

RETREAT AT ILKLEY, NOVEMBER 1997

First talk, Friday evening

Welcome to Yorkshire, and to this house. I want to say a few words about why we've come, and to promise you that this time of rest will be good for you. Everyone is in need of rest. Let us spend a little time noticing that many of us have travelled a very long way to be here - some as far as it is possible to travel on our planet. Some will still be feeling strange and far from home. All will feel tired after a hard beginning to the term, and after a dark journey. So let the stress roll back a little, and prepare for restfulness and calm.

A time of great significance

This first talk is an invitation to you, and it is an invitation I think you will want to accept. There have been many days in your life so far - none of you is far short of seven thousand of them. I can't avoid knowing that I've seen well above eighteen thousand of them. The Psalmist, an old man in meditative mood, says of the days given to each of us

*Most of these are emptiness and pain
They pass swiftly and we are gone*

Most of these...but that is not true of all of our days. Many of them are routine periods, times with little about them: waking, getting through the daily chores, working, relaxing, a little friendship and conversation, the odd social event, and if we are lucky some traces of affection and sympathy. Thank God, however, that there are in our lives days which have about them meaning that is lasting and memorable. I'm not saying that all of these are beautiful or happy, and some of them we cannot bring ourselves to call even *good* days. But they are days when we learn something important. Days of discovery are not always delightful; learning something often seems devastating, and learning something important costs the death of something. Perhaps days come when we finally accept something that has been becoming clear to us for ages, days when we really change our minds, and stop yearning for impossible futures, stop reinforcing our defeated hopes, or just stop barking up the wrong tree. This changes an ordinary day into a day of grace.

So often these important days are precipitated on us; we are overtaken by some collapse in our relationships, some sudden change in the world about us. Perhaps the people we live with may take action, or in some way we lose or fail or come to grief. But we are not to see ourselves as helpless victims of the world or of other people. We have within us an amazing capacity for change, and when this change is for the good, and the true, and the real, we can say that we have been born again. When that happens, we know that we are meeting God, who is the creator. These days together are not an accident. This is a day of grace. Think of this weekend as a time we have set aside for God. We do not know what he will do with it. But if we are willing, *he will change each one of our lives*, he will revisit the work of his hands, he will confirm to us what he has already said in our making. Because we are forgetful, and unconscious, and ignorant, this will be a moment of revelation, in which it may seem that he has even come to remake us. I am talking about the possibility of joy, that totally integrated peace and happiness that belongs to God and for which we hope. No-one meets God without this possibility opening up.

There are some things I have to say at the start of each retreat: the first thing is about the people you see around you. Realise that this is a holy time; you are part of a very privileged community. It is a cause of surprise and delight to me that people are ready each year to come

away and to share in this way their lives and their faith. I speak as your Chaplain when I say that the people you are with are not ordinary. These are people of extraordinary goodness and kindness. They are sensitive and loving, and they have come here with you to find the love of God. So please relax, and make a resolve to forget the strained world we have left behind us. We are on holy ground. Try to do nothing that would lessen the value of this weekend away. Try not to deliver any careless hurt, and be aware of the value of quietness. There will be time before long to make noise, but there is also time to be calm, time to be healed.

The second thing is about yourself. You have made sacrifices and taken a risk by setting out on this journey. Don't be afraid to be alone with God. With God we can all be at home, surrounded by the power that made us. In a way, our power to bless one another is proportioned to the blessing we accept from God ourselves. So your honesty, and attention, and self-examination with God, are a gift to all the others.

So as to take the shortest possible route to the depths, we are going to read about the Cross as a theme in St Luke's Gospel. The Cross is the ultimate mystery, the one no-one knows how to understand when it is happening. Three times in each of the Gospels Jesus warns his close friends about the Cross; in every case they fail to understand, and the experience when it comes is devastating to their closeness to him. Our aim this weekend is to experience alongside the first disciples the mystery and challenge with which Jesus faced them. At the beginning we make this prayer:

Thank-you, Lord, for bringing us together to this time of our prayer, this time of your closeness to us.

Thank-you for bringing us home from our wandering. Send us your Spirit to make us your daughters and sons, full of trust.

Enfold us with your love, and teach us how to love each other.

Gladden us with your light. Make our hearts burn as you speak to us.

Make us one through the breaking of the bread.