

Before I begin, may I first thank the Chaplain and the Head Master for their invitation to stand here in this pulpit tonight, as together we remember the life changing and pivotal events of the fire 40 years ago today. I confess it's a humbling and daunting task to attempt to do justice to all the issues we faced and the emotions we experienced. But I'm particularly grateful to the staff and Old Bedfordians who responded to my request to share with me their own memories and reflections of the fire and of the mood of the school in its aftermath. Thank you.

It seems right that our gathering today should begin in the chapel where, from this pulpit, Ian Jones first faced the school after the fire.

On the night of the fire, I had been returning from a rowing dinner at Eton around midnight, and saw the ominous red glow on the horizon as I crossed the M1. 100 or so people were on the field. We watched as the Head Master in what remained of his study, with the curtains and window frames already alight. With him were a couple of staff and some reluctant firemen (rightly reluctant because it was against their advice as the roof could fall in at any moment). They were struggling to take to safety the steel filing cabinets containing the records of current pupils and the registrations of new boys expected over the next decade and more. Ian Jones had already worked out his priorities. People matter more than things.

There was virtually no sleep for him that night - and not much the next - but by 4.0 am he had arranged for a committee to meet at 10 o'clock to plan for the school to continue their normal timetable for the final two weeks of term. He spoke to a school community devastated by the fire. We had watched with horror and dismay as the fire relentlessly took hold, with the unforgettable roar of the flame and the cracking tiles. One of the worst moments for me was when the great spire which for had been there for ever, it seemed, finally gave way and came crashing down in showers of sparks and sending a wall of flames 100 feet into the air. The searing, corporate groan from the bystanders I shall never forget.

As was his custom, he came to chapel that morning for the early communion service. In stark contrast with other schools faced with disaster, it never seemed to have occurred to him to close the school for the last fortnight of term. From the outset, one of you at the heart of the decision making process told me, "He was determined to use the fire to catapult the school forward to greater things; he never doubted (at least in public) that it would emerge with better facilities, greater resilience, more artistry, higher reputation".

But, for me and many of you, the most significant memory from the fire is the figure of Ian Jones that Monday morning. Just 33 hours after the main building had been set alight, we watched him climb the steps into this pulpit to address a shocked and fearful school as he set the tone for the future. We had just read on the school gates details of where every boy should go at 9.0 am, and that the normal Monday timetable would resume at 10.0. We could hardly believe it. On the way to chapel we had walked past the still smouldering embers of the fire with its dreadful odour of destruction. Some staff wives could not bear to walk past it then, or for weeks to come. But when the senior half of the school was crammed into the Chapel the Head Master told us: "The eyes of a large number in Bedford and nationally are upon us. We want the next few years to be the best this school has ever had." He insisted us that we should not see it as disaster: it was an opportunity. "Life is not just buildings, it's about *people*", he told us. "Hold your heads high both inside and outside the school, so that, when we look back on this darkest of hours, we can be justifiably proud of our efforts and cooperation. Provided there are no weaknesses in the chain, they will pull us through". He then told us how life would continue, that day and for the rest of term. Everyone recalls the remarkable lift of his challenge to us. We believed him, and emerged from the chapel with a new sense of optimism and purpose.

At the end of term there was a touching and emotional final assembly when the Head of School presented Ian Jones with a card of congratulation signed by every member of the school. And at the end of the school year, with, as it proved, good O and A level results obtained, and with rebuilding well under way, Tony Abrahams memorably addressed the staff to announce "Out of the fire has come a great Head Master".

And just 2½ years later the school was reopened on schedule and within budget. Sir John Tavener was commissioned to compose a commemorative work, performed by the 1st orchestra and choral society conducted by the composer, who titled his work "Risen". Throughout all this, the four major projects already in progress - the extension to the science block, the building of the new sports hall and swimming

pool, the gym converted into a theatre, and the Permaprene all weather pitch - were all completed. At the beginning of the summer term, 22 new prefabricated classrooms had appeared at the foot of the chapel steps, fully equipped with electricity, water and drainage. Of course there were times when it seemed it could never be completed, and innumerable problems to be solved. But it was. The Phoenix had risen from the ashes.

This all happened because there had emerged a leader who believed in redemption. He knew the greatness of the task, but he knew what he had to do: he was the man for the hour. To an assembled school he spelt out the challenge and its outcome. He issued a fearless call to follow him through to a new beginning worth striving for. He called us to follow; we believed we could do it. We trusted his leadership.

He had issued a call which expected total commitment and - yes - a degree of sacrifice - confounding the doubters, and showing, by his own example, the way to resurrection. "We were all part of Bedford School at that particular time" someone wrote "for a special reason. We had to play our part in overcoming obstacles so dramatically thrown in our path. We had a specific task. There was no sense of despair or of cynicism", that dry rot of society. The way ahead was clearly set; everyone knew what they had to do. Even the virginia creeper on the south wall of the main building began to re-emerge that same summer to become a symbol of regeneration and hope.

Ian Jones demonstrated the three fundamentals of leadership:

- He shared his vision, and called us to follow him
- He showed us how it could be realised, and we believed him
- He sent us out, challenged to follow him to a better future than ever before

Great leaders have always done that. I've been trying to follow such a leader most of my life. He lived 2000 years ago, and Peter, one of his closest disciples, told Mark the gospel writer how he'd done it. (Mark 3:13f). His name was Jesus. What did he do?

- He called them to be his disciples
- They lived with him for three years: they came to trust and believe in him and his selfless love, shown supremely on the cross
- He sent them out to put it into practice and tell the good news of resurrection to a broken world

It's a God given pattern seen from creation onwards. At the outset of the Old Testament, the creator God was calling Moses at the burning bush, and leaders ever since, to follow this same blueprint. And in these last times he sent his Son, who not only called and inspired and sent his disciples. No: Jesus the Messiah, the King, became one of us. He chose to go the way of service and suffering to the Cross for us. He conquered the last enemy death for us in his Resurrection to live in a new dimension of living altogether. "I have come that you might have life: life in all its fullness" he told them. He still calls his followers to do the same. I've tried to do this all my life, and, though I've often failed him, he has never failed me.

As I looked through the sermons preached in this chapel during 1981-82 (we called it "Restoration Year"), I found sermons by internationally known famous people, four HMC Headmasters, a gaggle of Bishops and Deans and others, but the last sermon in the year was preached by our own Headmaster, Ian Jones. It was all about character. His text was from the OT book of Proverbs: "*Like a city whose walls are broken down is a man who lacks self-control*". Ian Jones commented, "Character is ... to know, choose and do the right - a simple definition. It is the ability to come to the knowledge of the right from the wrong, the true from the false, and to choose the right; to possess the will to enforce self-discipline to do the right and resist the wrong".

Remember those filing cabinets he saved from the fire? People matter more than things. The development of character, following the right leader, should be the prime purpose of education. Ian knew that. And he showed us how it could be done.

Amen