experiences with others is vital if we are to live in full harmony with his purposes. The human mind is an amazing and still poorly understood thing – but opened up to God it can take us into new and astonishing places. 

Endnotes

¹See http://numerique.bibliotheque.toulouse.fr/ark:/74899/B315556101_MS0815_058V for this and other illustrations from the same MS. Paul's account of his rapture into the third heaven (2 Cor 12: 2) formed the basis of many fictional accounts of what he might have seen there.

²Luke 6: 25.

³Ian's story is told by John Woolmer, *Encounters*, Monarch 2007. Hundreds of such experiences have been recorded by cardiologist Maurice Rawlings – see Alison Morgan, *What Happens When We Die?*, Kingsway 1995, chapter 3.

⁴Acts 11: 4-18 (Peter); Acts 16: 7-10 (Paul).

about the writer

The Revd Dr Alison Morgan is ReSource's thinker and writer. Known in academic circles for her book *Dante and the Medieval Other World* (CUP 1990, reprinted 2007) she has also written about visions of the afterlife in *What Happens When We Die?* (Kingsway 1995, available from ReSource). Alison is the author or co-author of many of our publications. She lives in Wells with her family. Her next major book, on confidence in the Gospel, will be published by Monarch in 2011. Websites www.resource-arm.net and www.alisonmorgan.co.uk.