



No. 34.

May 4th, 1942.

WHAT IS FREEMASONRY?

(By W. E. Watson, Lodge Napier.)

Worshipful Master and Brethren—

It is with considerable diffidence that I have come here this evening to give this halting address, because my own Masonic career has been so short that I am painfully aware of my presumption in speaking to much older and more learned brethren than myself, especially as what I am about to say is by no means entirely original—a Mason as young as myself would have little right to air only his own views. Therefore, what I have done to string together into a necklace certain thoughts, and in many cases the actual words, gleaned from a considerable amount of reading, and I am deeply indebted to many eminent Masonic writers—far too numerous to mention all by name, but including Wilmhurst, Pike, Newton, Ward, and Castells. Because this address is not my own entirely, what I am about to say will no doubt be familiar to many of you, and I therefore crave the indulgence of the older brethren and ask them to remember that these remarks were originally intended for younger Masons, who may not yet have had much opportunity to read Masonic literature to any great extent.

We come here to our Masonic duties regularly once a month and we carry out our duties conscientiously and sincerely, but the more sincere we are, the more often must we ask ourselves: "What really is Freemasonry, and what is it all about?" and this evening I hope to draw a few lessons from some of the more familiar objects we see every time we come into Lodge. But first, what IS Freemasonry? It obviously is not just a social club, although the social aspect is a most important and enjoyable one, without which Freemasonry could hardly exist. But the social side is only one aspect—it is not sufficient of itself, and it could be enjoyed elsewhere and possibly even better, without the elaborate structure of the three degrees. Nor is Freemasonry altogether an organized religion, and certainly not just another religious sect, although at every point it is coloured and enriched by religious teaching. We are rather chary of mentioning anything about religion, because of the injunction not to introduce any topic of religious discussion, but surely that refers only to sectarian discussion and its almost inevitable differences of opinion. Once we get a true conception of the meaning of the word "religion" a new view opens up—the word merely means a "binding back" and really supplies the keynote to our Masonic philosophy, and until we realize the true meaning of "religion," our Masonry is more or less a vain repetition of a very beautiful ritual.

What then is Freemasonry? Is it just for ourselves, here in Lodge once a month, with the right to visit sister Lodges when and where we will? If Masonry is just that—if it is for ourselves alone, then Masonry will ultimately wither away and perish, because so narrow a concept can never influence our lives sufficiently for us to have any real influence on the world out-side. It must, therefore, go beyond the four walls and confines of our Temples—it must go beyond us who are members of the Lodge—beyond us who ARE the Lodge. It is important to remember that a Lodge is, in its essence, not a building or a place, but a fellowship of men, banded together for certain specific reasons. Probably the best solution to the question "What is Freemasonry?" is to be found in a word we use quite frequently, but generally without quite realizing its true importance—that word is "speculative." We are free and accepted or speculative Masons, but nowadays we do not often meet together (except in Research Lodges such as this) as a learned society to speculate on the deeper mysteries of this earthly life and of its hidden SPIRITUAL mysteries. This speculative Lodge—this

Masonry—is, as I read it, a blend of ancient philosophies and religions, revived and transmuted into a practical scheme of life, and it is trying to teach us something, so that we may influence for good the lives of those with whom we come in daily contact.

Somewhat differently from the organized religions of the world, it is trying to teach us by means of a series of very striking and dramatic episodes—by symbols and by allegories—as well as by the spoken word. The candidate for the time being is the central figure on the stage, and right from his first entrance into Lodge until he is finally raised, the drama and the teaching centre round him, and we who sit in the stalls and watch are month by month reminded that the drama and its teaching never ends—it is repeated over and over again to impress upon our minds that the lessons are for each of us and for all the time.

So then, Freemasonry is what we may call a speculative and dramatic philosophy of life. Now, the word philosophy implies a "lover of wisdom," and we know from the V.S.L., which plays so great a part in our ritual, that without wisdom we perish, and it is just that power to acquire wisdom which raises us above the level of the beasts of the field, and which gives us hope for the Future—a certainty of a Hereafter. We do not attempt to define our belief in a future existence, but we all, in our more serious moments, must visualize it as a place of beauty, of peace, and of perfection. To the Red Indian it meant a happy hunting ground, to the writer of the Book of Revelation it meant a new world sparkling with gold and precious stones. To some of us it means a garden. The words of an old hymn, "Jerusalem the Golden," are familiar to us all, and I think the writer, St. Bernard of Clairvaux, must have been a gardener, because one of the quaintest verses of the hymn—unfortunately omitted in our translation—reads somewhat as follows: —

"Thy garden and thy gallant walks
Continually are green ;
There grow such sweet and pleasant flowers
As nowhere else are seen."

But whatever view we may hold as to the nature of the future life, its promise is an integral and vital part of our Freemasonry. Some day I hope to hear a learned brother give us an address on the true INNER meaning of such phrases as "It is thus that all Master Masons are raised to a re-union with the companions of their former toils," and "The light of a M.M. is but darkness visible"—there is a wealth of meaning wrapped up in those and similar phrases. But I am digressing from my theme of the philosophy of Freemasonry. As I said earlier, philosophy means a love of wisdom. Wisdom and Knowledge—what wonderful words these are! Let us examine that word "knowledge" for a moment. We have two Kings in our ritual, Solomon, K. of I., and Hiram, K. of T. We also have Hiram Abiff, a man, we are told, filled with wisdom and cunning and understanding. Now, why are these three exalted personages so prominently brought before our notice?—surely because that word "King" means "to know"—it is from the same source as "canny" and "cunning"—one who "KNOWS," and is therefore worthy to govern and rule. And isn't the teaching for us that we too should be Kings—Kings of ourselves? Over the temples of the ancient mysteries were carved two words : "Know thyself." And if we know ourselves—all our powers, all our gifts, all our follies, all our strengths, and all our weaknesses—then, Brethren, we will have learned so to govern ourselves that we may have some influence for good over the lives of others. And that, Brethren, is what I think to be the real answer to the question "What is Freemasonry?" It is a philosophy—designed to teach each of us to be a King—King of Himself!

So now we have an idea, of what Freemasonry really is. Now, how does it teach us this philosophy—this way of life? We say that Freemasonry is a system veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols—and we generally let it go at that. But what use making the claim if we do not try to find out the underlying truths which the symbols are silently showing to us. In the alternative third degree we learn that the body of our Master was temporarily hidden in the litter of the Temple that is, something precious and something holy was concealed and could only have been found by searching. So must we search among the symbols and allegories to find the treasures they are concealing: only by such a search can we ever hope to appreciate and enjoy Masonry to the fullest extent. Every article in the Temple, every step and almost every word, is symbolic of something hidden, something deeper, and something richer and well worth the finding. So let us try to uncover some of the simpler symbolism—I say "some" and "simpler" because a great deal more than I propose saying could be extracted, and almost every object in the Lodge could be the subject of an address by itself—so please bear with me if you do not entirely agree with my ideas, and if you yourselves see interpretations I have missed or do not refer to.

When we first enter a Masonic Temple, we do not know its shape or size, and our first stumbling, hesitating steps are symbolic of our groping in the dark of this earthly life and of its problems. After a while we make open confession as to in Whom we put our trust in all our difficulties and dangers, and thereafter our steps become firmer and surer as we trust to the guiding hand of an unseen brother. This surely is a symbol of the slow, stumbling progress of mankind towards the light, and is a promise that if we but continue to put our hand into that of the unseen God, then some day the veil which obscures our sight will be removed and we shall see as we are seen. The circumambulation of the Lodge is a lesson to us to walk by faith and not to depend solely on our own strength and courage. Later on we find ourselves in an oblong chamber, which we are told has symbolically no covering save the canopy of heaven. Why this odd shape—this oblong square? It is partly a memory of those far-off days when men thought the world was flat, and when their knowledge of the habitable world was confined to those lands round about the Mediterranean Sea. If you take a map and draw a fair-sized oblong shape round the Mediterranean, you will find you will also see that the entrance was between the pillars of Hercules, which gives an added interest to us as Masons. The shape of the Lodge room also refers, in another interpretation, to the physical body of man, and I am of opinion that a deep study of Masonry would show us that all the allegory and symbolism finally refers to the physical body of man, to his soul or intelligence, and to the spirit of man which enwraps his body and his soul. But let us confine ourselves to the thought that the shape of the Lodge refers to the world—to us the floor represents the earthly life of man, its chequered pavement reminding us of our dual personality and of the vicissitudes and lights and shadows of our mortal existence. According to the lecture of the 3° T.B., the square pavement was for the High Priest to walk on. This, I think, is a lesson that we, each of us, should not only strive to be a King of himself, but also to become a Priest of the Most High God. To us, the whole world is a lodge wherein Man is to learn the Brotherly Life. So we, as Masons, interpret the mystery of the world, its purpose and its design. Ours is a simple faith, a profound philosophy and a practical scheme of life, which will work if only we will give it a fair trial. And if to us the Lodge is a representation of the world, so is initiation—our first appearance between the Pillars—a symbol of our birth into this world. But our initiation has an added difference—our Masonic initiation is a rebirth into a new world of moral values and spiritual vision—out of the lower into the higher. Not to realize that initiation—our "new .beginning"—is a moral rebirth is to miss both the beauty and the true meaning of the ceremony of initiation. At the door of the Temple we leave behind, or should leave behind, all that makes for envy and strife and covetousness—all that clogs and impedes our spiritual progress—those are the things which we really mean by "worldly possessions." Here in Lodge should we find a shrine of peace and concord and harmony, where men of all ranks and all conditions can be drawn together as Brethren of the Mystic Tie. Here in Lodge should be a world of the Ideal made into the Real, and here should we truly meet on the level and part on the square—brothers of one family—seeking the truth that makes men free!

Such, as I see it, are some of the lessons of the shape of the Lodge.

But we do not see the Lodge room first. What we see is the pedestal. It is one of the most important of the furnishings of the Lodge, and to extract some of its meaning and some of its symbolism is an important and instructive lesson. (That word "instructive" reminds me of something. When we take our obligations, we not only bind ourselves to the Lodge, but the Lodge binds itself to us, and not one of the least of the Lodge's duties to us younger Masons is to impart instruction—the Master is called upon to employ AND INSTRUCT his Brethren—and ritual work is not the whole of the instruction! This fact that the obligation works both ways is sometimes apt to be forgotten, but it is essential that Masonry and its inner messages be taught, if it is to survive and to make any worthwhile contribution to the world's progress. And, Worshipful Master and Brethren, this SPIRIT of Freemasonry should play —MUST PLAY—a great part in the destinies of the world in its present state of turmoil, if ever we are to usher in a reign of true peace and brotherhood among the nations.)

It was a profound insight which led our ancient Brethren to regard the Lodge as a symbol of the world, and to seek to symbolize in the ritual something of the orderliness of the rules and laws that govern the universe. Their whole idea was that if man is ever to build a spiritual temple, or an order of society that would stand firm for ever, it must imitate the laws and principles which keep stable the world in which man lives and moves. That is also our design, our dream, and our labour of love here in Lodge. And to fulfil that purpose we, too, need a spiritual education and wisdom from on high, and therefore on the floor of our Lodge stands an altar—not just a pedestal, as we sometimes think of it, but an altar, a focus of faith and fellowship, a

symbol of that thought and love and yearning we all experience in our deeper moments of repose and reflection, away from the rush of the rolling world. In all ancient temples and in many modern churches the altar was the place of sacrifice and adoration—almost always was it placed in the extreme East, above the ranks of the worshippers and approachable only by the officiating High Priest. But here in Lodge we find it on the floor, as near as practicable to the centre of the building

Surely, Brethren, here was a wise design—not for us an unapproachable altar, but an altar of fellowship and community of thought and feeling. Masonry is not a religious sect, even though it is religious in its very essence. Masonry seeks to unite men, not to divide them; nor does it seek to do exactly what the churches are doing—therefore its altars are placed differently. Masonry does not attempt to define God, or to teach of Him dogmatically. Beyond the one great truth of Brotherly Love, and therefore of the Fatherhood of God, it does not seek to go. It points out the essential fact, and leaves each man free to follow his own heart so far as doctrine is concerned. Therefore to us the altar is a symbol of unity and fellowship—of harmony and concord—of something which we must carry out into the world if Freemasonry is to have any real value. And as Masonry seeks to unite men, while still leaving them free in respect of their individual beliefs as to God's nature and attributes, so our altar becomes still another symbol—a symbol of freedom, not freedom FROM belief, but freedom OF belief.

To go into a church and find perhaps one solitary person kneeling in silent prayer and adoration beneath an altar high in the East is always a solemn and impressive sight. But, Brethren, such is not for us here in Lodge. Here no one bows in solitude before a lonely altar—only do we bend our heads when Lodge is open, and only in the full presence of our Brethren. And so we uncover still another lesson—that none may find the Truth alone, by himself and for himself alone. Only by the practice of Brotherly Love may we help in the upward progress of the world and so help in the coming of that Kingdom to which we all aspire.

These, I think, are some of the lessons of the altar.

It was another profound insight which led our ancient Brethren to place on our altars an open Bible—the first thing an initiate sees on his restoration to light. This great light is an essential in Freemasonry without which no Masonic ceremony may be conducted, much less may any candidate be initiated except upon an open Bible. And the restoration to light is inseparably linked with the V.S.L., for what is more typical than its insistence on light—more light ! Listen to just a few of the wonderful passages ringing their music down the long avenues of time:

Thy word is a lantern unto my path and a light unto my feet.
The Lord shall be to them an everlasting Light.
In Him was life and the life was the light of men,, and the light shined in darkness.
And there shall be no night there, for the Lord God shall give them light, and they shall reign for ever and ever.

These are just a few of the many references to light, and surely it was wisely done when our Brethren of old so arranged it that the first thing a newly-made brother saw on the altar before him was this one great light of Freemasonry.

In all ages, and in all climes, light has been the destroyer of darkness, symbolic of the triumph of the power of good over the forces of evil. And what is light? It is not a substance, nor is it a spirit. It is a force of Nature—something mid-way between the material and the spiritual, partaking of the beauty and mystery of both. Of all the gifts of God it is perhaps the greatest, folding into its benediction the rich and the poor, the just and the unjust, the thoughtful and the indifferent—all alike, even though quite unheeding, share in the benefit of the light.

And so the open Bible stands for us as a symbol of that light which we must carry out into the world beyond our doors —so hard a task to, undertake, Brethren, but if we fail, where then is the real value of our Freemasonry?

The very next things which our initiate sees upon the sacred volume before him are the square and compasses. The more one reads and studies, the more one marvels at the wisdom which inspired our Brethren of centuries ago. Masonry was not born full-fledged—it grew. Out of many springs and from many,

rivulets comes the great river of Freemasonry which carries us all on its broad bosom. Down the centuries men of wisdom and understanding have all added their quota, until to-day we have the marvel we know as Freemasonry. And the symbolism of the square and compasses was not the least of those flashes of wisdom. What does the square teach us? Let us think for a moment of the square itself—just a plain try square, legs of equal length, not marked off with measurements—just a plain testing square. It was used by the operative Mason to test out angles for sharpness and accuracy, but for us it is the test of character and integrity and of uprightness. The stones the operative Mason cuts are to be fitted into a building—a palace, a cathedral—but the characters we build here are to be fitted as living stones into that House not made with hands, the Home of our Father which is in Heaven. The square is for us the test of moral worth and fitness for the great task we as Masons should undertake in the world's upward progress. Any community or any society without high standards must lack stability—something we should esteem, for according to our traditions we say : "In strength will I establish this mine House that it may stand firm for ever." Each of us, Brethren, is to be a stone in that House, and to keep us in the right way of life there is in the heart of each of us a try-square we call conscience. That is the real square with which to test our lives and actions. And so, Brethren, let us learn the lesson of the square placed here on the open Bible, so that the world may rightly say of each of us : "He is on the square."

Another wonderful thing the Masons of old have done for us is to give us the symbolism of the compasses, more especially as seen by our newly initiated brother. There are many lessons to be learned from the compasses, but I will confine myself to this, that if the Lodge and its square pavement is a representation of the world and of our earthly existence, then is the spacious canopy above a representation of that Heaven to which we all aspire. And if the earth were once thought to be flat and square, then the skies were a circle, and what more natural than to associate with the try-square that instrument which is used to describe a circle. So Masonry is as wide as the earth and as high as the heavens, and the compasses are a symbol of that Almighty Architect Who encompasses and governs us all. And so we begin to understand the meaning of the words "to make the circle of our Masonic duties complete." We are a mixture of the earthly and of the divine, and we must so encircle our lives and keep them between the parallel lines of obedience to the Divine law, and of wisdom and justice, that we may finally be acceptable to that Divine Being from Whom all goodness emanates.

The square and compasses conjoined appear so very publicly on our buildings that they are quite familiar even to non-Masons, and we as Freemasons should so grasp their underlying truths that to the world, as to us, the square and compasses interlaced should be a shining symbol of the world as it should be, and which some day, if we live up to our principles, it may be. And so, Worshipful Master and Brethren, let us always remember that Masonic teaching and philosophy is designed for the purpose of helping us to live an upright and a useful life, and to help bring in the Kingdom of peace and brotherhood here and now, not in the dim and far-off future. It is perhaps visionary, but isn't it worth while trying to imagine the whole world as a Lodge—a place where there are no barriers, where we are just brethren together. No matter to what eminence we may rise in the world, no matter what regalia we may come to proudly wear, there is no more honourable title, or more majestic clothing, than that of the Master Mason. But, mark you, Brethren, the apron which is buried with us when we finish our labours here on earth is the simple white lambskin with which we began our Masonic career—symbolic, you see, to the very end, reminding us of St. James' definition that "True religion before God is this—to visit the widows and fatherless in their affliction and step oneself unspotted from the world."

To live honestly—to go straight—to suffer disappointment and misunderstanding rather than deviate from the right path—to be honest, not only in material things, but also honest in word, in mind, in thought—to willingly injure no man—to be tolerant and sympathetic with those in adversity and distress—to be brave among the trials and tribulations of life—to make a promise and to keep it—to strive to walk justly and uprightly all our days—these are the attributes which should distinguish us as Freemasons. Therefore, let us so absorb our Masonic teaching into our daily lives, our thought's, and our actions. that when the time comes for us that the Angel Azrael shall gently brush his dark wings across our wearied eyelids and soothe us to our last long slumber, the world may find for us no finer epitaph than the simple words : "He was indeed a Freemason!" Let us so live that when we, too, shall have passed through the intricate windings of this mortal life, we shall open our eyes as worthy initiates of that greater and grander Lodge above, where the world's Great Architect lives and reigns— forever!