

IN THE SPIRIT OF FREEMASONRY

Julian Rees, Delivered on Saturday, 22 June, for The Cornerstone Society at Freemasons' Hall, London.

Freemasonry, according to our own Grand Lodge, teaches moral lessons and self-knowledge. Here we take our stand. From this point, we as Freemasons start our journey, our quest for self-knowledge, a path leading us to the inmost parts of ourselves, our own psyche and our own soul. Against the imperative of this self-knowledge, all other activities in Freemasonry in which we engage, whether social, charitable or ritual, must take second place, however laudable they are and however much they may act as adjuncts to the main quest.

An initiate coming into our Order, who perhaps does not listen too carefully to the words of the ritual, might be forgiven for feeling that Freemasonry is a social club with charitable activities, clothed in a set of arcane mystery plays and with complex regalia adornments indicating higher rank. But if he does stop and feel the words of our ritual, he may be in for a surprise. He has just humbly solicited to be admitted to mysteries and privileges. Humbly? Mysteries? Privileges? These are not words which are heard too often in post-modern 21st century conversation! And how does he hope to obtain these? By the help of no less a being than God Himself. In other words, a mere fourteen lines or ninety-two words into the first degree ritual, we are already invoking the Deity, and we are about to invoke the blessing of heaven to enable the candidate to unfold the beauties of true godliness. Our candidate affirms that God it is on whom he relies in cases of difficulty and danger, not his mother, not his wife, not his boss nor the insurance salesman who has promised him indemnity against the difficulties and dangers of this life - no, none of these will suffice, only God. Are we serious about God? These references to the Deity, to the power of the Deity and to the spirituality manifest in all of us and in our world, increase as this candidate progresses through his three degrees. We find repeated and increasing references to God and to our relations with Him. But it actually goes deeper than this. If we consider that the secularisation of masonic ritual has been going on for some 300 years, we can begin to assess how much spiritual reference has been lost over that period. In the 1780 ritual of one of the German masonic orders, references to the Deity and to the nature of our own spirit are far more numerous than they are today. Admittedly this ritual is Christian in concept, but then so was most if not all masonic ritual in those days. Here then we may have stumbled across the reason for such secularisation, that in the 18th century moves to de-christianise the Craft, the baby was thrown out with the bathwater; spirituality was sacrificed along with doctrine and dogma. The teaching of moral lessons and self-knowledge, in other words the approach to our own spirit, must be our minimum requirement. If we are to stay true, at least to that minimum requirement, we might perhaps want to regain that dimension to our Craft that has been lost, the dimension giving us access to that knowledge of our self, to our spirit, to that 'otherness' in ourselves. What do we mean by that? We mean that attention to our physical wellbeing, acknowledgment of and care for the material side of our existence are not enough. Knowing ourselves does not involve understanding our bodies and how they work, valuable though such knowledge is. It means understanding the non-material, non-physical side of ourselves, understanding our heart, mind, psyche and soul. It means knowing our true selves, understanding that greater spiritual matrix of which we are a part. It means being with ourselves, owning ourselves, getting to know ourselves, having a balanced appreciation of our talents and our failings, so that we need not try so hard to prove ourselves before others. Then we are approaching that 'otherness' that is such a precious part of our own existence. We are, after all, 'speculative' freemasons in this pursuit, from the latin specula, a mirror. We are indeed a reflection of divinity.

Writing about the ancient Mysteries in his book *Freemasonry - a Journey Through Ritual and Symbol*, W. Kirk MacNulty puts this concept of 'otherness' into perspective:-

The universe is limited by the extent of physical phenomena [but] that of the ancient world was conceived as containing vast non-material realms which were not available to ordinary perception but were still considered to be part of the universe as it was then understood . . . Events occurring within these non-material domains were considered to be governed by . . . the same natural law which gave consistency to the world of ordinary experience. The Mysteries were schools which provided knowledge of the natural laws operating in those non-material realms. Their knowledge was imparted by a process of development represented by advancement through a series of grades, and the instruction itself involved ritual and elaborate symbolic structure used to communicate the principles. The objective was to train people to live in consonance with natural laws as they operate in the non-material domains.

And MacNulty goes on to tell us of the exploits of the Gods of mythology, men and women with remarkable powers engaged in astonishing adventures governed by arbitrary rules and occurring in unlikely situations. All a little abstract, removed from reality, superstitious even? Well, removed from contemporary scientific materialism, certainly. But even in our own lives today we have experiences on the border of reality when we dream, when we explore that landscape on the borders of our own consciousness, the borders of our own psyche.

The fact is, conditioned as we are by the materialist orientation of our society, any perception of our 'otherness' will seem bizarre, to others if not to ourselves, until we pass what I call the 'reality' barrier, and interpret the symbols for what they communicate, rather than taking them at face value. As Freemasons, we have a unique chance, using symbols and allegory, to free ourselves from the spiritual limitations of scientific materialism and to own up to the otherness in ourselves without which active knowledge of ourselves is not possible. Religion uses the oldest devices for this - myth, ritual, devotion and social action - as ways of coping with the fundamental human desire to come to terms with the mystery of our own existence. But spirituality pre-dates the great world religions. Since time began, we have needed to know that life makes sense. We need to know our part in it. In short each one of us, as a unique part of the creation, needs validation. While following the doctrines of the religion which we follow, our spirituality, though it may owe

something to the faith we practise, is ours alone. And if we practise no faith at all, then all the more important it is for us to explore and validate our own spirituality, to turn the key to open the mystery that is ourselves.

We all too often misunderstand what the masonic path is trying to teach us. In Freemasonry we have a comprehensive allegory of birth, moral awakening, life, pursuit of knowledge, experience, through to ultimate wisdom and the knowledge of ourselves, right up to the importance of the death of our old self to attain re-birth and perfection. And is our spiritual path rooted only in intellectual, academic or rational concepts? Not at all. The prominent Catholic theologian Hans Küng reminds us that 'faith would only be half a thing were it to address only our understanding and reason and not the whole person, including our hearts.' I spoke earlier about the difference between our material existence and our 'otherness', that vital part of ourselves beyond the material. In order to reach that inmost part of our being, we might like to shed the material, to discover indeed that within this perishable frame does reside a vital and immortal principle, inspiring holy confidence. We need, in the Christian description, to 'die to ourselves', to contemplate our inevitable destiny, in order to guide us to that most interesting of all human studies. The holy confidence referred to is that in ourselves we can be perfect; we can in ourselves defeat defeatism, defeat pain, suffering, low self-esteem, insecurity, inner chaos and outer hostility, and lift our eyes to a brighter horizon.

But in order to do this, we need a closer understanding of the nature or essence of God to further our quest for self-knowledge and the mystery of our own existence. It is quite clear that one candidate's expression of a belief in God may not match that of another. It is also clear that we are going to get nowhere if we try either to prove the existence of God, or to define His nature. But then we might like to remind ourselves that 'prove the existence of' does not mean the same thing as 'believe in'. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer says 'A God who is there, is not God'. God, understood most deeply and ultimately, cannot be simply an object. If God were that, that would not be God. God is, by definition, that which cannot be defined, cannot be limited. In all the Holy Books of the world, God is nowhere demonstrated by argument. Our powers of reason, bound as they are by space and time, cannot prove what is outside space, outside time. By reason, we can prove neither that God exists nor - atheists please note - that He does not exist. There are no strict proofs, but there are good reasons for His existence.

To be aware of His existence therefore will depend on us opening our hearts. In my youth, like many people, I had a closed heart. I went through an atheistic phase. Whenever I asked followers of different religions questions like - What is God? - Where is God? - I got answers like - God is everywhere - God is in you - and finally - You are God. That didn't make sense at the time, so great was my antipathy towards, and mistrust in, the very concept of God. I only paid attention to it much later, and in a slow dawning I began to see what it could mean. When I became a Freemason, I wondered in particular what was meant by the following :-

Endue him with a competency of Thy divine wisdom that, assisted by the secrets of our masonic art, he may the better be enabled to unfold the beauties of true godliness.

It gradually became clear that I was being made a promise. A promise that, assisted by the secrets, real secrets of meaning, not passwords and signs, I could set out on a path of understanding, or science, of the divinity, not some abstract divinity removed from my proper understanding, but the divinity already resident in myself. This is true empowerment: acknowledging, by meditation, the divinity that is mine, and owning it, being at the centre bounded by the equidistant parts of the circle, at a point where, as a Master Mason, I cannot err, I am truly myself.

It is interesting to note that this view is supported also by Christian theologians. Hans Küng again writes that Christians today are convinced that the meaning of this life is not simply 'God' or 'the divine' in the abstract, but human beings themselves, the all-embracing humanum. Not just to know God, love God, serve God, but also self-fulfilment, self-development, love of neighbours and those far away. And mustn't above all human relationships be included?

I should say here that it is important to distinguish between self-centred egotism which is negative, and self-awareness, which can lead to so much that is positive. This is not the only support Hans Küng gives to such a view. He writes:

As a human being I have, in reasonable trust in God, an 'Archimedean point', a firm standpoint from which I can at least determine, move and change 'my world', an absolute I can hold on to. Free commitment to this one absolute gives me great freedom over against all that is relative in this world - no matter how important and powerful it may be. In the end I am responsible only to this God and not to the state or the church, to a party or a firm, to the pope or any leader. This belief in God is thus the anchorage for an alternative basic ethical attitude [whose] centre is freedom and love, and whose focal point . . . new hope and joy in life.

The 'death to self' mentioned earlier is a key to this freedom, and is rendered in parts of our ritual, little vestiges of the spiritual dimension we have all but lost. But the overall effect of this is to make the candidate so unsure of himself and his surroundings that he no longer unthinkingly trusts the material world around him, the evidence of his senses. In each degree he advances through this state of insecurity, expanding his consciousness to embrace a new level in the Temple of the psyche. Initiation may properly occur not during the ceremony itself, but as a consequence of it - the ceremony plants a seed and the actual raising his level of consciousness follows. When this is achieved, when the initiate's heart is open, then he is truly an Entered Apprentice. His initiation takes place on the ground floor of his psyche, that part related to the physical world but separate from it. The candidate has agreed to be deprived, symbolically, of worldly riches. His clothing is half-undone, a metaphor much more striking in the elaborate dress of an 18thC gentleman perhaps than it is today. He has allowed a noose to be placed around his neck, a powerful image of submission. And, most importantly, he has agreed to be deprived of the power of sight, to be led around in darkness. If we have prepared our candidate properly, in mind as well as physically, he ought by now to feel humbled, submissive, and blind to more than just material light, for how long he does not know. He is going on a journey in darkness and deprived of so much in his

everyday life that allows him to feel secure. The object here is to focus the mind away from the sensuality of the world into the candidate's own being and consciousness. He comes a step closer to shedding his materialist outer garment. He will almost certainly feel threatened by sharp objects. His future in this new way of life is far from sure. He is advised against rashness, impetuously rushing forward, and also against retreat, reticence. But note that these risks are so constructed that to avoid the one is to increase the other. He can be neither impetuous nor can he hold back, and by this means he is taught resolute but cautious perseverance. One of the principal attitudes required of an Entered Apprentice is fidelity to secrets. I believe the concept of masonic secrets is one of the most misunderstood. We cannot surely mean signs, tokens and words, still less the form and content of our degree ceremonies. These have been so extensively published they can in no circumstances be regarded any more as worth hiding from the profane world. I myself read Walton Hannah's *Darkness Visible* before my initiation and, perversely, it gave me an even greater desire to become a Freemason! No, we are talking about quite different secrets to these. Freemasonry, viewed as it should be, is not a physical organisation but rather an activity in pursuit of divinity, of greater light. Our secrets are those things we hold dear, secrets of our own creation and creativity, which we are therefore reluctant to expose, much as a novelist dislikes showing his work to others until it is finished. These are also secrets because to disclose them would negate the good effect they would have on future initiates. The Entered Apprentice is represented by the Rough Ashlar. Kirk MacNulty puts this very well:

While the rock remains in the quarry, it is part of the mass and experiences what the mass experiences. The candidate in the Entered Apprentice degree is about to separate himself out, and to undertake to live his life as an individual, to be a separate stone. It is a step which only he can take; and he can take it only for himself. When he has done it, when he has recognised himself to be an individual, like the rough ashlar which will never be part of the bedrock again, the Entered Apprentice can never go back. To put it another way, when he has had an insight into his nature, when he has a glimpse of the fact that he really is, inside, at the core of his being the 'Image of God', he can never unknow it.

But of course in the second degree he is going to work on this rough ashlar and make of it a smooth ashlar which, when it is complete, will willingly integrate with his fellows and bear the burden with them, will integrate in the same way that the keystone of an arch must fit smoothly with its adjacent stones in order to support the entirety perfectly. In the second degree the hidden mysteries of nature and science are not imparted in the course of the ceremony, but the candidate is told that he is permitted to extend his researches into them. Here again, the fruits of the degree become accessible as a result of the work the candidate undertakes subsequent to the ceremony. The mysteries of nature and science are hidden; and by now you will have guessed that they are not hidden because we have something to hide - they are hidden because we cannot yet see them, and they are mysteries because we cannot yet understand them. It requires our own input to make them manifest. It requires us to journey on our masonic path, and to work. A mystery is of no value if it is 'in your face'; its value lies in the very work we have to do to reveal it. Only the foolish man would confer a university degree on someone who has made no study of the subject. In the first degree we are presented with a ladder depicted on the tracing board, incorporating a great deal of symbolism, but that ladder is a promise for the future; we do not ascend it in the course of the degree. In the second degree, by contrast, we are required to ascend the winding staircase of three, five, seven or more. By the three we can perceive the three lesser lights and their attendant columns; the Corinthian, imparting beauty, referring to the heart; the Doric, imparting strength, referring to the mind, and the Ionic, imparting wisdom and knowledge of self, referring to the soul. By the five we learn of the five orders of architecture and their attendant symbolism. By the seven we enter into the liberal arts and sciences. Time permits only this brief exposition, but this is true work, work to smooth the rough ashlar and make of it something which will be ready for the last and greatest trial of the third degree.

Nor does time permit me to take you more than fleetingly to the third level of consciousness, parts of which we have already explored here. Suffice to say that, if all has gone well, if we have truly progressed along our masonic path, we have by the third degree achieved some level of self-knowledge, learned how to free ourselves to focus on our inner world, achieved some inner harmony, peace and joyous fulfilment, so that we truly can be at the centre, imbued with all that divinity bestows on us and requires of us and able, as Freemasons, to discharge our duty to ourselves, and through that to the world around us, to live in harmony with that world and to realise our own potential. There is no greater gift, no greater achievement, no brighter light.