

## MERCY, ACTING ON THE HEART

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All things are literally better, lovelier, and more beloved for the imperfections which have been divinely appointed, that the law of human life may be Effort, and the law of human judgement, Mercy John Ruskin Here's a thought for you. Freemasonry is not a charitable organisation. I hear cries of shock horror from all sides. If it is not a charitable organisation, then what are all the freemasons doing collecting the millions of pounds each year that they do collect, and what are these charitable organisations, masonic and non-masonic, doing with this money? So, I have to qualify my statement, but please note carefully the qualification: freemasonry is not primarily a charitable organisation. Already I can hear the sighs of relief.

It's true though. Charity, touching so closely as it does on relief, the second of the three Grand Principles, is an important part of what we are, but there are two important objections to elevating charity to the grand status it so often enjoys.

The first is that freemasonry, whatever else may be, was certainly not conceived in the first place with charity as its prime objective. Our brethren in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were very concerned with a system that fostered tolerance, uprightness, truth, selfless conduct towards others, liberty of conscience and of thought (but not, of course, unguarded liberty of action), faith in God, faithfulness to the law and to their country, and above all knowledge of the self, which last aspect broadly fostered all the foregoing.

The second is this. We all remember being told at school or in our early childhood that 'actions speak louder than words'. I would like to re-state that in a slightly altered way, by saying 'actions speak louder

than money'. We all know what I'm talking about. By putting our hand in our wallet and slipping a fiver or a tenner into the charity plate, or by signing a covenant, we can be seduced into thinking that we've 'done our bit' for charity. This is not charity. This is charitable giving. Real charity is doing something that, normally, hurts. Like giving up precious time to visit Mrs Eileen Brown who maybe doesn't have many visitors, especially since W Bro Mike Brown was called to the Grand Lodge above. Like taking part in a sponsored walk to raise (yes, here it is again) money for the local RMBI home. Like becoming involved in some lodge function to raise the awareness of our fellow brethren to the needs of those around them, and in the world at large.

I say, when thinking about charity, be careful not to confuse it with money. I'm not going to talk politics or religion (heaven forbid, although St James did once say 'pure religion and undefiled is just this - to visit the fatherless and widowed in their affliction'), but we must realise that although it's ok for governments to create wealth and thereby also alleviate suffering and poverty, we can't personally claim commitment, by proxy as it were, to the relief of distress in this way. Throwing money at a need (at lodge level or at government level) may or may not relieve that need, but if we lack direct and personal involvement, it's we ourselves who are diminished. We ought to look at individual needs and ask ourselves, what can we do that doesn't involve fund-raising? What humane or compassionate gesture can we extend towards that need? Many of us freemasons (but perhaps not enough of us) simply practise philanthropy along the way as part of our moral commitment and hope, without exercising self-interest, to add to the total sum of our own building. We don't often stop to think how much more valid that commitment is than a financial one - perhaps we should. I think that, like mercy, it 'blesseth him that gives and him that takes'. It certainly takes us out of the loop of the everlasting material struggle that most of us are caught up in on a daily basis. And I've just realized what the first seven letters of 'compassion' spell.