

Opening the Retreat

Ampleforth 2003

I always try to set a target for retreats, so that we can work towards it in our thinking and praying. The choice of area this year seems made for us: we are in the first week of Lent, and therefore it would be perverse not to let the Lenten themes fill our minds and hearts.

Many visitors to Ampleforth on these retreats and others that I've run have spontaneously likened this Abbey to an ocean-going liner. I think it's a good insight. The Abbey Church itself is its symbol, and we embark on it at various points during our brief stay here. Back home, however, and on Sunday night when you go to bed, you will probably find yourself re-entering the Church in imagination, hearing the soft sound of the chant, or the thunderous crash of the great bell, and remembering the community with which you shared the liturgy. My guess is that you will not forget it. Because when we've gone home this Church will still be sailing on across the mornings and middays and evenings to come, and its crew will be entering it to sanctify each time with the search for God. The Divine Office is about sanctifying time. It interrupts all other business, summoning people from all other places to enter the Church and to listen to the voice of God. If at home you are a member of the music group, or a reader, or a minister of the Eucharist, or me, you will have the unusual experience of being carried in the liturgy of this weekend. Enjoy it! Let yourself be fed, but also carried, so that you come home in a different frame of mind, a different state, from the one you are in tonight. God is greater than we are. In order to approach him, we do not merely need to think of our own ideas, but to make room for a scale of being and life that is far beyond ours. The abandonment of our agenda in favour of that of the monastery can set a pattern which enlarges our horizon.

You may not find monastic liturgy to your taste, immediately, or at all. You might think it odd that they sing the words of the Psalms so regularly, almost without emotion. You might wonder how they do without drama and variety. But stay with it. In fact, the reach of this liturgy is enormous, embracing the whole Psalter with all its varieties of emotion: love and hate, indifference and darkness, elation and exaltation; you will hear voices of guilt and regret, hope and expectancy, fear and despair. As in the News of the World, all human life is here. The quality of the singing is dictated by the fact that it will happen every day of the year without fail from first thing in the morning until last thing at night, and it will take precedence over everything else that happens here. There's little place for local variations. Its peacefulness is that of eternity. If you listen, you will hear in it melody and depth. As the two sides of the choir sing and fall silent, they have time to listen and time to respond. This dialogue is very eloquent. We are not only announcers of the Gospel, but listeners too. Sooner or later, you will find your feelings, your anxieties, your hopes expressed, lifted up, and sewn into the robe of the liturgy.

If it works well, you will find yourself on the line which separates us from mystery. This frontier is something we seldom cross; our lives are workaday ones, which tend to emphasise our jobs, our activity, our loud speech and our participation with others. Here we are invited to fall silent, to let our being take over from our doing, to let the functions and duties and responsibilities of University life recede into the background.

You won't expect me to open the retreat without a note of gratitude. I'm very grateful to have been a member of this community for the last eleven years. I try to look after it and do what I can to build it up. There is great wealth in this community of ours. Retreats are moments of particular grace, because no-one comes on a retreat without a generous longing for God. It is a sacrifice to come here, to undertake the dark journey and arrive late, to deliver yourself into the hands of a strange experience. I thank each of you for making this gift, which is a blessing for the rest of us. Two important points:

- firstly, the retreat isn't just an exercise in human community experience. It is a shared journey to find God. I've never felt that God has failed to come, to meet us, on a weekend like this. It is a holy time: remember that the way of the monastery lies in the sanctification of time. So go with the flow. Don't revert to Nottingham time. Escape from it with a whole heart, and let the Lord speak to you in the silence you give him. He won't waste your gift to him.
- Secondly, work together to make it possible. Shared silence can be a fraught and bitter experience. It frightens us to keep silent – we long for the radio or a chat. But it can also be the most deepening experience of communion as well. The times when no words are enough, or when no words are needed, are the moments when the Holy Spirit works most powerfully. So there will be a formal period of silence tomorrow between a talk and discussion. Let's give to one another the silence we need for this to happen.