

Sunday Message from Fr William for the Nineteenth Sunday of the Year 2023

Dear People of St Mary's, I've just returned from our annual community retreat at Ampleforth. While there I did draft the next instalment of reflections for you on the 'other world'. But let's take a break from that so I can take the opportunity to write something to you about how things are back at base.

I think we're about 45 in number. This is different from the days when we had over 100, but it's still actually a large community size in comparison to most Benedictine communities around the world, and large by historical standards for Benedictine communities. I'm about 24th in community order, which means there are 23 or so who joined before me, and 20 who joined after me, most of whom are younger than me. The two most recent brothers were back for retreat from their studies in Rome.

The monastic rhythm of the day is more or less unchanged since I joined in 1986. 6am Matins, 7.30am Lauds, 9.00am Mass, 12noon Midday Office, 6.30pm Vespers, and 8.15pm Compline, though Compline used to be 9pm when I joined. Meals are in silence with one of the monks, on a weekly rota, reading to us.

The work of the community is the one thing that has changed a lot over the 36 years I've been in the community. When I first joined we had a lot of monks teaching in the school, maybe 35 or so, and a lot serving on the parishes, again 35 or so I would guess. And we've always had a small number giving retreats in the grange. Now very few in the school and very few on parishes. Four of the monks are chaplains in the school and I think this is now our only regular involvement in the school. And as for working away from the abbey on parishes it's only two of us now, though we do serve the local Ampleforth parish, and Easingwold, but from the abbey.

Our annual community retreats are always in the first or second week of August. We're encouraged to put our work aside, and spend a bit more time in reading and prayer, so it's a bit like a stay-cation I guess. We always have a guest speaker who gives us two talks ('retreat conferences') each day. This year we had Bishop Paul Swarbrick of Lancaster. Fascinating stories of his time as a priest working in rural Zambia, and sharing with us things he learned in that ministry. He is also a mountain hiker and a cyclist. In fact he brought his bike with him and was often shooting off between conferences to explore the locality. He and I were the only ones staying in the guest house. I was very pleased to get out for a walk with him one afternoon.

The annual retreat used to be in silence throughout. These days we're permitted to walk and talk in the afternoons. So as well as getting out with our retreat speaker I took the opportunity to have a walk and talk out with individuals from the community and have a catch up. I also visited two of the oldest in the community, both in their nineties, and still able to get about quite a bit.

Next Sunday let's resume with reflections on the 'other world'. I hope you're liking them!

William

Nineteenth Sunday of the Year, 13 August 2023