

Modern Christians we can admire Leonard Cheshire

Who was Leonard Cheshire? Those of my generation will remember him as the outstanding and most decorated bomber pilot of the Second World War. Others will recognise him as a great Christian humanitarian, particularly his foundation of the Cheshire Homes, one of which was, of course, at Mote Park in Maidstone for quite a few years.

However, before I talk about him, listen to what other people have said:

Pandit Nehru described him as the greatest man since Mahatma Gandhi. Coming from an Indian, that's quite a compliment!

Lord Denning, the famous Law Lord and committed Christian, said: 'He has done more good for more people than anyone else in the country.'

Sir Alec Guinness (also a Roman Catholic) said that his modesty, simplicity and sheer ordinariness were awe-inspiring. 'In good time', he said, 'I suppose the process will start which will lead to him being called blessed and eventually, I hope, his canonisation.'

Roger Waters, of Pink Floyd, described him as 'the only true Christian I've ever met'.

The readings I requested, 'Put on the whole armour of God' are totally appropriate for Cheshire; perhaps earthly armour during his wartime service, but definitely the armour of God in all his work subsequently.

You may have read Chris' article in the magazine in which he said that all the modern Christians spoken of so far had suffered real hardship. Cheshire was no exception. At the end of the war, drained both physically and mentally after six years of constant fighting, he was admitted to hospital as a psychiatric patient. In 1952 he contracted tuberculosis and was in hospital for some two years, having most of one lung and several ribs removed. Early in 1992 he was diagnosed with the horribly cruel Motor Neurone Disease, from which he died some six months later.

The Gospel reading said to love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all of your soul and with all of your mind, and to love your neighbour as yourself. This is how Cheshire lived his life, always loving his fellow man and perhaps later, loving and becoming a servant of God.

Geoffrey Leonard Cheshire, to give his full name, or indeed Lord Cheshire of Woodhall as he became in 1991, was born into a very middle class family in 1917. His mother came from a military family and his father was an academic lawyer, becoming Professor of Law at Oxford University. Leonard Cheshire was educated at Stowe Schools and Merton College Oxford where he obtained a 2nd class honours degree in Jurisprudence and was considered to have the makings of a good lawyer.

While at Oxford he learned to fly with the university air squadron and joined the RAF on October 7th 1939, just a month after the war started. In 1940 he was awarded the

DSO for flying back a plane so badly damaged that it had to be written off, but he saved the lives of his crew. Thus he was the first junior officer in Bomber Command to be so decorated, after 15 months of war; the first of three such decorations. He was, in all, to fly 103 operations at a time when the average survival rate was 15. He led 617 Squadron, The Dam Busters, for about 9 months on many hazardous and effective missions. In July 1944, he was awarded the Victoria Cross, the only one of 32 VC airmen to win the medal for an extended period of sustained courage, rather than a single act of valour. His citation read: 'in four years of fighting against the bitterest opposition, he maintained a standard of outstanding personal achievement, his success from operations being the result of careful planning, brilliant execution and supreme contempt for danger'. On one occasion he flew his P51 Mustang in slow figures of eight above the target obscured by low cloud, to act as a bomb-aiming marker for his squadron.

Cheshire displayed the courage and determination of an exceptional leader. His last mission was to act as official British Observer of the atomic bombing of Nagasaki. He left the RAF in 1946 and although he was pacific he was never a pacifist. He came to believe it right to bomb military targets but not civilians and he said he would fight again should the necessity arise.

Although he had been brought up in an Anglican family, he had rejected the faith, and became, almost certainly, an atheist. In 1945 he said: "It was absurd to imagine that God existed except as a convenient figure of speech. Man had invented God to explain the voice of conscience, but it was doubtful whether right or wrong existed outside the human mind. They were words affixed like labels to customs and laws which man had also invented to have social order." He was roundly rebuked by a young lady in the group for talking such rot, saying that God is a person, and you know it just as well as I do. This is when Cheshire came back to God, for he said: "I suddenly knew that what she said was true. God was unmistakable, Someone known". This was before he witnessed the atom bomb on Kawusaki.

The time immediately after the war saw him start several new ventures. One of these was a community called VIP (standing for the Latin phrase Vade in Pacem, meaning Go in Peace) that eventually settled in a house called Le Court, in Hampshire, which Cheshire bought from an aunt. VIP's aim was to provide opportunity for ex-servicemen and women and their families to live together, each contributing to the community what they could, in order to help their transition back into civilian life. He hoped that training, prosperity and fulfilment would result from united effort and mutual support. He saw the community as one way of continuing to work towards world peace. But the idea did not prosper and the community came to an end in 1947. At sometime, around Christmas 1947 he fell to his knees, "Oh my God, I desire yet I desire not. I am weak yet I long to be strong. Grant me thy strength."

Then Arthur Dyke joined him at Le Court. Arthur was a man dying of cancer who had no home to go to. Following a crash course in the business of nursing, Cheshire looked after him, washed both him and his clothes and bed linen. Arthur was a Roman Catholic, so sometimes they talked about religion and sometimes about the home that required a lot of work which Cheshire could not afford. It was a far cry from the end of 1945 when he had been granted his four wishes. He was universally admired, driving a Bentley, wearing Saville Row suits and had access to wealth. However he

found this joyless and within two years he was down to his last shilling. He had struggled to implement the second commandment and through Arthur he found himself contemplating the first.

Before Arthur died, Cheshire found himself looking after a second person, but before Arthur's funeral Cheshire started to read a book, 'One Lord, One Faith', when a particular paragraph caught his eye. It said: 'The supreme reason for my conversion was that I could not resist the claim of the Catholic church to be the one true church formed by our Lord Jesus Christ to guard and teach the truth. She alone possesses the authority and unity necessary for such a divine vocation'. Later he modified this, acknowledging that so far as the Reformation aimed at purifying and 'dephariseeing' the Roman church, it is right and we still have a lot to learn from it in the sense of living by the spirit and not by the letter.

A few weeks earlier he had made a promise to Arthur that he would turn away nobody, no matter who they were. Arthur asked him: "Can you, in good conscience, turn and refuse a patient food because he's too difficult or you're too busy? If you're going to leave the initiative to God you'll have to be consistent. Is that what you intend?" Cheshire said that that was what he intended. Thus we see the fundamental origin of Cheshire Homes.

Soon more people were to follow and so were regular donations. Whenever money was short or there were pressing needs, his answer was always the same: "The Lord will provide." Leonard Cheshire Disability that provides help to disabled people throughout the world is now one of the top 30 British charities.

In 1955 Cheshire left for India where he was to stay for the next 4 years, obviously with visits home and during this time he had several homes built including Raphaels, a home for 600 people, including many lepers. Raphaels is still operating very successfully. By the time he returned there were 15 houses in the UK and 8 abroad. At the end of his life there were 270 homes in 49 countries. Whilst in India, Cheshire met Pandit Nehru in 1957 who said that he was happy to meet him because of the fine work he had done for the relief of suffering. He said that the Cheshire Homes have set an example of unostentatious but effective work for the relief of suffering without much fuss, advertisement or expense. Nehru said, "I would like to express my admiration for the work he is doing and more especially for the spirit in which it is undertaken".

While in India he was to marry Sue Ryder (a converted Catholic and a modern Christian hero in her own right) on 5th April 1959 in a private chapel of Bombay's Catholic Cathedral. They had two children, a son and a daughter.

After the return from India he was involved in running the homes that expanded from 23 to 270 in 49 countries at his death. Concerning death he replied to a question, "I think they are saying, are you looking forward to it? The thought of what God is giving to us is so overwhelming that you just can't face it. If this is what God is giving us out of His sheer goodness and not for any merit at all, then please give me a little more time to do better than I have done."

Early in 1992 he was diagnosed with the cruel Motor Neurone Disease that was to take his life on July 31st 1992. During his illness he continued to attend functions and, in May, went on a last visit to India. He made a farewell visit to the Delhi home and meetings of the Eastern region Committees of the Fund. His last public appearance was to witness the Queen Mother unveil a statue to Sir Arthur Harris, AOC in C Bomber Command. He attended against medical advice.

He was asked, by a journalist, if he was frightened of death. He said: "How could I be? I've worked all these years with disabled people. Before it was always a case of me and them, but now I can say 'we disabled'. I've had a good life. This is just something to get around, a bit of flak on the way to the target."

He was buried in the village cemetery. Later, on 25th September a memorial mass was held for him in Westminster Cathedral. Cardinal Hume said: "...but there was something else. It was simply this. He had allowed God into his life. He had said yes to God, not half-heartedly, not with reluctance, but characteristically, in a manner that was total and even radical."

The hymn I selected was, 'When Jesus came into my Life' for we can see what happened when Group Captain Cheshire let Jesus into his life. Not many of us have the intellect, determination, compassion he possessed, but by letting Jesus into our lives perhaps we could make at least a little difference.