Leonard Cheshire Project Resonate

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Start of Transcription

00:00:00 Leonard Cheshire: Sunday November the 11th, Great St Mary’s Cambridge, Remembrance Sunday sermon.

00:00:10 Man: Would you sit down please?

00:00:11 [no speech to] 00:00:18

00:00:18 LC: I would like to thank your vicar, reverend Mayne and Mrs. Mayne, both for the kindness and hospitality they’ve shown me today and for the privilege of being invited – of inviting me to talk this evening, November the 11th, this 60th anniversary of the first Remembrance Day, on a subject that means so much to me personally. I realise of course that if you’re talking about something that means a lot to you personally, you’re in danger of trying a little too hard. I wouldn’t like the one remembrance that I leave you with to be, ‘Oh. What a heavy address that was.’ I would like to look at Remembrance Sunday and try and ask the question, ‘What is it that we are remembering? And is it moreover relevant to today, to the historical present situation, in which we find ourselves?’ If not, ought it to be done away with, or is there something that we can do to it, some new dimension we can give to it that would make it relevant, not just to today but to every generation. And I would like to do that in the context first – of man’s perennial quest for peace, not only for peace but his struggle to build a better world, to build a world in which freedom and justice and peace may reign. Because it falls upon all of us to work for change, for improvement, to realise that we live in history, we are part of an evolutionary process and that we need continually to improve and better and build up our society. I’d also like to talk about it in the context of the very beautiful lesson that was read, in which we hear of God’s plan for us. My translation is a little different from the one that was used – ‘God’s plan for the fulfilment of time, to unite all things in Christ, things in Heaven and things on Earth.’ In other words, the essential, integral unity of the entire human family and indeed of the whole Universe, of which we are the result and a part.

00:03:55 But I must also do it rather by way of a personal story, if you would allow me. And I think I need to take as my starting point that first Remembrance Sunday, 60 years ago. I would like to try in a little – as best I can to bring it to life. It took place in November the 11th 1919, just a little more than a year after that dreadful First World War had ended. And it’s interesting that the impact of that war, and of all the suffering that it caused, was so great that when they held their victory parade – I think in July – it was not called a ‘victory parade’, it was called a peace march. Peace is what they were thinking about. A cenotaph had been hurriedly – a temporary one – designed and built, and the nation held its first Remembrance act, into which was built a two-minute silence. And the two-minute silence was to stretch all over the country – the whole nation was, you might say, united by this bond of a two-minute silence. And nobody quite knew what was going to happen

00:05:49 But the whole nation did in fact stand silent. Trains stopped – or their engines were cut off – cars stopped, typewriters stopped, everything stopped, just for two minutes. And in the next year, something new was added to Remembrance Day: the Unknown Soldier, the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier as it now is in Westminster Abbey. But the idea of that originated in France. A printer in the town Rennes in France thought of it. The idea behind it was that every mother, every father or son or daughter could go before this tomb and really think, ‘This could be my son, indeed it could be’, if she’d lost a son who had not been identified. And the idea spread to Britain, and then to many other countries. In Britain it was taken up by an army chaplain and proposed by the Dean of Westminster. I think 6 coffins or more were brought both by the French and by the British from each of the main battlefronts to – in the British case to Calais and for the French to Verdun. They were unmarked and they were shuffled about, so that nobody could tell even from which battlefield the coffin had come. In the case of the French, an junior NCO was chosen and he was given a little spray of white and red carnations from the fields of Verdun and with all the important government and other officials present, he walked down this line of coffins and he put the spray on one of them. I find that a very moving occasion, if one pictures it.

00:08:24 The British Unknown Soldier was escorted from British headquarters in Calais to Boulogne by an entire division of the French army, which was made up of all arms of the French armed forces. It was put on the cruiser Verdun, HMS Verdun, as a tribute to the French, brought across the Channel and then to the Cenotaph. And King George V was waiting there to receive the Unknown Soldier as he was brought, and he placed a wreath on his tomb. And then after the ceremony, he was buried in Westminster Abbey in 100 bags of French soil. A truly remarkable sign of unity between our 2 countries, and also a remarkable national act of homage to the ordinary person. I grew up, as it were, in the shadow of that war, and I remember well that two-minute silence on November the 11th, which might be any day of the week. I don’t think I quite understood it, but I felt that I was taking part in something bigger than myself, greater than myself. I felt there was something noble and meaningful to it, and that I was privileged to be a part of it. The war was close and of course I used to read books about what individual soldiers had done, and I couldn’t understand how anybody could go through what the British and all soldiers went through on the Western front. But equally, I couldn’t understand why nations had to go to war. To me as a schoolboy, that seemed quite incomprehensible.

00:10:47 And then I moved from school to university, as you heard, to Oxford. But then things began to change. Hitler had already shown something of what he intended to do. There were many people at Oxford who were pacifists. But when 1939 came, somehow – not all of them of course, but the very great majority – forgot pacifism, because somehow in the face of Hitler and the Nazis it no longer seemed relevant. And so, unwillingly, we were thrown into that Second World War.

00:11.41 I would just like to … talk about two lessons that that World War taught me. The first is how small and insignificant we each are. It taught me that in war there isn’t such a thing as individual achievement, not really. I know that some men are picked out and given honour and put, as it were, under the spotlights, but those who are know only too well that whatever they may have appeared to have achieved was the achievement of a team of which they formed a part. It was a team that comprised not just your own unit, whatever that might be, but that went right back through the nation, back to the person who cleaned the floor of the factory in which the equipment you used was being built. Even more than that, you felt that it stretched backwards, back into time, into the past, because you could feel when you were in a fighting unit, the example of those who’d gone before you, the tradition that had been built up and which somehow gave you strength and carried you forward. Indeed it is true that man lived in history, and that what we are today is due to what happened before us as well as to what we ourselves are doing.

00:13:40 The second lesson was what human beings can achieve when we are united in a common purpose, when we have a goal that is common to us and identifiable to us as something which just has to be achieved. I think the Second World War showed us what man can do when he really sets his mind to it and when he is one, when he is united.

00:14:24 But of course, whatever the immediate goal of that war was, beneath it lay a deeper one, an ideal. I don’t believe that men can go through what had to be gone through in both those World Wars without an ideal. Man is born to work for an ideal, and although it may sound naïve, we believed that the real goal for which we were fighting was peace. At any rate, the foundations – having destroyed and stopped the aggressor – the foundations upon which governments would build peace. But the war was won, the years went by and we found that we hadn’t got peace, not the kind of peace we had thought of, and so the question in most people’s minds – I know in mine – was, ‘What is our duty now? What should I, as an individual, be doing to help build peace?’

00:15:51 I don’t mean that to sound presumptuous, but I do mean to say that having been through that war, having seen most of my friends not survive the war, having learnt that it cost all in all 55 000 000 lives, you have to ask yourself – ‘What is my duty as one of those who’ve survived to help see that this never happens again?’ And that question I couldn’t answer.

00:16:33 And in my own case, I got led into a different field altogether, the field of working with disabled people, and so as it were, I seem to have renounced that quest for peace. But now, 31 years later, I look back, and I’d like to ask, ‘What are the conclusions that we can reach, with the advantage of hindsight?’ And as I do so, I hold before my mind the image of the Unknown Soldier. Because somehow, he makes it more personal. It’s not an issue, it’s not a cause, it’s to do with a human individual being, and when you come to think of it, no returning soldier, no matter what his rank, no matter what his achievement, has ever received the honour that the Unknown Soldier, both in France – buried under the Arc de Triomphe – and in Britain, received. And I don’t think that he received all that honour only because he represented all those who had died, who’d laid down their lives – though that is true – but because he symbolised the eternal longing of man for peace.

00:18:30 Well, the first conclusion, as I see it, looking back, is that the real tragedy of World War II – I can’t talk so much about World War I – is not so much the war itself as the fact that it needn’t ever have been fought – at any rate, not on the scale that it was. Hitler at any time, right up to and including Munich – could’ve been stopped. He was bluffing. We could’ve called his bluff. He was hopelessly outnumbered militarily even at Munich. His own generals told him, ‘This is impossible, militarily.’ He said, ‘I know, but they won’t fight.’ The reason that we betrayed Czechoslovakia and did not stand up to Hitler was partly that we were obsessed with domestic issues – balance of payments, unemployment and so on – we weren’t really interested enough in the realities of the world as a whole. But also, the decision at Munich was not governed by a desire for justice, but by an excessive fear of war. And I know that it is true that an excessive fear of war may bring war closer, not drive it further away

00:20:28 [no speech to] 00:20:35

00:20:35 It makes us ask the question ‘If another Hitler, if another aggressor were to threaten to march again, would it be our duty to stand up and fight, or should we, in view of modern armaments, decide no, we won’t fight?’ My own personal answer to that is that, assuming we have worked to the utmost limit of our capabilities to achieve a peaceful solution, but haven’t succeeded, then we should tell him ‘We will not allow you, we will stand up and fight.’

00:21:34 I know that others don’t take the same view and I – with all my heart – respect their views. What I want to say is that this is an issue that each of us needs to think through. We need to come to a personal judgement about it, so that we know where we stand. What we cannot afford to do is to be caught half-way, neither ready, nor deciding that we won’t fight at all.

00:22:15 In the domestic analogy, we know that once you give way to hijackers and kidnappers you open the door, and international law, or more specifically the war convention, as laid down by various – Geneva and the Hague conventions and United Nations … decisions … based on the nature of international society, which consists at this moment in history of a series of sovereign states – lays down that the one international crime is aggression. And it accords to every state the right to stand up and defend itself. Remember, on the international scene, aggression is much more dangerous than on the domestic scene, because there’s no policemen. The only policeman is the victim state. And the war convention, moreover, attaches a moral value to standing up and defending yourself, because we are defending the values upon which international society survives.

00:23:50 [no speech to] 00:23:58

00:23:58 Those are my own views…but what I really want to say is that we do need, as individuals and as a nation to think this through honestly, objectively, and responsibly, and know which it is that we want to do.

00:24:21 But the real point that I want to make tonight is not that at all. The real point that I want to make is the positive way in which we work for peace. And to do that we just need to look for a moment at peace, and ask ourselves, ‘What is it?’ Peace is not the absence of armed conflict. Neither is it a situation in which two major opposing powers, which would like to go for each other are not doing so because of a balance of terror, of weapons. Certainly, it’s not brought about by a brutal and tyrannical government of a country – those who live in that country cannot be said to be living in peace. Peace has been called ‘the effect of justice’, ‘the result of justice’. So if we want peace, it’s not so much that we should say, ‘We must do away with war’, we must apply ourselves to building up justice. Justice should be our business here on Earth. To the best of our ability we should do away with injustice, we should work as best we can to improve justice in all areas of life – nationally and internationally. And above all, in my opinion, we should do everything in our power to bridge the gap between the poor nations of the word and the richer. We should do all in our power to enable the poorer world to stand on its feet economically, and I would say not only out of justice and charity, but out of our long-term self-interest. Because if we don’t, there can never be peace, never be harmony in our world.

00:27:00 I know it’s a complex subject, I know there are many vested interests one has to fight against, but it should be our common aim and our common goal. And if we say that all this is too difficult, we as individuals can’t do anything about it, then I answer that it is precisely the individual who does change things. I say that we should never lose faith in our ability as human beings to succeed if we set our minds to it, if a goal is right and good and if it is in the interests of the entire human family.

00:28:00 The Unknown Soldier to me stands not only for those who died in two World Wars and other conflicts, he also stands for those who died through injustice, through hunger, poverty, exploitation – all the other forms of human injustice. If we could see him in that light, if we could see the act of remembrance that we make as a nation today in that light, in terms of those who are suffering under injustice, and understand that it’s by putting justice first, by working for justice that we achieve peace, then I think that Remembrance Sunday would take on a completely new significance, the significance that inherently, implicitly it always had, but which has not been brought forward as it might have been. And in order to do – achieve what our goals should be, the building up of justice – we may differ about what is justice in some respects – we need to commit ourselves as a nation to achieving it. And in my own heart, I look forward to the day when that two-minute silence, that bond that united the entire nation, in intention towards a common goal, a remembrance of the past, a thanksgiving, but also – but above all a commitment to the present, should be brought back. And I would just like to thank you very much for having allowed me to speak to you as I have tonight. Thank you.

00:30:22: *Speech ends*

00:30:04: *End of recording*

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