

## THE MASTER MASON'S CHARGE

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The progression through the three degrees of Craft masonry has much in common with the spiritual pathway of the ancient Greeks. The third century philosopher Origen, a pupil of St. Clement of Alexandria and one well versed in both Platonic and Christian thinking, described the 'three ways' of the spiritual life – Ethics, Physics and Theoria. The terms ethics and physics are derived from the names of two of the works of Aristotle. Ethics had the same import as it has today, but Physics then referred to the study of the entire natural world and thus had a much broader import than it has now. Aristotle followed up his work Physics with another dealing with the underlying basis of the reality of time, space, form and so on - the hidden mysteries of nature and science - and he termed this work Metaphysics, which simply means the one coming after physics. Theoria, from which we derive the word theory, means a sighting and was the word applied by Origen to the vision of God. Thus, the Greeks of that day would prepare themselves by the pursuit of the ethical or moral life, then open themselves to intellectual truth and finally, by contemplation, enter into the presence of God Himself.

Hence the exhortation in the third degree reminds us of the moral teaching of the first degree and the intellectual principles revealed in the second. As the exhortation states,

...still guiding your progress by the principles of moral truth, you were led in the second degree to contemplate the intellectual faculty and to trace it from its development, through the paths of heavenly science, even to the throne of God Himself.

But now, in the third degree, his mind 'modelled by virtue and science' - by ethics and physics, including metaphysics - the aspirant is entreated to enter on the third of Origen's three ways, the Theoria. He receives this entreaty in the Charge of that degree that immediately follows the physical raising and is surely one of the most profound parts of our entire masonic system. The opening sentence in the Charge introduces us to the expression 'darkness visible'. At first view, the idea of darkness being visible is quite perplexing and paradoxical. What, therefore, is meant by it?

In the first degree, the greatest desire of the heart of the initiate is Light – and the Light revealed to him is that of the Volume of the Sacred Law (usually the Holy Bible in English freemasonry, but for a Muslim it would be the Koran, the Hindus the Gita, etc...) and the ethical and moral code exemplified by the symbolism of the square and compasses. The enlightenment experienced in the first degree corresponds with what St. Gregory of Nyssa termed 'photismos' and refers to that awakening of faith which calls upon the aspirant to begin a spiritual journey. It is not ultimate enlightenment: for that to occur he must first make that journey through the paths of heavenly science, as he is instructed to do in the second degree.

However, in the third degree, we meet this new and, at first view, rather awesome concept - 'darkness visible'. Spiritual darkness was no stranger to the Christian mystics, including a sixth-century Syrian monk who was well versed in Platonic philosophy and who took as his pseudonym the name of St. Paul's friend Dionysius the Aerophagite. Dionysius stressed the utter transcendence of God, beyond all attributes and description. He wrote of the God who 'surpasses all condition, movement, life, imagination, conjecture, name, discourse, thought, conception, being, rest, dwelling, limit, infinity, everything that exists', and added that we must go beyond name and form, beyond being and concept, into the divine darkness that we can only know by unknowing. Is this the key to wisdom? When the Oracle at Delphi declared Socrates the wisest of all men, Socrates replied that he only differed from other men in being fully aware of what he did not know! Jesus had no time for the fundamentalist know-it-alls:

Alas for you lawyers! You have taken away the key of wisdom; you did not go in yourselves, and those who were on their way in, you stopped.' (Luke 11:52).

(The German Bible has the word Schriftsgelehrter for lawyer – literally, a student of the letter of the text.)

Dionysius stressed that, paradoxically, we come to know God by going beyond human rationality and receiving the light of 'divine darkness'. As Father Bede Griffiths, a Roman Catholic monk who did so much to build bridges between Christianity and Hinduism, expressed, One has gone beyond (human rationality) and has experienced God in the darkness, as the light beyond the darkness and as the light in the darkness.

.. Darkness is one of the aspects of the mystical experience as one goes beyond the created world and encounters the divine Reality.

We encounter this concept of utter and absolute transcendence in other great faiths, notably in Buddhism. Buddhists, contrary to popular Western opinion, are not atheists. It is merely that, like Dionysius, they go beyond name and form, beyond being and concept, and thus, in their desire to transcend reason, appear to speak of the divine and the path to enlightenment in negative or apparently nihilistic terms. This is reflected well in a Zen story or Koan - Joshu asked the teacher Nansen, 'What is the true Way?'

Nansen answered, 'Everyday way is the true way' Joshu asked, 'Can I study it?'

Nansen answered, 'The more you study, the further from the Way' Joshu asked, 'If I don't study it, how can I know it?' Nansen answered, 'The Way does not belong to things seen: nor to things unseen. It does not belong to things known: nor to things unknown. Do not seek it, study it, or name it. To find yourself on it, open yourself as wide as the sky.

It is also reflected in the opening verse of the Tao Te Ching by Lao-Tzu –

'The Way that can be described is not the Eternal Way'. Of particular relevance to the Charge, Lao-Tzu also writes, Mystery and reality emerge from the same source. This source is called darkness. Darkness born of darkness, the beginning of all understanding.

Although the Charge speaks of 'that mysterious veil which the eye of human reason cannot penetrate', it adds, encouragingly, '... unless assisted by that Light which is from above.' But what is this Light from above? Masons differ in their interpretation of this statement. Some hold that it is the light of personal mystical experience, others that it is God's revealed will and word enshrined in the Volume of the Sacred Law and, indeed, the Worshipful Master may even point to the Volume of the Sacred Law at this point in the Charge. Yet others would regard it as an Inner Light – in Christian terms, the Holy Spirit dwelling within us. It is, perhaps, that light referred to by Mansukh Patel, an inspiring activist for global peace:

There is a light that we all have within us ... I believe that this light is the real you. It is your greatest treasure. It is the clarity of this light that makes a great person great.

The Charge also refers to the 'glimmering ray. Some Masters giving the Charge imply, by their gestures, that the glimmering ray of the solitary candle is the Light from above. I would suggest that the material light of this candle merely represents the light of human reason. One might even say at this point 'Yet, even by the glimmering ray of reason.' By the glimmering ray of our modern post-Enlightenment science-based rationality, we might be tempted to conclude that our lives are indeed transitory and will end in the cold bosom of the grave. But we are taught in the Charge that emblems of mortality and contemplation on our inevitable destiny should lead our reflections on to the knowledge of yourself.

Thus we are encouraged to ask if our 'inevitable destiny' is really the oblivion of the grave that we perceive by the glimmering light of human reason? I would suggest that the implication here is that our inevitable destiny is the exact opposite! By contemplation of the transitory nature of our bodily existence - Memento Mori - we are led to seek and discover our true selves as eternal and spiritual beings made in the image and likeness of our Creator.

Let us return to the philosopher Origen who emphasised that we dwell in God, and he in us, and who termed this indwelling 'en theos', from which we derive the word enthusiasm. He stressed that the spiritual life begins when we recognise that we are created in the image of God and that God is present to us in that image. He stated that the enlightened person 'understands that the real world is within.' Many mystics and religious leaders, including Pope John Paul II in his recent encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, have subsequently emphasised the importance of self-knowledge as the gateway to divine enlightenment. Indeed, the Pope reminds his readers of the inscription 'Know Thyself' carved on the temple at Delphi. The importance of self knowledge as the key to enlightenment is also stressed by the greatest of the English mystics, Julian of Norwich - This passing life that we lead here, in our sensuality, is not aware of what our true self is, except in faith. When we come to know and see clearly what our self is, then shall we, truly and clearly, see and know our Lord God in fullness of joy.

But can freemasonry, without trespassing on the sacred ground of religion, aid us in our quest for self-enlightenment? To quote another well known and respected Julian, W. Bro. Julian Rees, Classical mysticism distinguished between the once-born and twice-born; once born into the material world we only know ourselves as a material being in a material world, but if we have the good fortune to be twice-born we will know our own nature beyond the material, we will be spiritually awakened, we will know, esteem and love ourselves, not in any narcissistic or egotistical way, but know ourselves as part of the whole, thereby enabling us to love others, and to love God, in ourselves. I do not believe it is fanciful to say that freemasonry can enable us in that endeavour, indeed I believe that freemasonry is uniquely placed to deliver on such a promise. I would add to this that the more of us who are led by the Craft to a spiritual awakening, the more the light will shine throughout Freemasonry, to its great enrichment and re-enchantment. As Kahlil Gibran has written in *The Garden of the Prophet*:

So shall the snow of your heart melt when the spring is come, and thus shall your secret run in streams to seek the river of life in the valley. And the river shall enfold your secret and carry it to the great sea.

We may therefore conclude that our allotted task in this life is that of knowing ourselves, of acknowledging and facing both the bright and the shadow sides of our inner being, the darkness and the light. The path to self knowledge is through the first Grand Principle on which our Order is founded; namely, Love. The explanation of the first degree tracing board reminds us that the mason who is possessed of Love, in its most ample sense may justly be deemed to have attained the summit of his profession.

This great truth is beautifully expressed by St. Isaac the Syrian who wrote, When we reach love, we have reached God; our road is ended and we have crossed to the island which is beyond the world. It is also lucidly expounded on in the Volume of the Sacred Law, in the first letter of St. John:

God is Love; he who dwells in love is dwelling in God, and God in him. This is for us the perfection of love, to have confidence on the day of judgement, and this we can have, because even in this world we are as He is.

It should be noted that this profound statement stresses the indwelling or en theos of Origen and the fact that we are created in the image of God:

'...even in this world we are as He is.' Indeed, the light of the 'dazzling darkness' is that great unconditional love that the Greeks named agape, which can bring us through the profound and mysterious darkness to a loving knowledge of God, our brothers and ourselves. The unknown author of the 14<sup>th</sup> century mystical work, the Cloud of Unknowing, in writing of the transcendence of God, remarked 'By love we can know Him, by thought never.' Again, to quote St. John - 'Dear friends, let us love one another, because love is from God. Everyone who loves is a child of God and knows God, but the unloving know nothing of God. For God is Love'.

The Charge also exhorts the master mason to perform his allotted task while it is yet day. The book of Ecclesiastes, attributed to King Solomon (but probably written much later, around 180 BC), emphasises that existential dread that the godless man faces as he nears the end of his life. One remarkable passage (Ecclesiastes 12:1-7) from this book, one that is recited in some lodges in the third degree before the candidate is raised, begins

'... 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'.

It then continues with a description 'veiled in allegory' of the burdens of growing old, in an attempt to stress the importance of commencing our spiritual journey while we are fit and able. Jesus, in relation to his healing ministry, makes a similar comment (John 9:4) - 'While daylight lasts we must carry out the work of Him who sent me; night comes, when no one can work.' The incredibly powerful and hope-filled concluding statement of the Charge encapsulates the whole teaching of our Order. It impresses upon us that humankind's true nature is not perishable but, like our Creator in whose image and likeness we are made, is rooted in eternity. The Bishop of Oxford, the Rt. Revd. Richard Harries, acknowledges the difficulty faced by modern mankind in believing that life points beyond itself and has a consummation beyond space and time but he poses three crucially important questions concerning life:

If we have a relationship with God and God is eternal, how can it end with death? If our capacity to love is grounded in God and grows only through Him, how can death destroy it? If the person we truly are is known only to God, is as it were held in his heart, how can our death take away from that knowledge?

The bishop then asks that, in the light of the answers to these three questions, should we not 'live our lives with the quiet confidence of a well grounded hope?' The symbolism of the Morning Star, whose rising brings peace and salvation, is for each master mason to interpret according to his own religious traditions or experience. Christians will have no doubt who the Morning Star refers to. Finally, it should be emphasised that the Charge ends on a great note of optimism, so reminiscent of that great saying of Julian of Norwich 'All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.'