

THE DEAN OF YORK ON FREEMASONRY.

The Defence Lodge, No. 1221, Leeds, has arranged for a series of addresses to be delivered from time to time on Freemasonry, and they have been fortunate enough to enlist the services of the Very Reverend the Dean of York to inaugurate the series. We have much pleasure in presenting to our readers the address in question:

It is a good thing, I am sure you will agree with me, for I speak for the most part to men of business, to take stock from time to time of whatever we have in hand, to recall its professed object, to review its materialism, to reconsider its capabilities, and to acquire a fresh and comprehensive grasp of the subject for our future dealing herewith. Our loyalty to this Order is, no doubt, unimpeachable, our satisfaction undiminished, our pride, in being recognised members of the Craft, untarnished; but, nevertheless, we may not be altogether conscious of the opportunities and privileges which we enjoy, or fully estimate, as it deserves to be estimated the membership of our great and ancient body corporate.

At a time like the present, when for reasons which perhaps lie outside the strict ken of Freemasonry, I am not wont to attend social gatherings, and it seems to me that I can most Consistently fulfil the task which your kindness has imposed upon me by dwelling upon a legitimate province and practical work of Freemasonry at the present day.

And first let us clear away all misapprehensions of the subject which shall linger and indispose many to join our ranks, though I will not suppose that they obtain amongst those who have been enrolled in our Fraternity.

The proper conception of Freemasonry which prevailed in days gone by is, I think, altogether exploded. Men do not think of us and represent us to be such as old caricatures and squibbs portrayed us - mere gluttons and bibulous people, whose conversation was flavoured with coarseness, and whose actions savoured of indecency. The whole truth and character of the Craft now-a-days forbids such imputations to be even suggested, but, still, there is an idea that, whatever we may profess, Freemasonry is really a good fellowship club. Our pedantic and archaic expression of "banquets" conjures up in the public mind a profuse and intemperate participation in the luxuries of the table rather than that "refreshments" which precedes or closes the season of "labour." There is no reason why such frugal enjoyment should be intermitted. And it seems indeed a fact consistent with humanity itself that the partaking of food should be social rather than solitary, and that "the feast of reason and the flow of soul" may not only be compatible with, but actually in a great measure promoted by, aye! and in its turn, reacting on and influencing the necessary nourishing and strengthening of the body.

Good fellowship is not the aim of our society, though in its true and legitimate sense it becomes an element in it and in its due proportion and position is a feature which none need deprecate or be ashamed of.

Secondly, Freemasonry is not a mere benefit society. That many members of the Craft do, in their seasons of adversity and need, receive substantial assistance from our funds is true. It is our pleasure and pride that it should be so, and part of our labours is to make the acquisition of our Charity funds as great, and the expenditure as efficient, as possible.

Freemasonry would cease to be entitled to the very name of Fraternity if we merely greeted each other as brethren in the name of health and prosperity, and never "extended the right hand of fellowship " to one another in the season of happiness, sorrow, or adversity, unheeded the cause of the widows and fatherless children.

But it is one thing to rule Freemasonry because therein we feel there is a great opportunity and an unique agency for doing this, and another thing to enter it really with an eye to benefit ourselves. The two courses suggest two distinct and varied motions, the former that of the highest and most unselfish philanthropy, the latter that of very natural, very lawful, perhaps, but still simply commonplace self interest. It may be an act of prudence to enter a benefit club, and it is, no doubt, great want of prudence to belong to nothing of the sort, and to make no provision for possible dark days, or for those dependent on us, but surely it is a different and a higher course, if the object is not self but others, not what we may get for ourselves, but how we can best utilise our means and capacities to promote the welfare of our brethren.

In the former instance Freemasonry becomes a mere waste of time and money if we have never made a claim upon it, or, at the best, it is a certain expenditure of time and money in the present, with a very improbable contingency of some possible advantage at some indefinite future. In the latter case Freemasonry becomes the means of a present and ever increasing advantage, and enlisting us amongst those who place Charity in the forefront of their lives, and associating us with those who can give effect thereto in the most practical and substantial manner, very often kindling, always encouraging and stimulating the spirit of Charity, initiating many, furthering others in the pleasure and privilege of active interest in the welfare of others, which will in future animate and pervade their whole lives. And all this is utterly negated if there is a consciousness that, after all, they are doing a sagacious stroke of business for a future day - one word for their brethren, two for themselves. No, no! Let us have benefit clubs by all means, and let the benefit be in the forefront. That is a legitimate and commendable duty. But let us not mix up philanthropy with self-interest, and parade the former, while we are really labouring to promote the latter. Let the latter be regarded as the accident, the remote contingency, the reluctant possibility; the former as the aim and object which we have in view, and which as true and lawful Masons we desire to promote.

Again, Freemasonry is not a mere opportunity for indulging our taste in aesthetics and gratifying our latent yearnings for ritualism. That such a predilection lurks generally in the human heart there is no denying, and when separated from the " No Popery " cry, there is a general hankering for it. Where can you find an instance of enthusiasm which did not in some way express itself thereby, and the present

appetite for it, and its willingness to be satisfied with a very feeble instalment of it, and very little beyond is shown in rapid development of the Salvation Army.

But our Craft has this invaluable protection against the abuse of this natural and necessary feeling, in that so much of our ceremonial takes place in private. There are a few special occasions when the Masonic regalia is exhibited before uninitiated eyes, but these are the exception, not the rule. For the most part it is only seen in a lodge "close tiled," and much of it only by the members of those different sections of our community to which it specially appertains. And there is great wisdom and strength in this. Our vestments and our ritual have distinctive and recognised meaning, and they are only seen by those who understand it. Ours is no empty parade of mere fanciful posture and tinsel to astonish the weak minds of those around us and to exalt ourselves, we practice it amongst those only who appreciate it. It has a definite significance to us, and is emphatically, in our lodges, a tongue understood of the people. Hence we are, happily, free from those discords on these subjects which prevail outside. Those who have no sympathy therewith keep away from our fellowship. Those who identify themselves with us become more and more satisfied with what is but the harmonious exponent, and illustrative of what is approved and practised by us all.

And lastly, Freemasonry is not a religion. Many seem to fancy that in joining the Craft men in some way supersede or dishonour the faith which they hold; renounce their Christianity for some vague and mystic theism; and substitute strange doctrines for the recognised Articles of the Christian faith. Freemasonry is not and does not profess to be no religion, but it recognises religious truths, it inculcates and practices much which lies at the base of all true religion, and promotes a frame of mind and a temper which are most helpful to religion. I say nothing of the later developments of our Order, which profess and practice distinctive Christian dogmas and precepts, but speaking as a Master Mason, and therefore of Masonry as a whole, and in the widest and most comprehensive meaning of the word, it occupies, as it were, the ground which is common to all who hold anything deserving to be recognised as serious and sensible religious opinions; it accentuates, dwells upon, inculcates, and encourages those cardinal principles and spiritual foundations without which anything worthy to be called a religion cannot exist, and when we meet we do not suppress the very name of God as if His very being were out of place in social life and philanthropic work.

The Bible has its prominent and honoured place in our very midst, and reverence for things sacred is the very axiom of our society and the virtues which religious teaching circulates and enjoins are here commemorated and extolled, and the typical religious man is here ever held up as an example to which every one should strive to attain. God forbid that any one should renounce his Christianity for Freemasonry and accept the Craft in lieu thereof, and fancy that any attendance in lodge can be regarded as a substitute for it. But on the other hand no one can attentively listen to what is rehearsed and advocated here without feeling the more disposed to seek in those means which he holds most dear, the power to obtain to that tone of life and character which here are unanimously adopted and incessantly set out before him, and I do not say that it always does, because such is human nature and men of liveliness become indifferent to what is familiar to them, and

words and phrases even the most commendable become mere sounds and repetitions. But it is sometimes in an age when men are enticed to associate themselves together where the very name of God and the very mention of religion would be deemed an intrusion and a discord, jarring with the accepted routine and at variance with the purpose of their gatherings, to feel that, at any rate, there is nothing in Freemasonry which can chill any devout aspirations which are at variance with the best interests in this life or in another. I doubt if any really religious man has ever been pained by the recognised procedure of our Craft, and I would fain think that many wisely have been led to feel how true, how elevating, how really desirable is all that is upheld and advanced here, and has turned away to seek in the way which may best commend itself to his faith, how he may attain to the practice of such a "reasonable service."

To sum up thus we may say that the object of our society is to cultivate social intercourse and fraternal fellowship with the view of promoting acts of benevolence and Charity, and exalting and inculcating the practice of morality, and due reverence and loyal allegiance to the powers that be, whether of heaven and earth.

And let us now glance at the constitution of the society, I mean of the individuals of which it is composed, and what a wide and comprehensive gathering of all sorts and conditions of men, and may I say without irreverence of "all nations, and kindreds, and peoples, and tongues," for it embraces almost every nationality and permeates every quarter of the globe. But to confine ourselves to our own land first, it gathers together men of all ranks and stations, from the heir to the throne to the working man, perhaps few of the latter, but if we may so speak it is abundantly recruited from the upper and middle classes of society. And they are men of all shades of politics and all schools of religious thought, of the highest as well as the simplest intellectual culture, men of every profession and calling, clerical and lay, men of different temperaments and dispositions of varied gifts, of various professions, the richest to the poorest, the man of business and the man of leisure, the man of study and the man of action the man of commerce and the man of agriculture, the man of science and the man of politics, the employer and the employed, the man of the most independent and of the most subordinate positions.

What a wonderful organisation which masses all these together, brings them on to a common neutral ground, where (apart from all earthly circumstances and surroundings, all political or religious opinions) they meet and are honoured, not so much for their rank or position without, as for their position and rank within, and it is a social democracy, and yet controlled by a discipline, which is legally submitted to, and cheerfully recognised and governed by, an executive which retains the confidence of the members generally, and is obeyed and honoured.

The members (as a body) are content with their status; there are no factions or parties, no "caves " or latent movements of disaffection and sedition. A policy of mutual kindness and goodwill animates the whole, and nowhere is genial courtesy and kindly interest shown more generally than in a lodge. I do not want to colour the picture too highly, or to imply that there are no blunders and no exceptions to the rule ; but, speaking in general terms, I think that I am fairly representing the condition of the Craft at the present time.

Now surely such an organization is not affected out of date at the present time. If the Masonry of primitive days had its mission and its sphere of usefulness when the world was for the most part rude and uncivilised, surely it has a different perhaps, but an equally, nay, a far more important, sphere of usefulness at the present time, and when life is so busy and active, and the rapid progress of events and opinions seems acting with centrifugal force, and whirling men apart from each other, even while they cry the most loudly, for unity. It would be indeed a shame, a grievous abuse of great opportunities, a criminal waste of a grand and intricate organisation (which seems to have been permitted to grow together for some great purpose), if it was allowed to subside into a mere occasion for indulgence, for mere parade, for mere utterance of familiar formularies, and mere platitudes, and the mere assumption of costume. Such a corporate body ought to have an active and a telling influence upon the world (political and religious and social) around us, and none the less real, none the less powerful, because it should be indirect and not direct.

We do not want to have politicians soliciting the Freemason's vote; we do not want to have gatherings to report the Freemason's conscience; we do not want to identify ourselves, as a body corporate, with any one man, or any one party of men; but what we may do, and what it would be a great thing to do would be so to influence the temper and tone of the times that questions of importance may be discussed on their merits, apart from that heat of temper and those angry personalities, which too often effectually bar any really profitable action and the cause of success tempered, and the cause of defeats soothed, and thus differences prevented from resulting in mutual severance and dislike. Believe that Masons individually differ only widely upon all questions natural and religious, and I hope that they will continue to do so, for it is the best evidence of what I may call the catholicity of our body; but the frequent gathering together on a common ground and mutual associations on a common subject must soften any feeling of asperity and animosity amongst us, and if it produce no change of conviction, at least make them "agree to differ."

I do not suppose that all the world are going to become Freemasons, and that in due time we shall enrol all the great and divergent parties in Church and State, but a good example is very catching, and the evidence on such a large tale as ours, of men able to differ, and yet able to teach a fellowship of harmony and mutual respect, will not be ineffectual if only it is sincere. We can notice many instances where differences have provoked animosities, and the differences remain unheeded, not really for the sake of the matter at issue, but because of the animosity which neither will surrender, I venture to think that herein lies the crucial problem of the present day.

The very facility for combinations for the maintenance of supposed rights, or the remedy of supposed wrongs, tends to create little factions, not the less, but the more bitter, because they are little, and activity and independence inaugurate a constant discourse which mars the very peace of society, and the comfort and enjoyment of life, and we want some alteration sometimes which shall prevent our country degenerating into a mere nation of Ishmalites, and with every man's hand

against every man, and I feel that Freemasonry is qualified to supply this invaluable solvent.

Will it do so ? Well, that depends upon what Freemasonry is, and that upon what each lodge is, and that upon what each member thereof is. It is of no use to waste time in mere generalities, or, like some Masonic Pope, to speak *Orbi, et Orbi*, and "Charity begins at home;" but let the Charity be real, and it will not only begin at home, but develop its influence like the stone cast into the pool, in every widening yet concentric circles. Let Masonic Charity begin at home, in the inner chamber of its house, the lodge, and with the key-note struck there, let the banqueting chamber be maintained in harmony, then the life outside will follow in its true gradation of personal life, home life, social life, business life, political life, in fine, the whole being of man. And if each lodge will thus endeavour to acquire and maintain a high standard according to the true Masonic ideal, the progress may be slow, but it will be genuine. No doubt there are abuses which cause one good to be exit spoken of, which make Masonicship at the least unprofitable, and hinder many really desirable men from joining the Craft. The old leaven which did so much to tarnish its reputation, is not altogether extinct, and such are the infirmities of humanity that it is always ready to reassert itself. It is useless to parade high aims and intentions if Masonic gatherings are mere excuses for self indulgence, and unless there are real practical efforts made by each to acquire and practice the high principles of morality and conduct which he extols here, the mere recognition, therefore, will rather debase and harden than elevate the daily life. On the other hand, the frequent association and fellowship, with other high aims and genuine purposes, will brace the moral system, prove a very tonic to the human nature, and find a man back to his business life, social life, domestic life, stronger in will and purpose, and tone, than he was before, and the weakest brother will feel constrained to make vigorous efforts to overcome his propensities, and if the confirmed evil done finds that the Freemason's lodge no longer associates him with kindred spirits, and furnishes opportunities for excess, he will depart from such uncongenial society, and rid the Craft of a plague-spot and a reproach.

Forgive me if I have over-stepped the limits of your indulgence and forbearance. I believe that there is a great opportunity before our Craft. I seem to see that the busy world is needing that which our organisation has the capacity to supply. I venture to recognise the hand of the Great Architect in the wonderful progress and prosperity which has attended our Craft during the last half century. I cannot believe that such has been vouchsafed without a purpose, and I sincerely desire that each member may recognise and appreciate it, and do what in him lies to make it a reality and a power for good, not only to our Craft, but to our Fatherland.

- *London Freemason.*

*Extracted from
The Canadian Craftsman and Masonic Record
Vol. XXVII No. 10
Toronto, April 1893.*

=====
2008-09-01