

THE MISSION OF FREEMASONRY.

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It may be accepted as an axiom that all associations of men for the purpose of promoting the object., of definite schools of thought, whether as to religion, ethics, politics, science, or whatever-else it may be, have a mission to fulfil. This mission, for the most part, takes the form of a message either to mankind in general, or, as it may be intended, solely to those admitted to membership of such associations. There have existed through the many such associations ; some whose objects have been distinctly practical and beneficent : others whose aims have been harmless, if of little import ; and others again whose teachings have been indisputably evil in their nature and influences. With these last we have no immediate concern. But it is worthy of note that all those associations the tendency of whose propagandism has been contrary to the laws of God, and subversive of the will of the Supreme Ruler of the Universe, have had but a brief spell of power, have utterly failed to attain the objects desired, and have passed away after a short and troublous existence in dishonour and disrepute. Those associations, on the other hand, whose message to the human race was good and beneficent, having as its support the divine approval as revealed to man in the V.S.L., have had extended careers of usefulness; indeed, many of them are extant to-day, still actively carrying on their ameliorating and humanising labours.

Whatever may have been the intention of these associations at the outset as to the extent to which the dissemination of their peculiar principles should go - whether theirs was a message to mankind at large, or a message merely sought to be conveyed to those admitted within their fold - the result was, and must I always be, the same - the influencing more by individual example than by precept of such sections of society, small or great, with which the members of those associations came in contact. For it is not possible for any body of men organised as types of a definitely laid down system to confine to their own individualities alone the expression of that system, as long as they are in their daily lives and avocations freely intermingling with their fellowmen. Man is by nature in the course of his development pronouncedly imitative, and only ceases to be so when maturity has brought with it experience and force of character.

Now, it is given to every man to influence for good or ill a greater or lesser circle of his kind as he goes through life. If, then, he is the possessor within himself, as a member of some association, or even as an initiatory exponent, of certain high and noble rules of conduct and morals. and if in his life and actions he consistently carries out those rules, the social circles he intimately moves in will be certain in a lesser or greater degree to reflect the example quite unconsciously set by him. Thus it is that it is futile for any association of men to attempt to rigidly restrict to its own particular membership any peculiar system of ethical or other teaching if those taught are intermingling with their fellow men, and daily living up to their professions.

Among those associations of men whose tenets and principles and objects are undeniably good and calculated to be of great benefit directly to its own members, and through them to mankind at large is the Ancient and Honourable Fraternity of Free and Accepted Masons. Masonry is of great antiquity; indeed, its origin goes back so far that all records concerning it have been lost in the passing of the centuries. Doubtless it was not always termed Masonry, or known as such, but its fundamental principles existed and were practised by different associations of men, all deriving their knowledge and guidance from one parent stock. Let us consider it, however, from that time when it is known to us as having been purely operative in its character - that is to say, the time of the Operative Guilds or Lodges of Masons for purely trade purposes. but regulated on an ethical basis. It may be questioned whether Masonry so constituted had any mission, in the sense of a message to mankind. Yet to one who can see a little beneath the surface of things, to whom there are " sermons in stones," " tongues in trees," and "books in the running brooks," it is abundantly patent that these true and trusty builders conveyed in their work and in their organisation important messages to mankind.

Soulless, indeed, must he be who has been privileged to stand within the walls of some of the magnificent ecclesiastical edifices built by these ancient Masons, or to gaze from without at the beauty and symmetry of these monumental structures which have stood the test of the centuries, if he did not feel uplifted, awed by their inimitable grandeur. And then it must have been borne in upon him that this perfection of the building art, the secret of which has somehow been lost to the present age, was not done for the glory and honour of this or that builder, but solely for the glory and in the name of T.G.A.O.T.U. ; that the construction was of the essence of conscientious workmanship ; that these ancient Masons placed their reverence for the Supreme Being and their pride in the art of their craftsmanship above and beyond all earthly things ; and that these, results were only attainable by a high sense of honour, a noble devotion to duty, and the observance in the lives of these builders of those moral tenets and principles which alone can make men upright and trustworthy. Such were the messages to mankind of these Operative Masons, more especially their messages to all Masons, or Freemasons, who are their successors.

But with the rise, in the eighteenth century, of purely Speculative Freemasonry, the ethical message to the fraternity, and through it to mankind generally, is unmistakeable. It is made more clear, too, by the beautiful allegory, and the impressive symbolism adorning and amplifying its teachings. It is rendered more expansive by the practicability of universality which the change in the Masonic requirement as to religious belief brought about. It is a message, always through and by means of the brotherhood, to the nations and the people of the earth, and the question is what are we - Freemasons - doing in the direction of communicating it?

As an institution, Freemasonry, for obvious reasons, strictly confines the actual and direct teaching of its beautiful ethical system to those regularly admitted within its portals. Yet, as has been said, it has a message - a message of the utmost import - to the world at large. So momentous is the quality of this message that were it known to, accepted and lived up to, by the people of the earth the millenium would have arrived. What, then, is the explanation of this seeming paradox? It is true that books setting forth the nature and objects of Masonry are procurable readily by anyone desiring information on the subject. But this does not really affect the question in the slightest degree. So far as Freemasons are concerned, as long as the secrets guarding the gates against cowans and intruders are kept inviolate, so that Masonic privileges may be preserved solely for those who are entitled to them, it may even be held to be desirable that the profane, or outside world, should read and understand what Freemasonry is and for what it stands. There is abroad a great ignorance and a vast misrepresentation of both these things. Why, then, is the teaching of its tenets and principles confined jealously to its admitted members only, when, admittedly, they are such as to be of stupendous benefit to all mankind if universally carried into effect? The answer, it may be suggested, is to be found in the undeniable fact that, taken generally, mankind is not yet prepared either to live up to or to assimilate such teaching, and that it is only by the influence exerted upon society as a whole, by the individual example set by earnest and good Freemasons in their public lives and actions - an influence exerted tactfully, unostentatiously, free from any blazoning forth or aught of the meretricious - that it is hoped to prepare the general ground for the reception of the truly Masonic seed principles - Brotherly Love, Relief, and Truth. The profane may read in books the avowed ethics of Freemasonry; were it desirable or permissible, orators and lecturers might publicly discourse thereon, and the beauty and soundness of these ethics would, doubtless, appeal to the majority; but for the fuller understanding thereof, and the reaching of the heart, the peculiar atmosphere of our Lodges and assemblies, the added impressiveness of allegorical and symbolical veil verification, and the tried sense of brotherhood as we realise it are wanting. So the resultant effect to the profane, if any, is transitory and of little avail. Not even to the newly-made Mason is the Masonic teaching made directly and immediately clear. It is impossible that it should be so. The science is a progressive one; as such even more care should be taken than is now the general practice that the newly - admitted brother should be forced to realise its progressiveness by being made to evince an ample knowledge and understanding of one step before he is permitted to take the succeeding one.

It is, then, by the peculiar provision of Providence that every man must in his course through life influence other men for good or evil, that Freemasonry looks to spread abroad among the nations and the peoples of the earth the resultant effect as exemplified by its own members of its sublime and humanitarian tenets and principles. For these are its message to mankind at large. What a responsibility then rests upon its members, and what a trust is reposed in their hands. It would seem well, in order to better understand both that responsibility and that great trust to analyse still more closely the nature of this Masonic mission. The main Masonic allegory, the building of King Solomon's Temple, symbolically conveys one very important feature thereof. It is a feature which one is glad to recognise as year by year assuming an enhanced importance in the eyes of the civilised world. That this is the case is indubitably due in very great measure to the powerful but unostentatious part played by Freemasonry, and were it necessary ample proof of this could be brought forward. It may be said that at no period of the world's history was it ever more necessary - that this distinctive feature should be widely understood, accepted, and carried into effect. The feature referred to is the Masonic message of "Peace" - peace among the nations and amongst all sections of men. As we know, during the erection of King Solomon's Temple there was heard no sound of axe, hammer, or any tool of iron. The reason for this was that iron was the metal then used in the making of warlike weapons, and it was held to be incongruous that, anything having relation to war, strife, and turmoil, in which the worst and vilest passions of men are excited, should be used in erecting a Temple of Worship to a God of Love and of Peace. Hence, besides its other symbolical signification to the Freemason, is here symbolised that part of the Masonic message - Peace - which he by example and influence is to endeavour to establish among the nations and the peoples of the earth. The other symbolical signification of the building of King Solomon's Temple was, as is doubtless well known, the building up in the heart of every Mason of the spiritual temple. It is interesting to note how consistently the allegory is carried out in connection with the initiation of the candidate, and how here again is repeated the symbolism, impressing or emphasising the injunction towards peace. At that peculiar moment when poor and penniless he stands deprived of all valuables and - mark this - metallic substances, he (the candidate) stands figuratively as the material in which, and out of which, the spiritual temple is to be built. Like its allegorical prototype, the Temple of King Solomon, it is requisite that nothing of a metallic nature, having a connection with strife, turmoil, discord shall be there. The building up must be done in peace and harmony and concord. And where else in the world - the profane world - could these conditions be found so completely as in the quiet and calm and restfulness of the Masonic Lodge-room, where the work of construction is surrounded by fraternal help and sympathy. Thus, it will be seen, from the very outset the Mason is inculcated with the virtue of peace.

But where there is not love there cannot be peace, and where there is not charity, in its fullest, broadest sense, there cannot exist with any permanency either love or peace. The Masonic injunction in favour of peace, therefore, unsupported by the other part of its great humanitarian message to man - charity - would be futile. Supported thereby nothing is lacking, for charity is brotherly love, contains in itself all the elements which constitute relief, and is the divine embodiment of truth, and these are the three great Masonic principles, forming, together with the consequential belief in a Supreme Being, the basis of the Masonic ethical system. Thus it is that charity is the highest rung in the ladder - the virtue pre-eminent - the possession of which in its fullest signification marks the perfect Mason. The nations and the peoples of the earth, therefore, if they are to enjoy the blessing's of continual peace with one another, and amongst all sections of men, must first be taught to exhibit toward one another that charity in thought, word, and deed, which alone can create among them brotherly love, or, as it is sometimes expressed, the existence of that social condition called the brotherhood of man. That social condition is perfectly practicable, because we see it typified to all intents and purposes in Freemasonry generally, albeit imperfectly, and in Masonic Lodges in particular. And it exists without interference with or injury to individual opinions on what may be called vital questions, simply because the Masonic teaching is that of a great and abiding toleration, itself an essential of true brotherly love.

Necessarily, of course, the Masonic message or mission includes many subsidiary features. These are so closely related to the main issues involved as to be indispensable to its efficient setting forth. Thus

the message includes the injunction to be upright of conduct, strict in morality, strong for the right, jealous of one's honour, a lover of virtue, temperate in all things, faithful unto death, ever striving for self-improvement mentally and morally. Such is the Masonic teaching - the result which Freemasonry seeks to bring about in the case of each of its members. That being effected, if not in its entirety by reason of human frailty, but still in great measure, it is a sure and natural sequence that the example set by true and earnest brethren in the work-a-day world, and in their home and social circles, cannot fail in some degree to pass the message on to others who may thus be with us, if not of us, and so in their turn help the fulfilment of the mission.

What, then, are Freemasons doing, as a body and as individuals, to forward the real work of Freemasonry? It must be confessed that the majority are not doing all that they might do. Where a large percentage of the brethren fail to be of real assistance to the cause or mission of Freemasonry is in their apathy towards, or their ignorance of, the duty which is theirs to ever keep the Masonic tenets and principles by their bearing and conduct before the eyes of society. Put briefly, they do not exert the influence among others which they might and ought to do. The average Freemason would seem to be content to feel that he is a better man because of his association with Freemasonry, and to be quite prepared to be a regular attendant at his Lodge meetings, to enjoy the social after-part, and then depart and think little or nothing more about it till the next meeting comes round. But that is Freemasonry only in name. Earnest consideration of this state of affairs would probably lead to the conclusion that it was due to at least two causes - in the first place, to injudicious selection of candidates; and, in the second place, to the absence from the syllabus of the proceedings of Lodges in general of any organised system of instruction in Masonic matters outside the ritual itself.

Let us consider for a moment the first point - that of the selection of candidates. Good character is, of course, an essential qualification; and let it be conceded at once that, knowingly, no brother would propose for membership any person wanting in that respect. But good character alone is not sufficient for the great purposes of the institution. It ought to be accompanied by definite intellectual attributes and by a temperamental disposition towards a just, reasonable, and proper reverence for things sacred and the serious side of life generally. It is not quantity in the matter of new members which is required, but, quality - quality of heart and of mind. Then, as to the second point - a properly organised system of Masonic instruction. Is it not a fact beyond question that it is the rarest thing to hear a Masonic paper or address at the Lodge meetings? Degree working monopolises all the time and all the energies of the W.M. and his officers. and to its exigencies everything else must be sacrificed. Yet there is no need for this, and, more, it may be suggested that it is quite mistaken procedure. Few, if any, experienced Freemason, would affirm the principle of rapid Masonic advancement. On the contrary, the general verdict of these brethren would be that newly admitted Masons are not sufficiently retarded in their progress upward, with the result that in the great majority of cases that which is quickly and lightly attained is correspondingly deprived of its due value and importance. Even our beautiful ritual suffers as the result of constant and monotonous repetition, and its ever-recurring reiteration Lodge meeting after Lodge meeting is apt to become an undue strain upon the brethren. Whereas, varied by occasional Masonic literary or oratorical interludes, the tension would be relieved, the ceremonial gain fresh lustre and impressiveness, and the brethren themselves would be afforded some real education as to Masonic ideals, objects, and aspirations.

For, after all, these are the real things which count. Because, unless the Freemason is so instructed and by his instruction led to seek and enquire for himself, he may be a good man, an excellent brother, true and trusty, but still only a drone in the Masonic hive. At our initiation we have all of us accepted a great trust and a great responsibility in the matter of this mission of Freemasonry. Let us see to it that we do our best towards its fulfilment in our own persons, and so help to the spreading abroad among men of those our great principles - Brotherly Love, Relief, and Truth.