

Retreat at Ilkley, November 2000

We'll begin with a bit of scripture – it's Paul's account of the Christian life as he experienced it.

2 Corinthians 11:21b-31

Whatever bold claims anyone makes – now I am talking as a fool – I can make them too. Are they Hebrews? So am I. Israelites? So am I. Descendants of Abraham? So am I. Are they servants of Christ? I speak in utter folly: I am too, and more than they are. I have done more work, I have been in prison more, I have been flogged more severely, many times exposed to death. Five times I have been given the thirty-nine lashes by the Jews; three times I have been beaten with sticks; once I was stoned; three times I have been shipwrecked, and once I have been in the open sea for a night and a day; continually travelling, I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from brigands, in danger from my own people and in danger from the gentiles, in danger in the towns and in danger in the open country, in danger at sea and in danger from false brothers. I have worked with unsparing energy, for many nights without sleep; I have been hungry and thirsty, and often altogether without food and drink; I have been cold and without clothing. And on top of all the external things, there is, day in and day out, the pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. If anyone weakens, I am weakened as well; and if anyone is made to fall, I burn in agony myself. If I have to boast, I will boast of all the ways in which I am weak.

Every retreat, I believe, should have within it a time when you let something happen completely within yourself, without a conversation going on, or any particular input from outside. In my opinion, such times are increasingly rare for many of us. I hope today may include one of them for me, and for you.

A retreat should help you to reclaim your real self, and put into their proper place all the influences that tend to bowl you over and dispossess you in the busy part of your life. For this to happen, you need to be creatively and positively alone for a while. This talk is meant to set out something for you to think about afterwards, in a period of quiet and, if possible, solitude. Don't worry: it won't be very long. *And you won't really be alone!* Your relationships are never so near to you as when you move a short distance away.

The theme we've chosen for the Retreat is, paradoxically, *community*. You don't come here for a lecture on sociology: so the question I'd like to deliver to you this morning is, *Why are we here?* Why do we have this community called *the Catholic Chaplaincy to the University*? What is it there for, and what should it be like?

I guess that, in one way, we all find ourselves to be Catholics by accident. Perhaps there's a sense in which we get together as fellow-*sufferers* from Catholicism, something that was done to us by our parents, like our red hair or our tendency to be irritable in the early mornings. Yet religion itself isn't a thing you can inherit; you have to make an option for it yourself, and it has to be deeply personal. Nothing from outside can ever take the place of that deep personal choice to believe in God. Being a Catholic without such a choice is a senseless business, and can't be sustained. That's what is happening when people lapse from their religious practice. They feel more truthful – and it could be true!

However, the Church teaches that we cannot live the life of faith without a *community*. The community of faith has the marvellous vocation of guiding its members towards God, *and it can do it*. I'd like to think we could draw a little closer to that concept over this weekend, and identify its presence in our life together. It takes some thoughtful recognizing.

- People looking in on us from outside might easily mistake us for an ordinary community of students, belonging together principally because we're all the same age, and live in the same place, and we have this common interest in a certain form of religion, which we've partly inherited and partly made our own. There is a great proportion of the accident-theory in this judgment.
- The Church sees us as a community open to the love of God, belonging together because God has called us to be together – and in this analysis there is much less room for what is accidental. *Becoming the Church* means entering steadily and constantly into this deeper meaning, moving deliberately away from the superficial, accidental understanding of ourselves, and into an understanding which is based on our relationship with God. We should recognize that this is exactly the way love works in human relationships: *not by accident, but by decision*. Already some facts about us point in that direction:
 - (a) One is this retreat, where we have come away together to find the God who calls us. This is a typical moment of grace from God; but we've had to decide to do this, to come here.
 - (b) Another is the *variety* of people who are here, a diversity which eliminates casual theories of our unity. We aren't all the same! We are already overcoming the power of difference in *coming together*.
 - (c) A third is the presence of a priest, and the presence in our programme of sacramental signs which unite us further, and illuminate the real nature of our unity. These point powerfully to something deeper than any accident.

I'd like you to come to know the word for *community* in the New Testament, and to think about the formation of the first New Testament church. This isn't an academic interest. The New Testament sets the pattern for the future ages of the Church, and the way it was formed in the beginning is the way it is still formed.

Sharing The Greek word for community is $\kappa\omicron\iota\nu\iota\tau\eta$, an exact equivalent, taken from $\kappa\omicron\iota\nu\iota$ meaning *common*. *Community comes from sharing in something*. The Church is interested in any form of sharing; but is based upon the sharing of humanity as such; it is ordered, or destined, for the unity of the human family, and the human family within the greater unity of the cosmos, the whole creation. This means that the Church has to bridge all chasms, demolish all barriers, heal all divisions, and unite in one organic body the most diverse elements. It will not rest until the whole cosmos is united. That is the moment when we will see the true nature of the Church.

Clearly we aren't going to see this happening by any series of accidents. It is a huge, elemental process, running powerfully through history. It has already taken long and deep reflection, and determined action, and huge sacrifice for the Church to survive, to work, to progress towards its goal.

History, now that I mention it, isn't a ready fellow-worker with the Church. Not only is our world filled with *divisive* forces, it is actually *committed to division*, and each

part of it is deeply implicated in division, for good or ill. We British, for instance, live in a part of the creation which has cornered the wealth and prosperity of the whole; despite small concessions to a just world, we British are deeply committed, politically and socially, to *keeping* all we have fought to possess. This means that we have a *prima facie* stake in keeping other parts of the world comparatively poor. This can't be unconnected with the fact that the majority of the people of this country have a deep distrust, even of other Europeans, let alone the vast majority of humankind that lives beyond Europe. Class-based and racial distinctions are also influential in our country, with an efficiency which makes them so natural as to be almost invisible to us.

The Church, essentially based on sharing, could unthinkingly lose its soul in such a society. We, as (dare I say it) some of its more intelligent members, allegedly, must learn to detect the factors in our society which conflict with our faith, and take action to separate ourselves, to build the Christian community in opposition to evil and selfish forces. And we start this process very consciously here, in the actual community as it shows itself in the world of the University.

My concern, as the chaplain in the University of Nottingham, is to try to build the Church, and I am desperate to do it. I can't do it by myself, but only with the help of the Church's members. You are the vital members of the body of Christ, and by your relationships you will show either the Church's presence, or its absence, to others. If our community shows itself to have a mission from the Gospel, to be open and welcoming to others, to be ready to declare its principles and do the deeds of Christ where we are, then the Church is alive and the consequences will be surprising. If, by contrast, the Catholic community is self-centred, self-satisfied, a laid-back gathering of people pleased with one another and going nowhere in particular, that will bring its own judgment equally clearly.

If we decide that we want to *be* the Church, as opposed to having a vague relationship with these other nice people who have been thrown in our path, then we have to liven up very considerably. We have to spend some time praying and listening more personally to Christ, and making the Gospel our own. We have to hear the challenges of Jesus of Nazareth, and make up a credible response to them in our own minds and hearts. We need to spend some time looking at the plight the world is in, and take up in some way the tension on behalf of those who are being crushed and denied, relegated and marginalized, robbed and killed by the structures of division, or hatred, or fear. We have to gain our own credentials as breakers of oppression, healers of wounds, ministers of peace and grace – we have to put our own strength against the wheels of evil which turn in the world. This struggle is not some distant myth, but the reality, which many people are facing quite consciously. We cannot be neutral. If we are not working against the power of evil, *we are part of the problem.*

You might be wondering why I read the words of Paul about his tremendous life. I suppose we all assume that such a life belongs to the past that has now receded until it is almost unreal. Lately I have been deeply moved by the witness of James Mawdsley, a Catholic from Lancashire who has been very much in the news. James met some Burmese people whilst he was back-packing in Asia. That is a very modern, a very "studenty" thing, to happen. When James made it his business to go to their country and start a one-man campaign for democracy, fuelled by his Christian principles, he knew he would encounter the whole venom of a regime to which cruelty and torture are primary methods of daily recourse. You will know how he was ejected from the country and deliberately returned, a course which brought about his condemnation to seventeen years' imprisonment, and started to serve his

sentence - during which he endured solitary confinement, denial of consular access or visitors, and regular beatings. I am left wondering who taught James to translate the Gospel so simply and effectively into personal commitment, and I would like to know the secret. I can't help thinking that he brings the words of St Paul, with which we began, suddenly to life and reality.

The image which is essential in this understanding of Christianity is that of the crucifixion. What we've got to share, what makes us the *6≅4<≃<4∇*, is the pattern of living, suffering, dying, inheriting, and reigning *with Christ*. There are two phases in this pattern: the first is a sharing in humiliation, the second is a sharing in exaltation. Our community, and each member of it, must go through both. The humiliation is the effect of the Son of God becoming human. He didn't stop there: his downward path continued, through all his choices, all his deeds. People who expected him to be climbing, accumulating power, acquiring influence, found to their surprise that he was going in the opposite direction. His followers were the least-prepared for this; when he announced the cross as his destiny, they flatly contradicted him. How do we enter into this downward movement?

This is actually another form of the question I started with: *Why are we here?*

I'd suggest that we enter into humiliation with Jesus by the laying-down of our lives for others, in the service we perform for *our* community, in our readiness to welcome others as sharers in it, in our willingness to offer ourselves in the building of new, loving relationships. Think of the classical Christian images:

- of Jesus the shepherd, going out in search of the lost and lonely, and you will immediately be challenged about your attitude in the University, the Hall, the department, the flat, the city: in every place where you operate.
- Jesus feeding the hungry, siding with the outcast and the leper: in what sense am I the one who breaks ranks to serve the separated? Or to make known the needs of the needy?
- Think of Jesus the teacher, constantly ready to reach out to the discarded. When did I last cross the street to break down a barrier, or restore self-respect, or to find out the facts of a genuine problem that wasn't my problem?

Does our community shine as a welcoming one? How does it make the name of Christ known? Does membership of it help anyone to see the pattern of Jesus' life, his willingness to give himself for others in love? These seem to me to be the prime questions every part of the Church, and every member of the Church, should ask. I would be ashamed to be a parody of the Church, and still carry its name; I would bring the name of Christ into disrepute if I did.

The exaltation of Christ isn't a reversal of his humiliation. It isn't a second-stage programme of action. When his humiliation was complete, Jesus of Nazareth was dead. The risen Christ showed his identity to those who believed in him *by showing them the marks of the Passion*. You don't display your risen life by suddenly re-acquiring all the things you laid aside in the first phase, as if it were an alternative route to an identical end. The community is still, and always, based in the path of humility trodden by Jesus. But the sharing that is truly *in the name of Christ* has a quite extraordinary power and quality, which is quite different from the earthy variety that is built out of shared self-interest. It is the Father who raises Jesus from the dead, and that is how the exaltation happens to us.

The promise we are made is that, if we *love, and keep the word of Christ, the Father will love us*, and the Father and the Son *will come to us and make their home in us*.

The Spirit of the Father and the Son comes to us to teach us to be one in this way. Then the unity we are empowered to display to the world becomes the beginning of our exaltation – the second phase of the mystery of salvation.

If you watch and listen carefully to the happenings on this retreat, if you have a mind open to the deeper meaning of community, I think you will certainly have the privilege of seeing the traces of this mystery. We have come away for a whole weekend, so that we can catch a glimpse of the truth we talk about, but seldom experience: that where two or three are gathered together in Christ, *he is there in the midst of them*. I have never come away on a retreat without feeling that there is more here than the sum of the individuals gathered. When we all gather to turn our face to the living God, he does not forget his promise to us. He does not leave us in the darkness.

Let me tell you something about the Jewish patriarchs. When Abram is called to follow, the terms are: *Leave your country, your kindred, and your father's house, for a country which I will show you*. The Letter to the Hebrews quotes this fact, marking that *Abraham set out without knowing where he was going. By faith he lived in the land of promise, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him to the same promise. He looked forward to city founded, designed, and built by God*. When he is later subjected to his most penetrative testing, it is under the same command: *Take your son, your beloved Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, where you are to offer him as a burnt-offering on a mountain which I shall point out to you*.

If we catch a glimpse of the deepest meaning to our lives together, a door will open to us, and a path will beckon us, to see more, and to go further. Then we shall be a little closer to being the church, being the community of faith. It will always mean going further than you have before, into territory you had not considered, and making your way to God through that place. It isn't the place you select, but *the place God will show to you*.

Therefore this retreat will not be an exercise in recovering messages you once heard in the past. Nor will it be an idle weekend speculating about the future. It will invite you to enter now into the life-giving encounter with God, who will take us in hand and lead us where he has decided to take us. We will do this in praying, in discussing, in meeting one another, in giving and receiving, sharing our lives, and the one life which is the life of the community. We shall find the matrix which is interpreted by the liturgy, the source and summit of our community's action. I hope we will look on the tasks of the community, after our return to Nottingham, with a new understanding that we do not live for ourselves, but for Him.