

Taking off my shoes...

If you've ever wondered what it is like to go on a retreat, here's the story of one of the participants, Jill, who attended her first retreat "Take off your shoes: A retreat to explore the practice of prayer" led by the Revd Alison White at Shepherds Dene in September.

I was brought up in a Christian household and been a believer all my life. In the last few years, I've wanted to take my faith more seriously and move off 'that plateau'. I'd visited Shepherds Dene and so knew I would be very comfortable and well looked after. Going on this Retreat seemed a good next step for me. This is my diary...

Monday

We meet for tea with home made cakes and sink into the deep sofas of the Front Hall. I feel apprehensive in case I am out of my depth. Twelve of us will spend the week together. I am used to my own company but what it will be like to be with company but "not allowed to talk"!

Alison puts us at ease and explains the ground rules. There is no requirement to attend all the talks or worship. We are encouraged to relax and to find our own path through the week. A one-to-one session with Alison can be arranged by ticking one's preferred slot on the timetable placed on the notice board. There is no need to write one's name so confidentiality is retained. After dinner, Alison gives her opening talk. We say Compline together and then are asked to be silent.

Tuesday

I look around and wonder if everyone else is further forward in their Christian journey than I am. At least my lack of theological knowledge may not be so obvious as we are not talking to each other! We are encouraged to spread out around the house and there are lots of books about to read.

The talks are given in the Chapel in the morning and afternoon. Today we focus on why we resist saying prayers. I can organise the rest of my life so why do I find it difficult to make time for God?

Over lunch and dinner, Alison plays quiet music. The mood of contemplation continues and it is also an opportunity to be aware of other people's needs - do water glasses need refilling or would someone like to be offered more vegetables etc?

Wednesday

We are encouraged to take exercise – are the effects of eating sticky toffee pudding and lemon cream dessert already visible? - and are blessed with fine weather to explore the grounds. Some of the group take country walks and I slip off to my local swimming pool for an hour. There is no sense of having to spend the time in any prescribed way. One of the group appears to be doing some gardening. The atmosphere is calmer now that we have put a wedge between our usual environments and commitments. However, I keep the timetable handy so as not to miss anything as there seems to be lots to do.

In the afternoon, Alison gives a talk on intercessory prayer and in the evening, there is an optional session for sharing and listening to each other. Slightly to my surprise, I find myself joining in and talking about my experiences so far. People are inspired by the natural beauty of the surroundings - watching a woodpecker for half an hour and glimpsing a deer on one of Shepherds Dene footpaths.

Thursday

I come to appreciate the routine of the day which starts with Morning Prayer and follows a regular pattern. The time slips by and I enjoy the chance to read and reflect. I take my book to the Walled Garden and sit outside the potting shed, soaking up the sunshine along with the bees and butterflies in the lavender bushes and buddleia tree.

The talk this afternoon is about how to maintain a regular prayer life which I find especially helpful. I make some resolutions for when I return home tomorrow. I'm intrigued to find out more about my fellow 'retreatants'. They look interesting and I feel supported by them even though we are not talking to each other.

Friday

There is a final early morning Eucharist and then the silence is broken and we are free to talk to each other at last! There is a real buzz around the breakfast table as we share our experiences not only of the week but what brought us to Shepherds Dene. It becomes clear too that each of us has benefitted in his or her way from participating in the Retreat.

I feel refreshed, exhilarated and full of enthusiasm. I'll be lucky if I can keep this up and hope my good resolutions do not go the same way as so many New Year ones, but the week has been well worthwhile and helps me take a few steps forwards in my spiritual life. I go away clutching the Shepherds Dene programme for next year..... and I know there will be a day when you see my tick on that one-to-one list!

Note for editors:

(to be used if the article is used as a stand alone)

Shepherds Dene runs retreats and other courses (not all in silence) throughout the year. It is the Retreat House for the Dioceses of Durham and Newcastle and welcomes guests from different Dioceses and denominations. For more information visit www.shepherdsdene.co.uk or ring Kathryn Hope ant weekday morning for a copy of 2010 programme.

For more information see article 'About Shepherds Dene'

