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THE HUMAN FACE OF FREEMASONRY

An Address by Bro Peter Pole, MM

Delivered on behalf of the Hawke's Bay Research Lodge No 305

To Lodge Turanganui No 1480, EC, in Gisborne

Saturday, 24th July 2010

Worshipful Master, Very Worshipful, Worshipful and Brethren all, as a very new mason of only some four years experience it is indeed a privilege to be asked to address this gathering. It is also in some measure putting my principles to the test.

I do have a Masonic matter dear to my heart on which I am happy to speak. I must hope that in doing so I am able to engage your minds and perhaps here or there imbue a brother with something of the passion that I feel for this work.

My theme is "The human face of Freemasonry". Many of you will recognize this phrase and be aware that it refers to the work of the lodge almoner. I regret that I am unable to acknowledge the author, but perhaps someone here will be able to help me repair that loss.

So we have the almoner. His jewel is the scrip or purse, open, with a heart engraved upon it. He is generally that elderly brother who stands up at Lodge meeting and goes on (and on) about widows and sick brethren. It always seems the same and we tend to wish he would get on with it so that we can continue with something a bit more exciting. Believe me I do not bring him to your attention with a view to sport with your feelings; far from me be any such intention. I do have some special reasons.

But firstly who and what is he? An almoner is an official charged with the distribution of alms. Alms being "relief given out of pity to the poor" and "a good or charitable deed". Almoners were appointed by religious houses to oversee their obligation to care for the needy. When I was a small boy, hospitals had almoners who administered a fund assisting people with the financial cost of medical care. Like the supply sergeant in the TV comedy MASH, the almoners' position as the channel to food, clothing and financial aid, gave them power. Perhaps too much to be left to a bald man in a brown dressing gown. Some almoners are high officials and peers of the realm in England. But in Freemasonry in New Zealand, the first appointments came as a result of the position being added to the list of Lodge Officers at the annual communication of 1946. His work being, as we all know, to assist brethren in distress.

Now we come to the big question, and the crux of my endeavours. Is what he does all that important? I sense that the reception given to his monthly report is "ho hum, here we go again, heard it all before". Maybe the growth of the health and welfare sector in our country has rendered the office superfluous?

But I ask you to think again, right now, about what is behind that mundane report. One of our brothers has just lost his wife after a long and difficult battle with cancer. They have been almost inseparable for over fifty years. The almoner has visited and sat for a couple of hours and they have talked, probably the almoner has mostly listened. They have enjoyed a cup of tea, he has promised to call again. A suddenly very lonely man had company for a while, someone to unburden himself to, a brother. He can look forward to another visit soon. Believe me brethren that visit is hugely important to that man. Can the "state" take a brother's place. No!

A widow of maybe fifteen years or even more, not too far from that magical century, living quite alone, limited in her ability to get out and about. The almoner from her husband's lodge arrives probably bearing gifts of fruit, or perhaps something special he knows she has difficulty finding for herself. A box of kindling or a tough old pumpkin cut up and ready for the oven. The joy and

happiness he brings into that lonely home for a few minutes is amazing. The contact with a man from her husbands' lodge is special. She wants to know how the lodge is doing; there will be a bit of reminiscing about days long gone, about functions she attended and so on. She may well have been waiting for the monthly visit to ask a favour. A heavy pot plant moved or a picture rehung or some such small service. For half an hour so the almoner has brought the outside world into her home and shown her that people are thinking of her, someone is concerned for her welfare, help is not too far away if she should need to call on it. And no, the "state" does not, and cannot, fulfil this role.

We should be aware that this is happening in the real world. The almoner's visit will be mentioned in conversations with other visitors and with family. Like the pebble thrown into the pond the ripples of his work spread far and wide through the community. While visiting an elderly brother, his telephone rings and it is his son calling from Canada. Within moments that son is being told of the visitor from the lodge, a ripple that has gone 5000 miles in seconds. This is the best publicity that Freemasonry can ever have and it can be multiplied exponentially.

I exhort you to choose your lodge almoner well, and having chosen him, support him to the hilt. Don't leave him to do it all alone, go with him, or help him find those small things that mean he doesn't go empty handed. Listen to his report and try to visualize the men and women he speaks of. Always with the thought in your mind, "could I do anything that might help"? Above all, if the almoner says a brother is in need of visits, get off your behind and cheerfully embrace the opportunity to exercise that virtue. You may just be amazed at what this might mean to you yourself.

To close, please allow me to play the schoolmaster for a moment? When we speak of a calm day or of a palm tree, we never pronounce the "ell". Please extend the same courtesy to the almoner – "almoner" not "al moner".

References:

The Lodge Almoner, et al. WBro C J S Lea, PGD, United Masters Lodge No 167 vol VIII no 7
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