

THE ROYAL ARCH DEGREE

Address delivered by M E Comp A B Christensen, Grand Z, at Combined Convocation of Otago, No 6, Mapri, 28 and Celtic, No 42, Hiram Masonic Hall, Hillside Road, Dunedin, on Thursday, March 25, 1954.

In the ordinary course I would consider it inadvisable to add to the confusion of the Candidates at this stage by enlarging too fully on the Degree through which they have just passed; but my remarks are directed to the Companions at large, and I hope, in spite of the fact that this is all so new to the Candidates, they may derive some benefit. If it is their intention, as I earnestly hope it is, to make more than a superficial study of Freemasonry, and especially the Royal Arch, then they will realise now, more than ever, that they have almost everything yet to learn. It would be of some assistance if they could get a ritual and study the Lectures in conjunction with the full text of the Biblical references contained in them. But, of course, this will prove only a guide, no more.

Thoroughly to understand the aims and objects of ,Antient Freemasonry, of which the Royal Arch is a fundamental part, and not a separate institution as generally supposed, some knowledge and understanding of the symbolism of Craft Freemasonry is required, in order to comprehend the more involved and complicated symbolism of the Royal Arch and its supporting Degrees. Here the symbols are often compounded, which adds to the subtlety and depth and while providing some satisfaction in their most obvious and elementary meaning, yield their real secrets only to the patient and interested explorer after truth. The Royal Arch Degree is complementary to the Master Mason's Degree, the unfolding into a second volume of the history of that which was lost until its final recovery (or rediscovery). Without the Royal Arch, the Master Mason's Degree is like a song half sung, a tale partly told, or a promise unfulfilled.

I could not, of course, traverse the whole field of symbolism this evening.

The aim of Freemasonry is twofold. First, in the physical sense, Brotherhood, which it endeavours to promote by the simplest possible means, by the cultivation and active manifestation of those desirable attributes of character make happy association and true brotherhood possible. Obviously, the symbolism employed to illustrate the lessons which emphasise the value of fine character and personal integrity, and everything that leads to Brotherhood, must be simple and mean the same to all men, whatever their race, colour or creed. They should, and I believe do, speak a universal language. Thus there is nothing complicated or mysterious in the symbols of Craft Freemasonry, and their use in the three Degrees is calculated to leave such an impression on every Mason's mind that the sight of them anywhere, and at, any time, must immediately remind him of their special significance to him.

The other part of the twofold aim of Freemasonry concerns the spiritual aspect, and our search for Truth or God, which reached its highest development in the Royal Arch Degree. This is what is mainly veiled in allegory, which is, of course, merely the spoken symbol.

The two principle allegories in Freemasonry are the Hiram legend of the Third Degree and the story of the Vault in the Royal Arch Degree, both of which have direct relation to the great secret of the Craft. The central thought in Freemasonry today is the same as it has ever been – namely the loss, search for, and recovery of the Word. Its presence can only be surmised in the Craft Degrees; but since that is what is found in the Royal Arch, obviously that is what was lost in the Third Degree.

We were told there the conditions under which the Word, or genuine secrets of a Master Mason, could be obtained (namely, that “patience and industry would in due time entitle a worthy Mason to a participation in

them"), and when the Temple was completed, and the three Grand Masters were present and consented to give it. They, as you have often been told, symbolise Wisdom, Strength and Beauty, and thus we can receive the Word only when our own Temple is completed and those attributes are present, because all three are necessary to the realisation of the Perfect Ideal. To the Freemason, the Temple of King Solomon is the symbol of the perfect character. According to the belief of the Jews, it was also the place where Jehovah said he would place His Name and make it His dwelling place. To the ancients and the Operative Masons of the Middle Ages this Temple was the symbol of perfection in architecture. Hence it was natural and proper that the Speculative Freemasons should adopt it as the symbol of the Perfect Mason. We are ourselves the Temple and "the Word" is concealed within the sanctuary of our hearts. The Book says "Know ye not that ye are the Temple of God, and the Spirit of God, dwelleth within thee?"

For the Craft Mason, the First Degree represents birth and childhood, the Second Degree adolescence and manhood, the Third Degrees old age and death. Death intervenes before his character or Temple is completed and he has restored to him the awareness of God, which he once possessed. He has lost "the Word."

The Royal Arch depicts the search for, and the finding of the Word. It is not a search for any particular word, or in fact a word at all. The expression, "the Word," had a significance for the Jews and other ancient races which is hard for us to comprehend. In the ancient mind "the Word" signified all Truth, particularly Divine Truth. To us, the most familiar and striking passage of Scripture referring to this is that of St John - "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." St John does not here announce any new doctrine, but one that was perfectly familiar to the Jewish thought of his day. Only his identification of Jesus of Nazareth with the Word was new. Nor was this expression or this idea by any means confined to the Jews; it belonged to nearly all ancient philosophy. Amongst the Greeks it was the "Logos," a term derived from the Greek verb "logo" - to speak; the same root from which comes our word "logic," the name of the science by which reason or determine moral truth.

That noble attribute of man, the power of articulate speech, whereby his wisdom, his feelings and his most abstract thoughts are made known to his followers, - a power, so far as we know possessed by no other being - must have, in all ages, greatly impressed the thoughtful mind. The spoken word seemed an instrument worthy to be employed by the Deity Himself, not only in promulgating Divine Truth, but even in creating all things that were created. According to the ancient idea, Deity was so omnipotent that He had but to speak and the thing was done. He said, "Let there be light," and there was light; and that without the Word was not anything made that was made. Hence "the Word," under the development of philosophy, became synonymous with every manifestation of Divine power. So that finally it was regarded as not only co-existent with, but metaphorically as identical with Deity Himself. The Masonic search for "the Word," therefore, symbolises the search for Truth, particularly Divine Truth or God.

The lesson here for us is to search diligently for it, never to permit prejudice, passion or self interest to blind us, but to keep our minds always open to the reception of Truth, from whatever source, or however opposed to our preconceived notions it may be; and, having seen it, always to act agreeably to its dictates. Hence Freemasons everywhere are naturally devoted to the doctrines of freedom of thought, freedom of speech, freedom of action. The Master Mason is invested with a substitute word, implying that in this life we may know only in part, that we may approach, we may approximate truth, but never attain it in its perfection.

The search will continue as long as life lasts, but not till we have passed on to a higher state of existence will Divine Truth be disclosed to us in all its fullness and beauty. This final disclosure is symbolised in the Royal Arch Degree. The preservation of this extremely ancient conception of "The 'Word'" is not without historic value also, as indicating the great antiquity of the symbolism employed by Freemasonry.

With the lesson of the Vault you are all familiar. As long as you constantly bear in mind that you are the Temple or stones referred to throughout Freemasonry, you should have no difficulty in following the meaning of the allegory. Here we find what has been lost by the death of our Master, what has been lacking in our lives. "The Word," translated literally from the three languages of which it is composed means "I am, and shall be, Lord in Heaven on high, the powerful Father of all." In short, God! Freemasonry in its climax, therefore, leads us through suffering, difficulties and infinite labour, through the narrow way discernible only to real workers and searchers for Him, to the precious consummation, to discover within the hidden sanctuary His Name and His Law; literally to discover within our own hearts and beings the source of life and power, in separation and action, the solution to every mystery, and the answer to every wish and hope of the human soul. In the legend of the Vault the precious elements therein withstood the destructive fury of the enemy. Within our hearts they may also remain proof against the assaults of all the destructive and subversive influences which we encounter through life. War and pestilence, death and destruction, all the weaknesses to which the flesh is heir, may cause "the Word" to be forgotten, concealed or ignored, even for generations; but sooner or later wherever and whenever men seek to build their second Temple of reformation, they - the lovers of humanity and seekers after truth, depicted by the faithful sojourners, may discover, buried under the ruins and rubbish of narrowness, selfishness and bigotry, the Divine Law, "The Word" which each of us find for himself. Three great stones (or obstacles) had to be removed before the secret contents, and the beautiful sanctuary in which they were enshrined, were clearly revealed. Some remove only one stone and fail to explore the potentialities suggested. Only a few have the strength of purpose and courage to labour on and remove the last stone, to enjoy the beauty and sublime harmony of the Divine revelation – complete faith in God and obedience to His Law, the Law which very definitely commits us to an active interest in the welfare of our fellow creatures.

Such is the sum total of our symbolism. Even the most superficial thinker must realise that the aim of Freemasonry is not contained in a lot of signs, tokens and words, which are themselves merely symbols and designed to provide recognition and protection, but that underlying the whole fabric of moral regeneration in the Craft there must be a supreme objective.

There is nothing fantastic or romantic in what I have told you. You have only to read your ritual carefully, especially the Lectures in the Royal Arch, consult a Masonic encyclopædia and the Scriptural references and you can find it all. But as I have said elsewhere, just being told it, or reading it, is not sufficient. It will mean very little, nor can you enjoy the secret, until you have worked out the problem of God and life through your own efforts. That rich and fruitful experience cannot be given to you by anybody. It must be created and grown within yourself.

In the final analysis and this is where Freemasonry is so intensely practical and utilitarian, because it teaches you that nothing comes to fruition or has real meaning or value until all this (the sum total of knowledge and experience gained here) is translated into practical terms of "being and doing," theory into practice; dreams into reality; faith into works; plans into operations; a negative into a positive force, manifested in everyday life, and on being and doing something for somebody.

And now speaking to our Candidates, let me express the hope that you will experience comfort and happiness, as well as a deal of pleasure from your association with this Chapter and Royal Arch Masonry in general. If a purpose in life, if love and friendship mean anything to you, then we are assured that we have gained useful members, and you have found something that appeals to you, and will be satisfying all the years of your life.