

FREEMASONRY:
ITS SECRECY
AND RELATION TO FAITH
AND WORSHIP.

AN ORATION DELIVERED BEFORE THE
PROVINCIAL GRAND LODGE OF DEVON,

ON THE OCCASION OF THE DEDICATION
OF THE MASONIC HALL, BIDEFORD,

October 13, 1875.

by

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**DEDICATED, BY PERMISSION,
TO THE
RIGHT WORSHIPFUL BRO.
THE
REV. J. HUYSHE, P.G.C., etc., etc.,
AN ORATION, etc.**

RIGHT WORSHIPFUL PROVINCIAL GRAND

MASTER :-

IT is now my high privilege and most pleasing duty to request you, in the name of the Past Masters, Officers, and Brethren of the Lodge of Benevolence, to dedicate this hall in which we are assembled to the purposes of Ancient Freemasonry, agreeably to ancient form. And, while making this request, I desire also, in my own name and that of my Brethren, to offer our most grateful thanks to the G.A.O.T.U. for having thus far prospered our Masonic labours during the past eighteen months. Your prayers, Right Worshipful Sir, and those of the Brethren present, will be joined with ours that we may yet go on and prosper, and that our noble Craft may find a not unworthy home within these walls. And next we have to thank you, Right Worshipful Sir, and our Brethren of the Provincial

Grand Lodge, for having come, at no little personal inconvenience, to express your sympathy with us on this auspicious occasion, and to increase our joy by sharing it with us.

Sir, if I have read the principles of Freemasonry aright, this very gathering of today is a proof of the soundness of those principles, and their vitality amongst us. For it is no selfish pleasure that has drawn together so many Brethren of the Craft, but rather, I hope and believe, a sincere desire to congratulate us, who are in some sense an infant Lodge - an infant Lodge by force of untoward circumstances, though somewhat old in years - on the fair prospect of Masonic work and Masonic usefulness that has so happily opened out before us. This and other similar gatherings go far to prove that we all recognise the fact that Masonry was ordained (among

other noble purposes) for the mutual society, help, and comfort that one Lodge ought to have of another, both in prosperity and adversity.

Permit me, Right Worshipful Sir, to draw the attention of the excellent Brethren who are with us to-day to some features in the position of Freemasonry at the present time which I believe to have great claims on our consideration. Sir, the last few years have witnessed a great accession to our strength; not only are men pressing into our ranks in increasing numbers, not only are new Lodges being consecrated at home, and in our great Indian and Colonial possessions, but other lands - I was going to say foreign lands, but foreigner is a word unknown to our Masonic vocabulary - other and far distant lands are stretching out the right hand of friendship to our institutions. While, therefore, men are everywhere

pressing into our Order in numbers hitherto unknown, it ought not to be a matter of surprise to us if those who, either from ignorance or from prejudice, have always looked coldly on us, should now manifest an animosity far exceeding in bitterness their former dislike; while others, not altogether unfriendly, should be challenging our position, and asking us for an explanation of those points in our constitution which appear to them of an injurious or doubtful tendency.

These objections brought against our Order revolve, for the most part, round two points in our system, viz., its Secrecy, and its position with regard to Religious Faith and Worship. And, Right Worshipful Sir, it seems to me that these objections are not answered, nor these difficulties, where they exist, removed, by pointing to our vast and widely-extended charities, noble as they are; to the mutual goodwill and

brotherly love which exist among us; or the loyalty invariably displayed by the Craft to the person of the Queen and the Institutions of the Country. These, Sir, are the ornaments - the buttresses, if you will - of Freemasonry, but not its foundation. Granted that the foundation of the edifice is secure, we may well call on the bystander to admire the noble expanse of roof, the unity of the clustering columns, or the stories of loyalty and devotion told in the richly painted oriel ; but who would care to admire pinnacle, or roof, or buttress, if the foundation on which the whole fabric depends for its security and stability be unstable and insecure? And these two questions - our Secrecy and our relations to Religious Truth - do lie, in my humble opinion, at the very root and foundation of our entire system. To the Brethren of our Order who have imbibed something of its true spirit and esoteric teaching, these things present no difficulty; our

difficulty lies not in satisfying ourselves as to the truth and soundness of our principles, but in explaining those principles to the "popular and uninstructed world who are not Masons."

Suffer me, therefore, Right Worshipful Sir, to address myself to these two points - briefly, for I must not detain you long from the ceremony now awaiting its solemn performance at our hands - but yet with sufficient fullness to suggest to Brethren of greater power and more knowledge than myself thoughts which, so far as they are of any value, they may work out more completely at some future time. One objection, then, urged against us is this: "That we are a secret society." Granted. But, Sir, if you will pardon me for using an expression which has almost passed into the region of slang, there are secret societies and secret societies.

There are societies - in happy England we know not of their existence - whose objects are secret because they will not bear exposure to the light of day; because those objects, being aimed either against the peace and good order of society, or against the laws and established polity of the country, are in themselves reprehensible, and therefore must needs be kept in obscurity. Of such secret societies. I need hardly say, Freemasonry knows nothing; with such, Masonry has nothing in common, nay more, by the very spirit of our obligations, and even the letter of our first Masonic instructions, we are bound to repudiate all sympathy with them.

It may be that in other times and in other countries, men belonging to the Masonic body - persecuted by their political opponents, and driven to desperation by an odious system of police - have availed themselves

of their Masonic privileges to hold illegal meetings and therein to plot against the State; I say it may have been so: but this is not Freemasonry, it is rather a violation of our entire constitution, a prostitution of our whole system, an utter negation of our every principle of action; and it is no less an act of injustice to attempt to fasten on Freemasonry, as a system, such a violation of its whole teaching, than it is to fling the Gunpowder Plot or the Massacre of S. Bartholomew into the face of every member of the religious community in whose names such crimes were perpetrated. Our objects, sir, are no secret. The veriest tyro in the Craft will say that Masonry has for its object the cultivation of piety - a piety founded on the teaching of God's holy law, and morality - a morality founded on the great principles of brotherly love, relief, and truth. If, Sir, in evil times, these great objects and principles of our Craft have become

obscured or even lost sight of, it is a source of deep regret, but the principles are there nevertheless, embodied in our lectures, and enshrined in our ritual; and the mirror needs but to be cleansed, the spots of dust and accretions of rust removed, and once again its face will be bright with reflected rays - rays of light emanating from the Author and Teacher of all good. In evil and corrupt times the noblest institutions become corrupted, and if religious societies, whose members believe them to possess a more than human origin, are found to obey this general law, it would indeed be a mighty marvel if Freemasonry, which boasts only a human origin, though shrouded in the darkness of the highest antiquity, should escape its operations. It matters not much to us Masons of the present day if it be urged that these great and divine principles have been, in times past, too much lost sight of; we need not be careful to answer the

accusation; be it ours rather to labour in our own generation and hand down our principles and our institutions brighter, purer, and more unsullied than our forefathers in the Craft (even if the charge be true) bequeathed them to ourselves.

So far, then, as our objects are concerned we are no secret society. And this fact is acknowledged by the law of the land to this extent, that Freemasons are specially exempted from the laws passed in troublous times for the suppression of secret societies. In point of fact the State of England holds the loyalty and patriotism of Masons to be so indisputable that she requires a list of the members of each Lodge to be returned every year to the Clerks of the Peace, and that very return releases the men therein named from the penalties of the law to which I have referred. Thus, Sir, the whole question at issue lies in a nutshell. A

foreign voice which Church and State alike have, for the past three-hundred years, declared to have no jurisdiction in this Realm of England, condemns Masonry because it is a secret society; the laws of England especially, and by name, exempt us from the laws affecting such societies. I do not think, therefore, that Englishmen need, for a moment, hesitate to declare which of these two conflicting voices demands their attention and allegiance.

But, sir, we possess secrets, many great and valuable secrets, as dear to us as life itself. And in what do these secrets consist? We all, from the Heir Apparent to the Throne of this mighty empire - may the G.A.O.T.U. grant him a prosperous voyage and a happy return! - to the humblest Master Mason amongst us, have entered Masonry by the same narrow gate. The solemnity of that time-a solemnity

increasing in intensity the further we advanced—the remembrance of those hours, can never fade from our minds while Memory retains her seat, and by these memories we are bound together by an indissoluble chain of the deepest associations. Truly, sir, a secret bond such as this needs no apology, for similar bonds lie at the root of our purest affections, and permeate every link in the chain of our social life. What, sir, let me ask, constitutes the real bond of union between man and wife? not the marriage service only, or the wedding ring, but the hidden life to which these were but the outward entrance; the thousand-and-one sweet secrets, begotten only by years of sympathy, of joy and sorrow borne hand in hand; so that while their hearts know their own bitterness, yet no stranger intermeddleth with their joy. So, too, there is a mysterious bond between parent and child, between friend and friend, between teacher and taught, which

only those can understand or appreciate who have thus been brought into relationship with others.

And our other secrets, what are they? Means of instantaneous intercommunication known only to ourselves, arising out of these associations of which I have already spoken. Again, I ask, do such secrets need an apology? To refer again to the nuptial bond of which I have already spoken. Who will venture to find fault with a husband separated from his wife by a thousand miles of ocean, if he choose to invent a cypher by which he may hold intercourse with her, which none save she shall understand? And if a society of men, otherwise loyal and honourable, choose to invent a system of communication for their private use, I fail to see wherein the world at large is injured. I cannot recognise any right of complaint on the part of the half million readers of the Daily

Telegraph if they are unable to decipher the mysterious advertisements of Mr. Ignatius Pollaky, or to interpret the announcements in the "agony column;" neither can I feel individually aggrieved because, though a Freemason, I cannot penetrate the secrets and mysteries of the Orders of Foresters, Odd Fellows, or Good Templars.

Sir, if objections to Freemasonry have no firmer basis than this, we can well afford to smile at them, and the bitterness of our detractors' denunciations need not for a single moment disturb our serenity, as they certainly will prove powerless to impede the onward march of our Order.

I pass on to the other class of objections which I have mentioned, viz., those founded on our supposed indifference to religious truth ; and this objection, to my mind, if it were capable of being sustained, would

be fatal to our position - fatal, that is, in the estimation of all men who really value religious truth as being a revelation from God, and therefore binding on the consciences of men. I propose, therefore, touching on this subject very briefly, as time will permit. The objection, I take it, may be fairly stated thus:-" Masonry admits within its pale the Christian, the Jew, the Mahometan, the Hindoo, the Parsee - in fact, every man who admits the existence of a personal God, and believes in a future state; hence, Masonry declares that it does not matter which of these conflicting creeds a man may profess; that all are, so far as Masonry is concerned, equally true; which, of course, necessarily involves, to the mind of the logician, the further very startling proposition that all are equally false."

But, Sir, I conceive that the whole force of this objection depends on what sort of a society Masonry really is. If Freemasonry were a religious society, professing to teach or define theological truth, or to combine men in formal acts of worship, the objection would be valid. But Masonry is nothing of the kind, and professes to be nothing of the kind. Masonry declares that she is "a peculiar system of morality, veiled in allegory, and illustrated by symbols;" and it is no more part of her domain to lay down theological truth than it is the part of the musician to prescribe the visible forms of artistic beauty, though music and painting are twin sisters, even as religion and morality must go hand in hand. Freemasonry is a religious society so far as this: she declares that unless a man believes in a personal God, and a future state, and that in that future state he will be accountable for his actions in this life, he is a man not to be trusted with

the sacredness of an obligation; just on the same principle, I presume, as our courts of law refuse to accept the evidence of a man who refuses to bind his conscience by the sanctity of an oath or solemn affirmation. Further than this she does not advance into the domain of theology, not because she is indifferent to religious truth, but because it is not her province. She conducts us, as it were, to the threshold of the temple, bids us take our shoes from off our feet, lets us catch a faint echo of the worship within, a glimpse of the bright light surrounding the sanctuary, but further she dares not go; she is content to place us in the hands of more competent guides, whom she bids us follow. Not that Masonry is without religion, for our ceremonies abound with religious teaching, and that neither vague nor uncertain, of which I may be permitted in this place to give one instance. Does she not teach us that fallen man in his low estate is

utterly and entirely helpless, that One only can raise him to renewed life, and that One must be none of secondary rank, however high, but the Lord of Life Himself, coming down from His high place, stooping, bending, and condescending to the level of him whom He desires to uplift and restore? These, and such as these, are the religious teachings of Freemasonry, touching, indeed, only the outside, as it were, striking but the keynote of the inspired harmony.

Formal acts of worship are, of course, impossible amongst men of conflicting creeds, but outside and beyond all formal and positive worship there is a vast deal of informal devotion in which all may have a part. I could not enter a Mosque and join in the worship of the Moslem, but if a Mahometan and myself were rescued from imminent peril by shipwreck, God forbid that I should refuse to kneel with him on the shore of

our deliverance and thank our common God and Father for His common mercy. There is but one man who could not join in our thanksgiving, and that is the man who would attribute his preservation, not to the outstretched hand of a watchful Providence, but to the operation of a blind chance; the man, in fact, who would not be permitted even to open his eyes in a Lodge Room, or cross the very threshold of the First Degree.

Thus, Right Worshipful Sir, I have attempted - very feebly and imperfectly, and not without much fear lest I should mar what I have desired to make - but to the best of my ability and the opportunity afforded me, I have attempted to reply to those objections which, in certain quarters, are raised against our system. How far I have succeeded, you, Sir, and my excellent Brethren, can judge far better than myself. But if I

have, in any degree, been successful in proving the security of our foundation, let me now, and in conclusion, ask you to raise your eyes with me to the successive stages of the noble edifice it is the boast of our Craft to have erected in our midst. Deep in our inmost hearts we lay the foundation of faith in God, and obedience to His holy law, and on that we build, first of all, devotion to our Country, and loyalty to our Queen; "never forgetting the allegiance due to the sovereign of our native land, ever remembering that nature has implanted in our breasts a sacred and indissoluble attachment to that country from whence we have drawn our birth and infant nurture." Loyalty to Queen and Craft is as the very air we breathe; how we testify it our lives must show, while we rejoice in giving expression to it in such acclamations as welcomed our Royal Grand Master when he paid us a visit in our own province, and the still louder shouts

which greeted him on that ever memorable day when he mounted the Throne to which our unanimous suffrage had elected him.

Let us raise our eyes one stage higher, to that feature in our Institution of which it becomes us to speak modestly. I refer to our noble Masonic Charities. We need not in this matter speak of ourselves: the tongues of aged Brethren and widows, supported and comforted in their declining years; the voices of orphans who find a sheltering home in our Institutions; these will speak the praise of our Craft, and join in thanking the G.A.O.T.U. for the establishment amongst us of a society which considers the maintenance of such works of charity its special prerogative.

And yet, Sir, these charities, noble as they are, are but a streamlet when compared with the overflowing tide

of benevolence from Brother to Brother, of which not only the popular world, but even ourselves know nothing. And to this, Sir, I would point as the crowning glory of our Order - the cap-stone which surmounts the entire edifice. The Mason's ear is never deaf to the tale of a Brother's sorrow; the Mason's hand is never withdrawn from a Brother's need; the Mason's heart is never closed against a Brother's weakness; in weal or woe, in joy or sorrow alike, the Mason knows where to look for sympathy with the certainty of finding it; and that not only in his own land, but where he needs it most - in distant climes, and amongst those who, but for Masonry, would be strangers and foreigners, but, who, thanks to the Masonic bond, are now only links in the glorious chain which unites Brother to Brother over the face of the habitable world.

May such a structure, built on so sure a foundation, stand for ever in our midst. It is our privilege to be the present guardians of the fabric; be it also our pride and constant endeavour to maintain it unhurt, and to hand it down to our successors, bearing, indeed, on its brow the impress of hoary antiquity, but uninjured by the ruthless hand of time.