

RETREAT - 8TH NOVEMBER

I'd like to start with some words of welcome, and by inviting you to make this weekend something very special. (You're the largest group of people we've ever had on retreat, so you're already special.) I wonder what the security-man thinks when he sees us all clambering into a coach and disappearing into the dark on a winter night? He knows we've got some motive in our minds, but he would probably not guess what it is. We are, after all, in a very special situation.

You're bombarded when you come to Nottingham with the message that, as a student in our University, you are in a privileged and very desirable situation. They're trying to encourage you to use all that you are offered as fruitfully as possible. This sounds pretty exhausting.

Now, I would say that there is something much more in this weekend. Here we are, in the presence of a large group of people who are longing for God. That may or may not be what people think University students are up to this weekend. But it means you are surrounded by the very best of intentions. You can therefore take everyone who is with you this weekend very seriously. They are also all (or nearly all) Catholic Christians. That means that you may trust them to be truthful, generous, and possessed of a certain high view of humanity; because Catholicism believes in human beings and places a very high value on every one of our lives. So relax. Remember that you're among friends who have every reason to value and love you.

If this is a privileged time with others, it is also a time for finding God, who always opens the door when we make an honest attempt to knock at it. How is your faith in him? Sometimes we feel far from God when our lives are disrupted or chaotic or under stress: a sign, perhaps, that we are prone to tie God to our home experience, or to our families. But the God of the Bible is quite unlike that: his first invitation to a human being was his call to Abraham: *Leave your country, your family, and your fathers' house, for a country which I will show you.* God continues to be a shepherd who leads out his sheep: a liberator from slavery and domination: a conqueror of oppression. The God of peace is not to be encountered without that setting-out in faith. Sometimes this means a detonation of the past. Nor was Jesus content to wander about blessing human families, and approving of human happiness: he too called people out, to follow him, and he brought a sword which divided human loyalties, a fire which was laid at the foundations of earthbound structures. We'll need to have courage to offer this time together to Christ, so that he may make of it what he wants. Let it be a holy time in each of our lives, a time when we set out to meet the living Lord.

As your Chaplain I get a lot to think about before a retreat. What should I be doing? I'm here, first of all, to tell you how much the Church thinks of you, and wants you to grow in your faith. Our Diocese invests quite heavily in this, and so do the Chaplains personally. So, although there should be much fun and simple friendship on a retreat, there is also an aim to travel together on our journey to God; this is a symbol of a shared pilgrimage;

and pilgrimages do something wonderful for those who undertake them in faith.

So remember that we have precisely *retreated* some hundred miles from Nottingham. Let the meaning of that sink in: let's spend a moment on letting the burdens and worries of our work slide off us. We can do nothing vital about Nottingham until we get back. We can do nothing more vital for our happiness than to spend this retreat finding our bearings, and restoring our awareness of who we are, where we are going, and what comes first for us. So abandon the future to its fate for this weekend, and try to be alive here with your whole life - with what would be left if everything outside yourself and your personal life were suddenly taken from you. Let us, in this privileged and holy environment, allow our true selves to be present. I would ask you to take time to be aware of the lives that are near to you, and to treat them with tremendous sensitivity. We need each other's kindness very much; it is a real experience of the Church. This need not be effusive or forced; it lies much deeper than the surface; but it does mean breaking down our wretched reserve, and letting our reality be known.

In case you are under any illusion, let me share with you something I've learned over my years as a priest. I have found again and again what Shakespeare gives Duncan to say in the Scotch play: *How difficult it is To find the heart's construction in the face!* Our world encourages us to present an impassive and inscrutable face to others. Behind it is a sounding chasm of emotion; still its eyes may be vacant and its expression indifferent. I break no confidences when I tell you that in this room are people who are suffering very deeply. There is in this room perplexity, anxiety, and uncertainty which is entirely private. There is enormous tenderness and affection here, there are depths of loving attention which might astonish us if we knew them. There is the struggle to accept what is unwelcome, painful, and apparently unlovable; there is a slow bearing of difficult burdens which no-one else suspects. Hidden under what is deemed acceptable, everyone here is secretly a buried treasure: each face before us could reveal a man or woman made in the likeness of God. But equally every face can display a false front, can conceal; and that capacity is what can make our world so lonely a place. So let us try to be open and generous to God, and to each other, welcoming Christ in each other. And may our experience of being welcomed, and accepted, and listened-to help us to recognise the gifts of God hidden in our own lives. The Church - and we are the Church for this weekend, and here - is a sacrament of our meeting with Christ. May he make us able to share his gifts in these days.