Leonard Cheshire Resonate Project

File Title: Group Captain Leonard Cheshire's address in Westminster Abbey on the Foundation's Silver Jubilee, 30 September 1973.

Duration: 00:21:48

Transcription Date: 05/05/2020

Archive Number: AV-S:242 Side1

Start of Transcription

[00:00 – 00:05 *Silence from audience and a few coughs from the audience].*

00:06 Group Captain Leonard Cheshire: ‘He who would save his life will lose it and he who loses it for my sake will gain it.’ These words which was spoken by our Lord 8 days before his transfiguration and on the occasion when he first disclosed to his apostles how he was going to achieve his life's work, the restoration of peace between God and man, summarise, perhaps, better than any other words his fundamental precept and example to us. He was referring, of course, to the saving of our souls. But those words have an application in a more mundane and human way and it's about this that I would like to speak today. We - that to say the Foundation which I represent today - have been given the great privilege of this Thanksgiving service in this historic Abbey. It is a moment of remembrance for us of Thanksgiving and of dedication; a moment when we remember everything in these past 25 years that has gone towards making us what we are today such as that is; when we remember all those in different ways who have helped - many of them no longer here; a day when we give thanks for all the benefits with which we have been blessed; when we give thanks for the opportunity of undertaking this small work. And, perhaps, above all when we examine ourselves and ask ourselves what are our motives: Are we doing it for a good motive? Are we doing our best? Are we really providing the kind of service and help that is needed? But I want to talk not about us for I know that we are one tiny little part of a great multitude of organisations, of governments, as well as voluntary organisations and individuals working to bring about a better world. I want to talk about that fundamental issue that affects us all, of world peace and unity and, in particular, I want to talk about Remembrance Day - it's relation to this struggle for a better world. I, myself, was brought up as part of a generation that rejected war as a means of solving international problems. I know that my father maintains that I would not listen to his stories of the war - I did not want to know. At the same time, I know that I used to read stories of individual soldiers. I could not understand how a man could survive what was involved in trench warfare and I still can't today. In those days war was close. We used to observe every November Armistice day. At that moment, 11 o’clock in the morning on the 11th November everything suddenly stopped and for two minutes we were silent with the King at the Cenotaph. I was too young, really, to understand what it meant but I still remember very vividly the impact it had on me. I felt that I was taking part in something much greater than myself. I was edified and moved. And, also, there was a tomb of the unknown soldier, which played, probably, a bigger part in our lives then than, possibly, it does today.

6:17 But, nonetheless, war came. It wasn't so much that war came but that it needn't have come - not if we'd been sufficiently realistic about what was happening in the outside world. I think that the war taught most of us two fundamental lessons: First, that if in life you want to achieve anything you have got to mean it with your whole heart and your whole soul; you have got to be fully and completely professional, in charge of all the details of your particular work. Secondly, it taught us how small we are as individuals, how dependent upon other people. That whatever we may achieve is not our individual achievement, it's part of a team. And those to whom it was fallen to achieve, perhaps, some fame - no. But, in fact, it was on other men’s shoulders that they were carried. When it comes to being in the firing line, you have no illusions. You know that when the shells are bursting it may hit one man, it may hit the other. You have very little control over it. One realises how identified one is with those who have gone before in the past, that their tradition - their example - strengthens one and keeps one going. We fought the war, primarily, in order to save ourselves from destruction and to help save Europe from destruction. But there was more to it than that. There was an ideal. We hoped - in our small - way we were fighting for peace, for justice, for freedom. Fighting for a world in which war would not come again. When the war was over, we wondered: Have we achieved that? We knew, I think, in our hearts we had not. And, so, one wondered what was it, now, our duty to do. What could just one ordinary individual do to help bring about a united world in which war would not return? And for myself, I could not answer that question. And, so, it came about that I became involved in the world of the disabled. And I had to forget about that problem of world peace because I was fully occupied. And, in due course, together and with the help of my wife I began to learn about this new world - a world that I never knew even existed.

10:25 There is much I think that I have learnt. In particular, I have seen how the human spirit triumphs over adversity, responds to the challenge of suffering, of disability, of poverty, of whatever it may be. I have learnt that those who are disabled … want, as all of us, to lead a life that is useful. To feel that they have their own contribution to make to the world. They do not want to be dependent upon other people's help. And most important of all, I have learnt that there is no one in the world - no matter what his circumstances - who cannot, in fact, contribute to the good of the world. If there is someone who should have no other movement in her body but one toe, and if that person were to lead a life without complaining, without demanding, making the most of it, smiling, trying to find some way of communicating her thoughts to other people, which of us would dare say - even if we were in the highest office - that her contribution to the world is less an ours. God, himself, has told us that he judges not by the external act, but by what we have done relative to our opportunities and our resources. When our Lord saw the old lady come into the temple when people were putting money into the money box, he said that little lady with her farthing has given more than all the rich with their big gifts. In other words, each of us has our own contribution to make. Its value is relative to our opportunities and to what it has cost us. And, now, 25 years have gone by and for a moment look back and my mind comes back once again to that question of peace. I can see that each of us has a means of contributing to it. But what I can see is that peace once again - as in the 1930s - is at risk.

14:03 Our fault in the 1930s, whilst that we were too inward-looking, we were too concerned with economic problems. We did not face the realities beyond our shores until it was too late today. There is no Hitler threatening us. But I think we are looking in the wrong direction. There is another threat looming up over the horizon and that is the growing gap between the poor of the world and the rich - it is growing. We are doing something about it that is true, but we are complacent. We are not recognising how real that danger will become if we don't do more about it. We have the means as Nations, as communities and individuals of doing something. But we need more. We need the purpose. We need the determination. We need the realisation that we have to do it. Here in this great Abbey there lies a reminder of what it means when we become involved in a world war and I refer to the tomb of the unknown warrior and for a brief moment I would ask you to think about him – to picture that day when he was brought here. The idea originated independently and, apparently, almost simultaneously in France and in Britain. A French printer thought of the idea and the press in France persuaded the government to bury him amongst the great of the Country. With Britain it was a Church of England Chaplain who thought of it and the deal of Westminster who persuaded the government. The body nobody knew from which battlefield it had come was escorted into Boulogne by an entire division of all arms of the French army. It was brought across the channel in HMS Verdun as a tribute to France and at the same time another train was travelling towards Paris with the unknown soldier of France. The unknown soldier was brought to this Abbey and the King himself was standing outside waiting to receive him. He lies in his Abbey as a tribute to the courage of those who died in that First World War. He was surrounded with honour that has been accorded to no individual and yet we don't know who he is. He could be a duke of the realm; he could be one of the unemployed of those days. But I suggest that the reason why he was given so much honour is not because of the courage that he symbolises but because he stands for that universal desire in every human heart - beginning from the first man who set out to conquer the jungle, right up to the last man who will perform the last action on Earth – for peace. The storms may ruffle the surface and make us angry, divided and so on. But deep in our hearts we want peace. And the unknown soldier reminds us of the price, not of war - I don't accept that.

19:20 War was the immediate cause of his death but it was failure to do something in the early stages that made war inevitable and so it is today. And as it is my privilege to stand here for a moment, today, I would like to ask that Remembrance Day be given a new and contemporary form, that instead of looking only backwards it looks forward, that it be given a form in which every generation - now and to come - will feel that it is involved, that we are involved in the struggle for peace. And that as a part of it the two minutes silence is brought back, so that the entire nation is involved, so that follows 2-minutes we stop - not on a Sunday - on a working day, so that this Country could show during those 2 minutes that we stand for peace, that we know we must sacrifice for peace, that we have understood that fundamental lesson: it is not in looking to ourselves - not just in saying I will obey the commandments and if I don't I will repent, that we achieve our eternal destiny - it is in spending ourselves for other people. If we don't then on a human level, we will not gain peace. I would like to express on behalf of the foundation I represent my deepest gratitude to the Dean and the Chapter of the Abbey for this great privilege that they have given to us. Amen.

21:45: Speech Ends

21:50 Recording Ends

End of Transcription