

RITUAL REFORM - RIGHT OR WRONG?

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This talk has been announced as referring solely to the Royal Arch but the question whether changes to the ritual in any masonic Order should be made from time to time is one of general principle. That therefore will be the frame in which I shall invite you to consider the proposals now before Supreme Grand Chapter. As we are not tyled there can be no demonstration; but the proposals have been widely circulated and you will no doubt have studied them.

Teaching is at the heart of Freemasonry and ritual is the method by which the lessons are taught. So we must be quite clear what masonic ritual is, what it does and how it does it before we think seriously about whether changes are needed. So what are the general principles? To answer this question needs clear, analytical thinking. Unfortunately any mention of changing masonic ritual tends to arouse an immediate adverse reaction in some quarters which leads to further discussion becoming emotional - and that clouds judgement. The arguments of tradition are valid and must not be despised; but equally we must realise that ritual is a means to an end, not an end in itself. Therefore, as theologians and philosophers discovered long ago, to ensure that the product remains attractive to successive generations with differing outlooks it may be necessary to change the packaging, since without that the project itself will wither and die.

Our first task then is to work out why there should be this reaction. It must be based on some deep rooted reverence on the part of supporters of existing rituals; but what are they revering? The blunt answer would be 'a form of words or of ceremonial' but that begs the question. I suggest that the reason will usually be that some ritual has made a deep impression on the individual. There may also be a comforting feeling arising from familiarity when so much is changing and when the older among us find it difficult or even impossible to keep up. All this may be praiseworthy but it can unwittingly be selfish and so may unintentionally obscure clear vision about the future. Nevertheless such feelings are certainly not something over which we should feel free to ride roughshod.

We must then try to be analytical. Easily said, but what does it mean in practice? I suggest that we can reasonably start the enquiry by thinking about three basic questions:

First, What is ritual?

Second, What is the purpose of masonic ritual?

Third, what in the masonic context are the advantages and dangers of ritual?

When we have answered these three we should hopefully be able to consider rationally the question posed in the title of the paper.

First then, what is ritual? Your immediate reaction may be to say 'what a stupid question; everyone knows that'. Well, do they? For example, is the definition of ritual limited to the spoken word? To take specific examples: is the set-up of the lodge-room part of the ritual? Are the movements of a speaker part of the ritual? Are not such everyday gestures as shaking hands, using hands to accompany prayer, standing for the National Anthem or the Hallelujah Chorus or when a candidate is taking an Obligation, ritual? Are not the perambulations in the Craft Degrees and the preparation of the candidate for them ritual? Is there such a thing as visual ritual? These questions alone show that it is a complicated concept. My own suggestion is that ritual comprises every method of standardised communication - using that word in its widest meaning - directed to the achievement of a defined end. [**repeat**: every method of standardised communication directed to the achievement of a defined end].

The second question was 'what is the purpose of masonic ritual?' On the basis of my definition the answer must be the achievement of a defined end; so what in masonic ritual - using that word also in its widest sense - is that end? Clearly the aim of ritual is teaching - but teaching what? The accepted Craft rituals themselves which have guided us for so many years tell us that Freemasonry is a system of morality and sum up its teaching in well known words as Brotherly Love, Relief and Truth. But we at

once encounter a snag: what does 'relief' mean? Now there can be little doubt that in the later eighteenth century, before the days of bankruptcy laws and national insurance, most Freemasons regarded 'relief' for masonic purposes as referring primarily to help in insolvency. A look at the reports of the early Boards of Benevolence will confirm that. It soon got extended to education for disadvantaged children but the quarrels between the Duke of Sussex and Dr. Crucefix over the Asylum project show that the ambit of masonic charity was not extended without difficulty.

We must be careful then, because we are now using the word 'relief' in a sense not immediately recognised today; are we justified in doing so? In fact there is no distortion but as the primary meaning has changed this

use sounds strange to a modern ear. To complicate matters further the Shorter Oxford Dictionary shows that what we may now consider its original meaning is actually nothing of the sort; 'relief' was a technical legal term in feudal times meaning a payment made to take up possession of an estate. The Dictionary then gives a later definition: 'the alleviation of or deliverance from pain, distress, anxiety, monotony, etc.' and then adds 'or the feeling accompanying this mental relaxation'. Here we can see how the word has developed so that the feeling is now the primary sense and we realise again that language is indeed a growing organism. This alerts us to the possibility that while we may have to reconsider words handed down to us in doing so we may unwittingly be laying traps for our successors. You can see the dangers clearly in the development of meanings far removed from usage even a few years ago in what has happened to one word - 'gay'. That is an extreme but very vivid example. Another, more frivolous instance, would be the way in which a phrase once used to describe Freemasons as 'brethren of the mystic tie' might be misunderstood today as referring to a recently introduced item of masonic neckwear.

To return to our quest: in using 'relief' to denote charity in its widest sense we are in fact correct though the exact relevance is not immediately apparent, a factor to the importance of which I shall refer later; and the answer given two thousand years ago to a famous question 'Who then is my neighbour?' teaches us how wide is charity in its true meaning. Nevertheless, the immediate reaction of today's man to the word 'relief' is probably to consider it as implying deliverance from one's own anxiety rather than behaving with charity to others - a passive rather than an active feeling - and if we were writing the ritual today we would probably try to find another word; but I suggest that this is not necessary because the existing word is adequate and would indeed be difficult to replace - though its significance may have to be explained to candidates. What is needed in this case is not a new word but a clear understanding of why it is the right word.

But why should we hesitate to find another word? Surely clarity is desirable in ritual? The answer illustrates another point: when a word has changed its meaning we have to consider whether our purpose is best served by an alteration or whether the use of the original gives rise to a useful opportunity for explanation; in other words, what will show the best dividend in communication, a quality which is essential for teaching? So a minor archaism may be preferable to a change.

Different considerations may apply when we are confronted with what I might call the 'bulk'. We have noted that Freemasonry's objectives are usually summed up as teaching Brotherly Love, Relief and Truth, and that, I add, in the context of religious toleration. Now wherever philosophical teaching is involved two important factors must be considered: first, one generation may favour detailed explanation while men of a later time may prefer something shorter - or vice versa; and second, different generations may - indeed will - have different interests and perspectives. The problem arises partly from changing *mores* but the attention span is always longer when the hearer's interest has been secured than when he is bored. It is surely a fact that a listener today stops analytical hearing sooner than our ancestors did in the days when our rituals were being compiled and a good sermon might last an hour. This emphasises again the need when teaching today to secure a man's interest quickly. So one of the factors that has motivated the Pro Grand Master's Strategic Working Party in its consideration of the Exaltation Ceremony is: how to get the lesson across before - to use the vernacular - the candidate 'switches off'.

We have to remember that understanding involves a progressive mental process, a process which can be described as 'recognise, note, analyse and understand': [**repeat**: recognise, note, analyse and understand] - four separate and progressive steps: the message will only be fully understood when all

four steps have been taken. Clearly, a candidate in such ceremonies as ours is unlikely at first, or even second and third hearing to get beyond the stage of noting and very unlikely to get at once to analyse and understand in any detail. So his attention must be riveted at that instant moment of first communication to such a degree that he is at once incited to investigate further. A vital test of our ritual must therefore be whether this incitement is achieved.

In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in this country men were interested in delving into philosophical discussion in wordy depth; today they take much for granted, have many activities to occupy their time and may even have become blasé about the daily diet of discovery. Even thought has to some degree become mechanised. However, when stirred to interest they can delve deeply - though this delving today is too often to try to get what we might term a 'ready-made pre-packaged fix' from the Internet and avoid having to think too hard for oneself. But, whether we realise it or not, deep down we are still trying each in his own way to work out what life is about. Freemasonry should be helping us to do so.

Before we dare to discuss the teachings of Freemasonry, we must actively realise the seriousness of its message. In the world today, torn and battered and full of uncertainty, a sense of brotherhood can be a saving grace. Never forget that; when you have to use the ritual consciously realise that you are teaching the candidate and reminding yourself and your brethren about an aspect of that important message of universal - note that word - universal brotherhood and understanding coupled with religious toleration - the little leaven that may lighten the lump.

I want to elaborate on this theme for a moment. Personally I think that we need to recognise that the Craft is not for everyone and we should particularly aim to interest those who will be touched by its searching; for it is a search and this gives us another clue about ritual - about the ritual, our ritual. It means that we must decide what it is that we are offering and what sort of man is likely to find it attractive; then we can concentrate on how to keep his interest so that he, we and indeed all who believe in the same ideals will benefit. In commercial terms we must research our market. A suitable candidate will I suggest be concerned about social responsibilities. We on our part must ensure that he realises that this is our concern also and that he will enjoy our ceremonies and our company. The message is serious but enjoyment must be and be seen to be a real and vibrant element in our meetings. Long faces and boredom must have no part in Freemasonry.

All this has its lessons for ritual. It implies that our spoken words must be instantly recognised as offering practical guidance about our duties as human beings and must do so clearly and briefly and without boring the hearers. We should not try in the world of today to be like Socrates or Aristotle and carefully dissect every motive; our business is to entice one another to think about life and specifically about the welfare of our fellow mortals all over the world.

To return now to our basic questions. The first was 'what is ritual'; the brief answer suggested is 'a means of communication'. Secondly, 'what is its purpose?'; here my answer would be that it aims by its message - brotherly love relief and truth in a context of religious toleration - to interest and to intrigue not only the candidate but also those who are watching and listening, and to encourage - to entice - all of us to learn more.

The third question was: what are the advantages and dangers of ritual in a masonic sense? Clearly presentation is important here; the presenter must be aware of the significance of what he is teaching and not simply holding forth because that is what it says in the book. On the other hand, what the book says is, or should be, the best way of delivering the message and its use is a politeness to the candidate, and indeed to all present; it should therefore be meaningfully delivered rather than recited, a point which calls for more attention than it sometimes receives. It may be masonic heresy but I would rather listen to a meaningful rendering than one which is painstakingly accurate.

So a main advantage of verbal ritual is - or should be - certainty, getting a clear message across without distortion. The main dangers are I think three: that it may become dated, that words can change their meaning and lastly, at any rate as we practise it today, that it must indeed be carefully learned and meaningfully delivered, something which demands the expenditure of time and effort not merely to learn it but also to understand its full meaning ourselves; but we must be careful not to let this become a

criterion for masonic advancement: a man can be a good Freemason even though the efficient delivery of the ritual may be beyond his capability. Ritual is important but there is more to Freemasonry than being a good ritualist,.

Where has all this led us? I suggest it means that we must balance two things in considering changes. The first is whether the existing ritual adequately does its job? The second, if change is required, what amendment is needed?

We are not alone in recognising the problem; I have taken part in a number of conferences where representatives of many masonic jurisdictions have discussed it. In initiating the proceedings at a Conference of English-speaking Supreme Councils a few years ago I said in introducing the paper which we had sent out to guide the discussion:

'Basically it has two themes. One of them is to investigate whether new thinking about the way in which we present the Craft in general and the Ancient and Accepted Rite in particular is going to be adequate in promulgating its message in the technical age into which we are being led with such merciless rapidity, and the second is whether there is indeed any place in that new era for Freemasonry at all.....or whether, like so many other things it has had its day... Perhaps it is only necessary to ask two questions in order to assess where we are heading; those are ...What is Freemasonry and...what - if any - basic needs does it meet?

First, then, what is it? The traditional explanation in English rituals is 'a peculiar system of morality'. This immediately leads to one vital point. 'Peculiar' no longer has the basic meaning it had for our eighteenth century ancestors under whose guidance the ritual took shape; to them it meant 'distinguished in nature or character' - I quote from the Shorter Oxford Dictionary. Today it more usually means 'unusual, strange, odd'.

The moral is obvious - to appeal to the world today we must where necessary explain ourselves and our Craft in today's language - or perhaps I should say in the respectable form of the language because English seems to be going through one of those periods of change which, however distressing, all languages must undergo if they are to remain vibrant, expressive and alive. We therefore have to balance veneration for the past with the needs of the present and our hopes for the future: and that means treasuring the ritual without being enslaved by it.'

The other question - what use is Freemasonry today and indeed has it any practical use - could have involved different emphases in a talk about rituals of The Ancient and Accepted Rite but I think that what I then said still applies generally. So this is the way in which it was tackled:

'So we come to the....question - what use is Freemasonry?.....I suggest that the answer reflects the question by the Hebrew poet when, as the English Authorised Version [of the Bible]....has it, he asked 'What is man that Thou art mindful of him?' Looked at from a different angle this is making the same point as a verse in the Book of Proverbs 'Where there is no vision the people perish'....As human beings we need companionship; we need people to talk to, with whom we can give meaning to existence, from whom we can get comfort in trouble; that is what 'brotherly love, relief and truth' are about and so what Freemasonry is about....The package will remain substantially the same; the wrapping may need attention [in order] for instance to reflect the impact of social change, the advance of knowledge and changes in modes of communication.'

To come back now to the title of this talk: I hope I have convinced you that we must not be afraid to revise the ritual in certain circumstances and subject to certain conditions; but what circumstances and what conditions?

As to circumstances I suggest that revision may be justified when the meaning of words has changed or where there is obvious absurdity - as in the Second Degree where the candidate is solemnly but somewhat patronisingly told that he is 'now at liberty to extend his researches into the hidden mysteries of Nature and Science'; we might at least say 'encouraged to extend your researches further'. There are surprisingly few instances of this sort, basically they are those where the wording is dated or has grown too cumbersome or where immediate impact is not achieved; consideration of these points is one of the

factors which have led to present activity about the Royal Arch.

So far as conditions are concerned those must surely follow from my earlier definition - the alterations must be such as will improve the prospect of attaining the defined end so that the teaching is in a form acceptable today and which will hopefully remain beneficial tomorrow.

In a paper to the Committee of General Purposes some time ago I stated my view of how this applied to the Royal Arch as follows:

'Are the Royal Arch lectures satisfactory? I have no doubt that while the First Lecture is accepted as interesting, the Second is felt to be prolix and the Third, in spite of its claim to be the star of the show, induces boredom because (a) it comes at the end of a very long ceremony, (b) it is written in the language of yesterday, and not the most elegant language at that, (c) its explanations and excursions into philosophical speculation are out of tune with modern thought, and so (d) it is too demanding for the attention span of today's men. Each of these factors may not of itself be a reason for alteration but together they result in a loss of attention on the part of the audience, not least the candidate, however satisfying the ritual may be as an ego trip for the speaker. Its message therefore does not impress on the candidate what it is intended to convey.'

An additional point I made - and one which for many of us is probably the most important - was that we do not make the best use of our material, in this case visual ritual. None of us forgets the impact of the restoration to light in the Exaltation Ceremony but instead of using that moment to explain to the candidate what the Royal Arch is about - all of which is then before his eyes - we ignore it and go on with what he will soon begin to feel is an interminable ceremony. This, in financial terms, is a waste of our capital and ignores how the nature of the average individual's interest and study has changed over a period of two centuries.

Many of you will recall the story of the three servants each of whom was given money to invest for their employer - we mustn't say 'master' in these eclectic times - while he went away. Two put the money to gainful use but the third, frightened of loss, buried it. He thus gained nothing for his employer and for that breach of trust he was punished. If we do not make the most of that moment in the Royal Arch we are just as guilty as the timid servant. We cannot, we must not ignore a moment so pregnant with meaning. We have the candidate in a receptive mood and ready to learn what the Royal Arch is about - that is, 'truth' beyond the rules for living with which the Craft is concerned; but instead of building on that we bombard him with interminable lectures which may be satisfying for the speakers but often outlast his already much tried attention span. Deferring the lectures to a later date cannot help; the impact has been lost, the magic moment has gone and what results will be just another masonic performance. We should keep in mind that the candidate has been through a stressful and emotionally demanding ceremony and has been on his feet for a considerable time for much of which he has been blindfolded, something which as we have recently been forcefully reminded is considered so disorienting as to be a useful interrogation technique; the last thing we should do is to bore or confuse him. He must be led to appreciate immediately - **at once** - how important and pregnant with meaning is the teaching to which he has just been introduced - even if he will only work out its full meaning later: 'recognise, note, analyse and understand'.

It is with all this in mind that the proposed alternative lectures are put forward. Other suggested alterations are consequential or designed with the same aim in view, teaching the message of brotherly love, relief and truth in the context of enjoyment and companionship,

One point here which merits consideration is that where the proposed alternative lectures are adopted they may well enhance the importance of, even preserve, the existing lectures which will then be available for evenings when - for instance - there is no candidate. A great deal more attention is likely to be paid to them when they are given in those circumstances than they receive at the end of what is one of the longest ceremonies in our rituals. We have an example of this in the Craft in 'The Explanation of the First Tracing Board', something which always guarantees a 'full house'.

Inevitably the question will be asked: 'why bother?'. My answer would be that Freemasonry in general

and the Royal Arch in particular will only thrive if they are enjoyed and satisfying. Unless the Master Mason sees that Companions enjoy their Chapter meetings and find them meaningful and realises that he is being invited to share that enjoyment, that search and that understanding he will not be persuaded that it is worth his while to give up three or four more nights a year and undertake yet more learning and expense, and therefore even if he remains a lodge member he will certainly not seek Exaltation with its great message extending the theme of the Craft beyond the limited message its three degrees convey. The attention of candidates has to be earned before it can be kept - and don't forget the influence of the joint bank account today.

Another and important point is that the present proposals for the Royal Arch should be considered in the context of the bigger picture. I am very concerned that we may be setting our sights too low, undervaluing Freemasonry. Remember that it has the potential to help in the vital task of forging understanding between men of all nations and creeds who think about the future of our world. This is why I am anxious on the one hand that our ritual should be clear, that its meaning should be relevant and that Freemasonry should prosper but on the other that any amendment or alteration should only be made after it has been shown to be at least desirable.

Freemasonry has no right to expect that it will survive just because it has already survived for a relatively long time. If it is to continue to flourish it must be seen as making a serious contribution to the world of today and even more importantly as providing a worthy inheritance for that of tomorrow. To achieve this what we need above all else is to realise the importance of our objective, to realise that we are taking our part in striving to be worthy not only of our past but of the future in which our descendants must live. Individually and collectively everyone, whether a Freemason or not, has a part to play in shaping that future and should be willing to shoulder that responsibility. As Freemasons we must therefore shape our teaching to meet it. This is too serious a matter to be dismissed on the grounds that we must always follow the patterns of the past. Revere and respect that past but make up your own minds about the future, remembering that what you are deciding is also the future of Freemasonry itself and indeed whether there is any future for it at all. Carefully consider what needs to be done and help your Companions to do it. The responsibility is ours and the legacy of our success or failure will help or haunt our descendants for many future years.

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