Leonard Cheshire Resonate Project

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Start of Transcription

[00:00] Group Captain Leonard Cheshire: Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Father. I thought that these words expressed more clearly and more succinctly than any others that I could find the reason that has brought us here today to celebrate our 21st birthday. The more so as they are found both at the beginning of the emergence of ancient Israel as the chosen people of God and at the beginning of our Lord Jesus Christ’s public life. But I’m sure that you will appreciate that standing here today in this very beautiful and most historic church I am surrounded with many, many personal memories of these past 21 years.

[01:16] But I find it difficult to find my way as it were through all these memories, so close and so vivid, to keep my way along the theme that I would like to follow. I would like above all to thank the rector, the Reverend John Carr, for the warmth of your welcome and for the privilege of giving me this pulpit this afternoon. Perhaps my first memory is that of a very cold February day in 1955, 21 years ago, when just 4 people met in the then empty and rather derelict as it was Staunton Harold to discuss its future. And the decision to try to take it on and convert it into a home for the disabled was an act of faith by all those who participated in it. But it was an act of faith that somehow was not difficult because of the attendant circumstances.

[02:45] Firstly, there was Staunton, not only a most beautiful building, but one with a great history and a great tradition and which stood for much that is best in human life. I realise that everybody in this district looked upon Staunton as part of them, and they wanted at all costs to preserve it. And up until then there had been no means of doing so. But now this desire married as it were with the need to find a home for the disabled, who at that time themselves had no home.

[03:38] There was also the fact of this church next to Staunton, linked irretrievably with Staunton’s history, and as you’ll probably know built at the sacrifice of its builder’s life, Sir Robert Shirley. And the words that stand on the stone plaque above the entrance to this church would inspire everybody to ty and do something to preserve Staunton. And I think they are an indication of the spirit and the example that all the other generations after Sir Robert Shirley who lived in Staunton brought to it. Because I think we know that houses are not only bricks and mortar; they carry in them something of the personality of those who lived there. And one couldn’t enter even the empty Staunton on that cold February day without feeling something of that spirit.

[05:00] Since then an innumerable number of people came forward to undertake the work of rehabilitating it – more than one could possibly number, even in large groups. I don’t think I’ve seen anywhere an undertaking in which so many people from such diverse backgrounds came to give of their time, their money and their work. And it was all done in such a happy spirit, and long, long before it was ready the first residents came in. And amongst those who came in 21 years ago, on my left is Charlie Bolton, and on my right is Edna Granger and Elsie, as if to stand as symbols of all those in those early days who gave so much, but many of whom sadly are no longer with us today.

[06.25] We have many things for which to thank God on this occasion. I think first the challenge that we were offered, the privilege of being offered this challenge of saving Staunton and building it into what it is today. We have to be thankful for the example that everybody else involved in this work set us. We have to be thankful for the new dimension that it gave to our lives, being associated together and being associated with the disabled, who have set such a true example of how to turn misfortune into something good and noble and worthwhile. And I think also we learnt and have to be thankful for the example of what can be achieved when men and women stand together in a common purpose to achieve a goal that they know is necessary and worthwhile. So, we do indeed have much for which to offer thanks to Almighty God.

[07:57] But this of course is just our 21st birthday – it is not the end of the work, and there is much that lies ahead. For one thing there is an extension to be built we hope, so that the residents who are now on the first floor can be brought down to the ground floor. Amongst the things that I personally, most especially hope and pray for is that this home, like all the others within our family will always remain flexible in outlook, ready to adapt to the changing needs of changing times, not as it were caught in the rut of thinking that what we’ve done in the past is right and therefore must be right for the future. I pray that we will always remain youthful in spirit with the vitality and the drive that was needed at the beginning to start the home at all.

[09:19] And if I am not misunderstood - as I hope I won’t be -, I also pray that we will never become wealthy, that if we receive money it will be spent in doing good to other people, but it will not sit in the bank to give us security. I know some security there must be; I know that money must be put aside for future extensions, but I also know that money can weaken one’s spirit; even in the Church itself wealth weakens the spirit. And it tends to attract a different type of person – not the person who came forward to do the work that was needed to get Staunton off the ground. So, we have much also for which to turn to God and ask his help and his guidance.

[10:28] But of course, when we ask God for his guidance, we need to be quite sure that we know what it is we are asking for. We tend to think as human beings that what we are asking is God to help us to carry out our own plans, but that is not really asking God for guidance. If we ask him for guidance, we are asking him to show us what he wants us to do. And that means we must be willing to listen and then to carry it out, whatever it might be. In other words, we need to live by faith.

[11:27] And when those words were spoken - man does not live by bread alone -, perhaps for a moment we can just picture the scene. Our Lord had come out of his 14 or 15 years of working as a carpenter to begin his public life. And after he had been baptised by John the Baptist the Holy Spirit came down on him - we are told in the form of a dove -. And immediately the Holy Spirit led him into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan. The Word really gives the impression of drove him out, pushed him out, thrust him out into the desert. We might ask why – why should he have to do that? I think the reason is that he, like all human beings - because he was man as well as God - had to work out how he was going to carry out his life’s mission, his great mission in life of the salvation of the world. And it was clear that God wanted him to do it in a way in which he was not allowed to use his power as God. That was to be hidden and concealed. And so he had to, as it were, just as Israel before him, be humbled and be tested so that God could be sure that he would carry through his work in the way that his father wanted.

[13:33] And at the end of those 40 days, or whatever period it was, he was at the point of exhaustion, I imagine so exhausted that he could not even by his own strength get back from the desert into Galilee. And then the tempter came and said ‘Look, you have a life’s work to do; you are the saviour of the world; look how weak you are. You have the power to turn those stones into bread. Turn them into bread’. We can well I think picture the forcefulness of that temptation. But our Lord answered by turning to scripture. He had faith, but even though humanly-speaking there was no way in which he could find the strength to leave the desert and could start his life’s work, God would help him. And we know that later when he had also resisted the other temptations, the angels came and ministered to him.

[14:55] To me that was the supreme act of faith, believing in God’s word, even when everything seems lost. And I think that perhaps the lesson that Staunton and all that flowed from it has taught me is that each one of us is called to play a unique part in the building up of the kingdom of heaven or the kingdom of God. And that this we do not just in our spiritual life but in the circumstances of our daily life.

[15:53] As Christians we tend perhaps to talk so much about heaven and the saving of our soul and other people’s souls that we give the impression that this world is something quite different, that we just happen to be passing through it, and that if we stand by the rules or if we end in the right disposition, then we go to heaven. But I think God is telling us that the two are intimately connected; we cannot dissociate the two. But in fact, our work on Earth, if we live by God’s word, by what he wants us to do is constructing heaven. But we carry with us through death, not just our souls, not just our sacrifices and our good dispositions, but our works. And that we are on Earth as God’s representative to eternalise the things of this world. And this we do in whatever position God has put us, whether our work is humble or great, whether we are fit and strong, or whether our life consists in being disabled or even totally helpless.

[17:33] What matters is that we try as best we can to find out what God wants us to do and then do it to the best of our ability. But of course, we only can if we stand by each other. If we recognise that we are members of the one human family and that we stand or fall together in the same way that we realised here at Staunton that only by standing together would we achieve the task that we had set ourselves. And so my special prayer on this occasion for the future of Staunton is that collectively and individually we will do our best to remember the implication of those few words: man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.

18:43: Speech ends

18:45: End of recording

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