

Retreat at Ilkley, November 2000

Welcome Talk

The first thought I have at a retreat is for the people who have never been on a retreat before, or at least not one of ours. I feel I should explain the way in which we approach them, and the meaning that they have for us.

I start from the premise that this is no ordinary group of people. We'll be meditating tomorrow on why this is so, and what the consequences are (or should be). For the moment, perhaps it is enough to say that this weekend is for me, and I hope for each of you, a privileged moment in our lives.

In bodily term we have left behind us the University and all its concerns and demands. *Please do not spit on your luck!* I think it is almost a test of maturity that we all make a positive decision to declare independence from the academic life for these few hours. I do not want to hear the sound of typing fingers this weekend. The University is a wonderful place, but it is not the heart of our life. That is something else. We are here to seek it out and make friends with it again.

We are here to seek God's blessing on us all. We know, because of the traditions of the Jewish past, because of the teaching of Jesus, and because of the constant witness of the Church, that God blesses us in our *community* life. There are ways in which we realize this fact as individuals, but even the most personal of God's gifts are meant to unite us, so that the blessing of one is a blessing for all. But when God blesses people in their community, then something wonderful happens, and we all find a huge sense of affirmation, of belonging, and of promise.

For this moment I want you to hear what I say in an atmosphere of prayer, and to believe that I am saying to you something that comes from God to you. First, I want to tell you how personally welcome you are to this weekend. I want to draw your attention to the warmth and sympathy of all the others who are here. God's love for you makes itself plain in your being here, with these people who are like you in having many needs and anxieties, as well as terrific gifts and powers. The community God gives us in the Chaplaincy has been consistently marvellous in its membership. I know for sure that everyone who is here has come to be generous and for the highest motives. So we are already greatly blessed in each other. We have to let that sense of belonging grow and deepen: we are ministers, in this, to one another.

Secondly: one of the ways in which this community is able to share God's blessing is through what makes it happen: *communication*. We risk ourselves in opening our minds to each other, in making ourselves plain. For this to happen, we require an accurate and active sense of *listening* which will encourage others to take the risk. So I beg you to talk generously, and listen generously, and you will begin to unwrap the marvellous gift which God gives us in each other.

The third point is about encounter. There is a wonderful quality about this moment, in which the mystery of all these lives lies hidden from us. The greatest thing that the story of your life has to offer you is going to be your meeting with another person, or with others, or with God. All of this is possible here, and nothing else

matters in comparison. You'll have many more weekends in the life that is ahead for you. But few will be more open to meaning and more potentially blessed than this one. You are very safe. You are among friends, you are among good people. Together we are going to look for the God who has given us these lives, this life, these days together.