

MASONRY IS - - - - VENERABLE

Bro. F. Glenn Fox

During the next thirty six hours we are going to talk, breath eat and sleep masonry. We shall not talk aimlessly, I hope, but shall concentrate our whole attention on the question of just what masonry is, to each of us and all of us.

The search for an understanding of the true character and strength of masonry is not new. By its nature our order invites study and analysis, and also by its nature it almost defies analysis. Because of its antiquity we shall never be able to say with certainty how it all began or what motives impelled its originators. We can only deduce and infer what happened and why. Many great students of masonry have laboured long and written extensively about its origin and development, but they have been concerned mainly with the history of the order, not with its character. Few indeed have been prepared to say what masonry is, and perhaps for good reason.

We need not be deterred by their reluctance to philosophize. We may do ourselves and our order great good by seeking to know just what it is, and we certainly can do no harm.

You are all familiar with the ritualistic statement that "masonry is a beautiful system of morality, veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols." this statement is true, but as it stands it does not really tell us very much. It is not intended to tell us much. It only suggests to us that there is more to masonry than the conferring of degrees and the sharing of good times.

It has been said that masonry is a religious order, but not a religion. I think there is a grain of truth in this statement, but my fellow speakers challenge it, and I concede that it is an over-simplification. I set it aside as a statement or definition of the character of masonry because it is a pat statement, a sweeping statement. Nevertheless, I think you will see the grain of truth that I mentioned as we go along. What, then, is masonry? I define it as a brotherhood founded by religious men, who imparted to its ancient legends, customs, charges and regulations the guidelines to an upright, moral and productive life. Its great objective is to bring together men of like mind and good will, that they may strive together to become better men, that they may contribute each to the well-being of all, and contribute individually and collectively to the well-being of the community. It is above all a state of mind that enables the true mason to look upon all men with affection and understanding.

Masonry has no theology and no religious dogma, but its teachings are not materially different from those of the great monotheistic religions of the world. We teach the brotherhood of man and the equality of man. We urge relief to the distressed, devotion to truth, promotion of justice, and above all, faith in the goodness and mercy of God. All this is acceptable in the eyes of every faith, and indeed we have among us brethren of many faiths - Christian, Hebrew, Moslem and Hindu.

I have said that masonry is an order founded by religious men. They were the great Cathedral builders, the architects and stone masons, tilers and carvers, of medieval times. they were simple, unsophisticated men in the main, and for their government they looked to the great moral teachings of old testament literature. The few scraps of their rituals and regulations and legends that have survived and come down to us are permeated with allusions to the great events of old testament times, from the days of the patriarchs to the time of King Solomon. Their legacy to us is a rich one, the richest jewels of it being the

Holy Saints John, the seven liberal arts and sciences, and the Hiramic legend.

The old masonry of our operative forefathers underwent a great change beginning sometime after 1650, and culminating in the years 1717 to 1735 with its transformation from an operative guild to a philosophical brotherhood. The brethren who contributed most to this transformation were themselves students of the testaments and of antiquity, and they further enriched the order that they had inherited with texts from the old testament - texts that were chosen carefully for specific purposes.

Given the strong religious bent of the early operative masons, and the equally religious but more scholarly approach of their immediate heirs, it is not surprising that masonry as we have it is full of references, direct and indirect, to old testament literature. Let us now consider the purpose of some of these.

The Holy Saints John are known to all of us. We celebrate the festivals of the Holy Saints John, and many lodges are dedicated to them. Have you ever wondered why? Have you ever read of their activities and considered what message they might have left for us? You must not suppose that our interest in them implies, in any way, that we are a Christian order. For one thing, John the Baptist was not a Christian. For another, in various parts of the world lodges may be dedicated to King Solomon, to the four crowned martyrs, or, in Hebrew lodges, to Jehovah. Some lodges are not dedicated to anyone. Our interest, then, is clearly non-sectarian.

John the Baptist went about Israel exhorting the people to follow God's teachings and baptizing those who wished it. He spoke out firmly against vice and license, and this soon put him at odds with the cruel and psychotic Herod Antipas, tributary ruler of Judea. He was thrown into one of Herod's dungeons. He was not intimidated, however, even by the rage of the unpredictable Herod, and he resolutely refused to retract a word of his teachings. He maintained his fidelity to what he knew to be right. Herod hesitated to do him in because he was uncertain of the reaction of the people, but in the end John the Baptist was murdered - beheaded at the whim of the vicious Salome.

Saint John the Evangelist appears to have been adopted by masons somewhat later than John the Baptist - probably not long before 1650. He lived a little later than John the Baptist. His great concern was the relation of man to man, and he taught and promoted brotherly love among all who would listen.

To me, brethren, it is clear why our lodges, erected to God are dedicated to the Holy Saints John. What better patron saints could we have? What better qualities could we cultivate in ourselves than the faith and fidelity of John the Baptist and the brotherly love of John the Evangelist?

Now let us consider the liberal arts and sciences. Our ancient brethren found these in Genesis, Chapter IV. There we learn that the patriarch Lamech had three sons, Jabal, Jubal and Tubalcaïn. Jabal found the craft of geometry and "he parted flocks of sheep and lambs in the fields and first wrought a house of stone and timber." Jubal "found the craft of music, song of tongue, harp, organ and trumpet." Tubalcaïn found the art of smithcraft "to work in gold and silver, brass, copper, iron and steel." One of the old manuscripts lists the arts and sciences as Grammar, Rhetoric, Dialectica, Arithmetic, Geometry, Music and Astronomy, and says, "These be the seven liberal sciences, which be all found by one science, which is geometry." Is it not strange, brethren, that the founder of the craft of geometry, the revered science which is the foundation of architecture, is unknown to masons? He found the craft of geometry, but we never mention his name.

We still have the seven liberal arts and sciences today, and we still urge a study of them on every brother. Why, in this age of computers and space travel, instant communication and instant foods, do we stick to our simple old liberal arts and sciences? Well, the answer is not difficult to understand. Every man has an obligation to use the brain that God has given him, to capacity, all his life. He must make the best possible use of every God-given faculty. There is a practical as well as a moral necessity for constant self improvement. Of what use is a knowledge of any science, for example, to a man who cannot speak or write his own language with precision and purity - how can he communicate his knowledge to others? How can we hope to find true and just solutions to social, political, or moral problems if we fail to reason and analyze, if we fail to think logically? Can we doubt today that study of the liberal arts and sciences expands the mind?

Perhaps the most remarkable inheritance we have from the operative masons is the Hiram legend - the story of the building of King Solomon's Temple and of Hiram Abif. This story is found in the second book of Chronicles and the first book of Kings, and its appeal to the operative masons is easily understood. THERE in the old testament is an account of the erection of the most famous building of ancient times. THERE is an account of the organization of the workmen, and even of the wages they were paid. The dimensions of the temple, the materials used, the adornments and the vessels, all are described. For the operative masons, who spent their lives at the erection of great cathedrals and public buildings, these accounts must have had a special fascination. It may be that their interest was at least partly professional rather than spiritual, but it is clear from the few documents that have been left to us that they regarded the erection of the temple and the harmonious relations that existed between the workmen, the supervisors, and the three kings as the crowning achievement of humanity to that time.

The indispensable role of the Hiram legend was recognized by those who revitalized and remoulded masonry early in the eighteenth century. They determined that the legend should become the means of exemplifying man's belief in the resurrection of the body and the immortality of the soul. Accordingly they added to the legend the story of the murder of Hiram Abif, and of his raising from an unhallowed grave. Probably most masons today would have reservations about belief in the resurrection of the body, but every mason must I believe, I think, in the immortality of the soul, for he must believe in God.

Now let us look at some of those passages that were added to the body of masonry when it became a philosophical order.

You have all observed many times that we do not begin work in our lodges until the old testament (it could also be a Torah, or a Koran) is opened upon the altar. You must have observed also that it is not opened at random. How often do we think, brethren, of the book and verse that is intended to be meaningful to us and to the work that is to be done. How many of you know what those verses are?

Consider the Book of Ruth, Chapter IV, verse seven. It says "Now this was the manner in former time in Israel concerning redeeming and concerning changing, for to confirm all things a man plucked off his shoe and gave it to his neighbour, and this was a testimony in Israel."

When a candidate is first brought into the lodge he is neither barefoot nor shod. This custom is a direct allusion to the old Israelitish custom, but remember, brethren, that the candidate does not know that at the time. He is told later that he was neither barefoot nor shod because of the custom, but he is not told why that custom has significance to us.

Perhaps the omission of explanation is deliberate, perhaps it was intended that the candidate draw his own conclusions. there is another possibility for you to consider. I suspect that this verse and this ancient custom are intended to convey a message to the brethren of the lodge as well as to the candidate. they serve to remind us that we are at that moment taking each other on faith. we are accepting the candidate as being truly what he appears to be - a good man worthy of our trust - and he must so accept us. That is what it means to me, brethren. What does it mean to you?

We are also concerned with Psalm 133, which states, as clearly as it can be stated, an article of faith for all masons - "Behold how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity."

We have in our lodges and in this room brethren of diverse political and religious persuasion, of many professions, occupations, and interests, and of varied ethnic background. there is no average mason. While we are together in masonic work, however, we are united in principle and purpose. This verse is wholly in keeping with our dedication to St. John the Evangelist.

Let us go on a little further and consider Judges XII - 7 and Amos VII - 7, 8. The first of these, Judges XII - 7 is a great anachronism in masonry. It says, "Then said they unto him, say now Shibboleth, and he said Sibboleth, for he could not frame to pronounce it right. Then they took him, and slew him at the passages of Jordan, and there fell at that time of the Ephraimites, forty and two thousand."

The word Shibboleth means an ear of corn or a stream of water and is often now used to mean "a watchword". We use it to mean plenty, and symbolize it by a sheaf of wheat suspended near a waterfall. But why were that word and that passage chosen for a degree devoted to the promotion of learning? The passage is part of a description of one of King David's battles. We may understand the taking of an ear of corn to mean "plenty", but what had King David's battle to do with masonry? The word Shibboleth to me has a connotation of death and destruction. Why do we not use a passage from Genesis IV, whence come the liberal arts and sciences? Why not commemorate the neglected founder of the science of geometry, or the founder of music, or smithcraft?

I believe that the word Shibboleth was not originally applied to the second degree, for neither the word nor the verse from which it comes have anything whatever to do with the liberal arts and sciences. I believe that in the turmoil of the early days of the Grand Lodge of England this word and verse were transposed from another degree. you should think about this strange use of a word, and I will give you a hint to start you off. the founder of the art of smithcraft, we are told in Genesis IV, was Tubalcain.

In Amos VII, verses seven and eight, we read: "Thus he shewed me, and behold the Lord stood upon a wall made by a plumbline, with a plumbline in his hand. And the Lord said unto me, Amos, what seest thou? and I said, a plumbline. then said the Lord, Behold, I will set a plumbline in the midst of my people Israel, I will not again pass by them anymore." surely the masonic application of this passage is clear. the plumb is one of our working tools, and it admonishes us to walk uprightly in our several stations before God and man. Possibly there is a deeper, hidden meaning for us in this passage, but if there is, I do not perceive it yet. Give some thought to this - I hope that among you there is one who can instruct me.

Let us look now at Ecclesiastes Chapter XII, which we have before us when we enact or emulate the Hiram legend. This is some of the most beautiful language in old testament literature. Let me read to you the appropriate verses.

"Remember now thy creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them.

While the sun or the light, or the moon, or the stars be not darkened, nor the clouds return after the rain, In the day when the keepers of the house shall tremble, and the strong men shall bow themselves, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those that look out of the windows be darkened,

And the doors shall be shut in the streets when the sound of the grinding is low, and he shall rise up at the voice of the bird, and all the daughters of music shall be brought low,

Also when they shall be afraid of that which is high, and fears shall be in the way, and the almond tree shall flourish, and the grasshopper shall be a burden, and desire shall fail, because man goeth to his long home, and the mourners go about the streets, Or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the Golden Bowl be broken, or the pitcher be broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern,

Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was, and the spirit shall return unto god, who gave it."

Brethren, the first and last verses of that noble passage tell masons in unmistakable terms what is their duty and their destiny. Remember God, not only when we are old and tottering on the brink of the grave, but when we are young and the future is bright. Remember that the soul belongs to God, and for every man there comes a moment when he must yield it back to God. Remember THAT as the story of Hiram's fidelity and his death unfold before you. Your reward will be the veneration and respect of all who know you, but more than that, it will be the knowledge that you have striven to be a good man.

And now I am nearly done. I have not told you what masonry is, but I have told you what some of the ingredients of masonry are. It is for each of you now to reflect and explore and determine, if you can, what masonry is to you.

Theme Speech #3
Delivered at
The Alberta Masonic Spring Workshop, 1969
held at Banff Alberta.