

Old Lewesians Reunion 6th September 2014

Chapel Service Talk

'Thank you for those kind words of introduction. They are not exactly what Mr Jones used to say when I was regularly hauled up in front of 1J in 1963'

Introduction:

Headmaster of Priory School, Old Lewesians, Trustees of the Chapel, friends and guests
I am honoured and privileged to have been asked to give this talk this afternoon.

OLO Chairman, Martin Relf, who kindly briefed me about the arrangements for the service, was a more senior pupil than I was during my time at Lewes, and, as far as I know, I did not meet him until over 40 years later at my father's funeral in Eastbourne, where he had given some support to my father's quirky project of a rather eclectic museum and art gallery near the seafront in Eastbourne.

I guess if we all looked around today we would find previously unrealised connections between many of us.

I am grateful also to David Carter, John Gower and John Murray of the Chapel Trustees for arranging for me to be invited to speak today, or perhaps knowing them this is all probably some kind of stitch up. I think the fact that 3 such serial rogues from the B stream of Lewes Grammar School for boys in the 1960s have been elevated to the position of Trustees in their middle age should give encouragement to us all.

Three themes:

I was asked to do **three things** this afternoon:

give some nostalgic reminiscences

say something about the role of the chapel as a memorial

and have some kind of message for us all for the future.

Hopefully what I will say in the next few minutes will fuse, rather than confuse all three elements.

Reminiscences:

First, to remember.

In thinking about today I took the trouble to skim through the **Old Lewesians website** to find that it is a hive of stories and information about the past; and I would recommend you taking an hour or so to read there, and then maybe add your own story.

I have I am afraid only three memories of the chapel, apart of course from it being there, and rising tall and white as a backdrop to every game and playtime and sport played.

(Bizarrely I remember playing splits with a penknife at playtime on edge of the field just outside the chapel – something we would be horrified about today I imagine)

The first memory concerns John Davey, Old Lewesians Vice President and former teacher. Of all the dozens of talks and services I must have attended in my seven years at the school, I can only remember one of them. It was given by John Davey.

He took an obscure bible story from the Old Testament, where the disgruntled and ungrateful Israelites were infested by a plague of deadly snakes, and no cure could be found until Moses erected a bronze sculpture of the snake and hoisted it high on a pole in the camp so all could see. And told the people that if you get bitten, then immediately come and look at the snake and God will heal you. (*Numbers 21*)

Well Mr Davey strung this out as a tale, and got us to imagine different reactions people

might have to this instruction:

those who said bah, humbug, and wouldn't believe, and refused to look at the statue
those who said, well I better go, but right now I have a lot on my plate and I will go later on when I have more time.

those who just didn't pay attention

and probably with dramatic emphasis he described how each one who failed to listen to Moses' advice, unfortunately suffered the consequences.

And then, of course, there were those who were bitten, and knew it, and without hesitation, went straight to the statue, looked, believed and were healed.

You can guess the moral he made about faith and hesitation and unbelief, and doubtless he also made reference to Jesus' comment, that 'just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life'. (*John 3.14*).

The details are fuzzy, but I remembered his telling of it sufficiently to re-use it myself in children's talks over subsequent years in my work with young people, and re-work it in my own fashion.

So thank you John for the memory, and not asking permission to use your illustrations.

My second memory is more a continuous one, and a general one. I expect the chapel seemed a huge place to me at the time, the formality, and great organ bellowing out old hymn tunes.

I recall two hymns from those days, probably because I hardly heard them elsewhere, and on the very rare occasions I still hear the first one I am then taken back into this place, :

Sing aloud, loud, loud,

God is good, God is truth, God is beauty, praise him

God is love: His the care,

Tending each, everywhere.

God is love, all is there!

Jesus came to show him,

That mankind might know Him!

Don't know if you remember it also!

But the other song that sticks in my mind went like this (*I never made any choirs so I won't attempt to sing it!*)

O Christ who holds the open gate,

O Christ who drives the furrow straight,

O Christ, the plough, O Christ, the laughter

Of holy white birds flying after,

I have driven past many a furrowed field over the years and seen the line of white birds following the tractor, or the doves, or pigeons or gulls settling on a sown field, and often I have come back to this chapel in my mind and remembered that song, and equally mused at why those white birds were called holy – when they were preying on the farmer's crop. And I drove on none the wiser.

In fact, this summer I was with a group of young people planting cabbages for fodder on a farm in Dartmoor, and then making scarecrows out of poles and feedsacks, and I asked the young farmer who we were scaring off. He answered seagulls, but I did not ask if they were holy and white.

However as a good Old Lewesian, I am resolved that it is never too late to learn, and it is only yesterday that I discovered that the holy white doves, and in fact the hymn itself, is extracted from a long John Masefield poem, entitled 'Everlasting Mercy', which tells the story of Saul

Kane, a man whose life spins into a series of failures, until in the emptiness of spirit he finds his redemption, and in a moment of epiphany is transformed and even the pull of the plough seems to him like the work of Christ and the following white birds like the following of the Spirit in his heart.

I guess then there is always the hope and possibility of redemption for each of us in the paths of our life.

As the reading from Ecclesiastes reminds us, there is always a time, a time to plant and to uproot, a time to search, a time to scatter and to gather, a time for everything, under heaven.

School as Foundational

I don't know how often you have sat down to reflect how much your schooling at the girls or boys grammar or the Priory laid the foundations for your life, or what influence you think it had. I doubt I thought that much about it when at the end of the fifth form, in line with our tradition, we on the top floor of the Heathfield bus, as we crossed the bridge, hurled our caps out into the river - I guess to sweep away our childhood in preparation for being young adults in the sixth form.

My year, the lower sixth was the final year as LGSB, and our upper sixth was the first year of Lewes Priory School. From there I went to university with one other as I recall from Lewes, and from thereon failed to keep in touch.

It is only in the last few years that I have joined my peers for an annual stoking of the memories most Christmases at the Brewer's Arms, or perhaps just enriching and embellishing the myths with each passing year, of events and characters.

However I do think something of the school motto or school prayer has stuck with me over the years.

They cut us off from Latin in the B stream at the end of the second year, and I doubt I fully grasped then the meaning of 'Dare nec Computare', and probably thought it was something to do with mathematics, which I wasn't good at either.

But I do remember the school prayer, that we have read/will read shortly:

Teach us, good Lord, to serve thee as thou deservest;

To give, and not to count the cost,

to fight, and not to heed the wounds,

to toil, and not to seek for rest,

to labour, and not to ask for any reward,

save that of knowing that we do thy will.

I would like to think that in the background this has been there as a model and inspiration for working.

I have been privileged to spend my whole working life, since leaving university, in youth and community work in south London, among the housing estates around Clapham Junction, among communities very different from both my East Sussex and Lewes school backgrounds; and have certainly needed something of the tenor of the school prayer sentiments to fuel my working over many years.

The Story

The small organisation – Providence House - I work for has just celebrated its 50th anniversary. We hit on a title for the event – 'Providence House – A Part of our Lives'; because in talking with people we realised more and more how much the place had been a part of so many people's lives.

Part of our work in our 50th anniversary year has been to begin to record in different ways people's stories in connection with it being a part of our lives.

In reflecting on this and on other local organisations that are either flourishing or withering, I have come to the conclusion of the importance of the story for the well-being of an organisation. If you lose the story you may lose the organisation. The story will develop and change with the twisting of time, but you need to hang on to the story.

That must have been in the minds of the founders when they built this chapel.

I came to Lewes in 1963 so missed the building of the chapel and would in any case have been too young to have appreciated it; but I read yesterday – again from Old Lewesians website – the words of Mr Bradshaw in 1960, who wrote:

‘This building is designed and built not for one day, not for one year, but for one thousand years.

‘Those we commemorate, you who have built it, will rest in the hearts of men and women.’

This chapel provides a unique and apt symbol of the story of this place, not only the memory or recognition of those who gave their lives in the war, or of the following generation of those worked together to found it, or of those who, like many of us, studied and grew up within the walls of this school, and within its sister schools, but also of those who still enjoy or endure their schooling here, and will do in the years ahead.

The centre of the story is people, but it may be that the presence and continuance of the chapel here can be a part of the energy of the telling and re-telling of the old stories as well as the new stories.

Conclusion

For Mr Bradshaw, of course, the chapel represented a deeper story:

He wrote:

‘Two thousand years ago a sacrifice was made at Calvary without counting the cost, and ever since has rested in the hearts of men and women.

The concept of giving springs from Christ Himself and leads us back to Him.

This Chapel is a house of God where the young people of this school may seek and find the One who has left the supreme example of service. We start with Christ and we end with him.’

The writer of Ecclesiastes said that there is a time for everything, and I guess that each of us as we look back or look forward, or hardly look at all, we have to decide what there is time for:

A time to break down or a time to build up;

A time to cast away stones, or a time to gather stones together;

A time to seek or a time to give up;

A time to tear or a time to sew

A time to love

A time for peace

And always we hope a time to remember.

Thank you