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Hawke's Bay Research Lodge No. 305

Reflections of a Master Mason

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I am a Master Mason only. I hold no office in my Lodge and, consequently, I feel a certain lack of confidence in presenting a lecture in the presence of those Brethren who have given many years to the study and practice of the Masonic Arts.

It is true, however, that Freemasonry does not present itself in exactly the same manner to any two Mason, however learned they are. Our symbols and formulas are aids to speculation on the inner meanings of the ritualistic acts we perform in Lodge, which are themselves aids to a better understanding and knowledge of our duties in our inevitable journey from the cradle to the grave.

Each Mason has probably a slightly different idea of what our Craft is generally and what it means; in particular to him. To one, the outer aspect is the most prominent and the most important-the Lodge and its activities taking the first place in his regard. To another, it is the inner meaning of Freemasonry, the spirit that underlies all the outward forms and ceremonies, which appeals most strongly. To yet another, it is Masonry's symbolism which is the most attractive. It is the spirit of fraternity and equality which undoubtedly draws us together, but each one, according to his inclination, is thereafter free to indulge his individual taste as to the particular aspect of our observances to which he gives the greatest attention.

Upon my initiation I was impressed by the ceremony and the verbal beauty of the Charges delivered to me. I had no understanding, at that time, of their hidden meaning. While I was charged with the duty of making a daily advancement in Masonic knowledge - no opportunity was afforded me of study in preparation for my *passing*. The test questions of the First Degree were learnt but little understood and, at the time, they appeared to be a somewhat empty form of words. Whereas, closer study reveals certain profound truths which may never become apparent unless the meaning is carefully sought in the literature of the Craft.

In the South-East Charge of the Second Degree, the Fellowcraft is exhorted to extend his researches into the hidden mysteries of nature and science. In my view, Brethren, the words "hidden mysteries" have a particular significance.

As our numbers are drawn from all walks of life, with different trades, callings and professions and with different standards of education and opportunity for study and the acquisition of material knowledge, it seems to me that this charge cannot mean that scientific principles and natural laws should be investigated as a prerequisite for admission to the Third Degree. Science and nature contain innumerable mysteries hidden forever from the understanding of all but the most learned men.

In operative Masonry the hidden mysteries of nature and science could well relate to the Fellowcraft's obligation to study and become familiar with the principles of construction and design of the mighty edifices upon which he and the members of his Lodge were engaged and thus, by practical work and active instruction, the Apprentice or Fellowcraft would acquire the skill and knowledge qualifying him to become a Journeyman or Master at his trade or occupation.

In speculative Masonry, is this not an injunction to so study the hidden mysteries of the Craft that they

become understood and accepted and used to construct a life, richer, fuller and more in conformity with the design of the G.A.O.T.U.

It is my sincere conviction, Brethren, that candidates are frequently raised to the Degree of a Master Mason without any course of study whatever or without the acquisition of any knowledge other than that obtained from a series of attendances at the working of the first two degrees.

And so I come to the underlying purpose of this lecture - to appeal to all the Brethren, placed as I am myself, actively to accept their responsibility not only to follow a formula of words, actions and signs, but, as opportunity affords, make a real attempt to acquire some understanding of the hidden meanings to be found in what otherwise might appear, on the surface, to be a meaningless routine, obscure in origin and somewhat ridiculous in performance unless fully understood.

What then is the real meaning of the Ritual of the Order? What do we stand for and what is the symbolic teaching of the three Degrees, in its simplest form? The answer to these questions may well be a source of interest and instruction for all newly raised Brethren for whom this lecture has primarily been prepared.

Freemasonry stands for many things besides the grand principles upon which the Order is founded - namely, brotherly love, relief and truth. It stands for **Patriotism** - the love of one's native land and a devotion to its interests and welfare. **Tolerance** - for the opinions and views of others; a mutual respect for each other's feelings; a mutual regard for each others rights; a mutual desire for each other's welfare. **Equality** - between the Brethren in their Masonic life; friendship for all mankind of whatever race or colour, who upon examination, or enquiry, are found to be good men and true, obedient to the moral law and observance of the golden rule.

It claims civil and religious liberty for all men. It stands for a true brotherhood - not only among individuals but also among nations. It demands we act upon the square in all our dealings, not only with our Brethren but also with all men and all nations. It teaches systematic benevolence. It exemplifies the dignity of labour. The aprons we wear are the outward symbol and expression of our faith in work, either of the hands or of the mind. For idleness has no place in the Masonic creed.

It stands for the exercise of Faith, Hope and Charity; for the Brother, faith in himself, in his fellows and in the G.A.O.T.U. With faith there comes hope for a better world and a better life and a greater understanding. With charity, not so much of money but of mind, we reach that compassion for the misfortunes of others, that teaches us our duty towards the trials and sufferings of all humanity.

These and other teachings are enshrined in the three Degrees and may be found by those who actively and conscientiously study the hidden mysteries awaiting the understanding of the enquiring mind. This enquiry, as I have pointed out, is enjoined in the Second Degree, for the symbolism of that Degree is in essence that of the progress of the worthy Brother through life, from the initial state of ignorance at birth, to a state of mind, through the acquisition of moral knowledge, in which he can truly say that for him "death has no terrors" and he is mentally prepared for the final test, the third and sublime degree in which we put off the restraints of life and become, in truth, free men.

In this degree we pass from death to a new life, clothed for the first time with our master masons' aprons as a symbol that our labours are completed and that we are qualified to join the Brethren who have preceded us to the Grand Lodge Above. Translated into the experiences of life, the First Degree symbolises the period of birth with all its concomitants, restriction, pain, discomfort, and helplessness.

The candidate is introduced in a state of restraint and of darkness in a lighted room. All but he are in the realm of light - he alone is standing about in a slipshod state within the temple. He is assisted step by step in a state of helpless bewilderment. Masonically he is as inert and unintelligent as a newborn babe - he is a ridiculous, helpless and indigent figure.

If he has the means of buying assistance, in aid of his moral progress, he must again be thrust into the outer darkness from whence he came and be re-introduced into the company of virtuous co-equal men - he must be "born again". In short, this Degree symbolises the entry of a human life upon a new

world, where material advantages of wealth and fortune find no place. Where moral standards alone predominate, where there is no colour line, no rival sects or creeds, but, where humanity, perfectly co-equal, stands proud. Based upon the fact of its equality, it rests upon its essential mutual quality and finds a broad avenue of common opportunity for advancement along which the neophyte may make a daily progress towards the perfection of Masonic knowledge.

The working tools of this Degree imply a state of rebirth - part of our life henceforth is to be spent in prayer and service; conscience is to be our guide and we are reminded by the Chisel that our re-education has begun.

Proceeding onwards and still guiding his progress by the principles of moral truth the initiate is led in the Second Degree to contemplate the intellectual faculty. The Great Architect as the planner and the Creator, now becomes the geometrician; symbolic not of creation but of orderly progress and development. It is the Degree of experience, of a life planned, regulated and well ordered from the first acquisition of knowledge, each span of life, through progressive moral conduct, bringing us closer to the attainment of the ideal realisation of moral perfection. This Degree symbolises man's upward struggle from his lowly origin, to a well-ordered life and rational comprehension. It recognises that the path of complete moral and intellectual rectitude is full of pitfalls, is winding and tortuous and that progress is slow and difficult.

The candidate approaches the East, symbolic of the apex of a well ordered and well comprehended universe, by steps taking him in a quarter of a circle - or 90 degrees, the angle of the square - as though ascending a winding staircase. By itself this is a somewhat ridiculous performance unless it is recognised for what it is, a representation of the tortuous but ever upward struggle of the moral man to attain to a state of perfection enabling him when life is over to be accepted as a worthy brother in the Grand Lodge Above. In short, this is the degree of education in the conduct of a moral life, that long-drawn-out process by which man is led to a realisation of his better self and, by successfully surmounting the vicissitudes and temptations of life, he is led to the throne of God Himself.

This rebirth and education in the moral arts seems to be the meaning and explanation of the first two Degrees of Masonry.

Some students reject wholly the Hebraic history and fables with which our ceremonies are interwoven and maintain that the real basis of our practices lies in the ancient Greek mysteries of Eleusis, upon which have been superimposed certain Jewish allegories with no historic foundation whatsoever. Such Brethren dismiss entirely the references to King Solomon and particularly the stories associated with Hiram Abiff and go so far as to suggest that the explanation of the Tracing Board, so far as it is Judaic, is pure nonsense.

I confess myself to having a similar feeling and it may be found interesting at a later date to endeavour to trace the many similarities between our ritual and that of the rich Eleusinian mysteries where initiates were taught how to achieve union with the Gods by rising above the fear of death. Our final passing to the end of the Second Degree brings us to the point in mortal life where we have progressed as far as the boundaries laid for us by the Grand Geometrician and we are preparing to cross to the unknown state beyond death. The symbolism of the Third Degree is the plainest of all and we are left in no doubt that its object is to teach us how to die. We are reminding ourselves that to the just and virtuous man death has no terrors.

The candidate advances with both breasts open to the world with courage and fortitude. He steps over the open grave in recognition that the soul under the protection of the Divine Being does not descend to the nether regions but continues on beyond the grave. And the candidate thenceforth proceeds with courage, with bold and marching steps, assured, as he is, of a happy re-union with the former companions of his toil. In symbol we have passed from death to a renewed, more free and happier life.

In conclusion, I do not think I can do better than quote Bro. W. L. Wilmshurst in *The Meaning of Masonry*, where he says of this degree: "I sometimes fear that the too conspicuous display of the emblems of mortality in our Lodges is apt to create the false impression that the death to which the

Third Degree alludes is the mere physical change that awaits all men. But a far deeper meaning is intended. The Mason who knows his science, knows that the death of the body is only a natural transition of which he need have no dread whatever; all that he fears is that when the time comes he may not be free from those "stains of falsehood and dishonour", those imperfections of his own nature that may delay his after progress. No, the death to which Masonry alludes, using the analogy of bodily death-in-life, is to man's own lower self, to which St. Paul referred when he protested "I die daily". It is over the grave, not of one's dead body, but of one's lower self, that the aspirant must walk before attaining to the heights. The soul must voluntarily and consciously pass through a state of utter helplessness, from which no earthly hand can rescue it, and in trying to raise him from which, the grip of any succouring human hand will prove a slip; until at length the Divine Help Itself descends from the Throne above and with the Lion's Grip of Almighty Power, raises the faithful and regenerated soul to union with itself in an embrace of reconciliation and atonement.

This, Brethren, is the greatest of the hidden mysteries of the Sublime Degree.