

INSTALLATION ADDRESS.

(Delivered by V.W. Bro. J. B. Thomson, G.Lec., on 27th March, 1946.)

A year or two ago in this Lodge I delivered a lecture in which I offered some criticism of things which one might see in the working of any Lodge. So far as I know, almost all of the fairly large number of brethren who heard or read the lecture approved of it. But I am not at all puffed-up about this. That lecture had no practical effect whatever. Now I don't at all claim that I was right in everything I said, but equally certainly I wasn't wrong about everything; and the negligible effect of the lecture forced me to the conclusion that there was in the Craft very little inclination to self-criticism in the ordinary conduct of Lodges. That is perhaps not very important. But it does lead to another question of the most first-rate importance. Is there any inclination to self-criticism of our individual conduct as Freemasons both inside and out of our Lodges?

It is on that theme I wish to speak shortly tonight.

In the Craft we work a ritual which prescribes a certain code of conduct, not only to our brethren, but to the outside world. Do we really accept that code? Or, having joined the Craft, are we still the same people—good, bad, or indifferent—as we were before: applying in Freemasonry our standards of the market place, good, bad, or indifferent, instead of applying in the market place the Masonic Code? In short, do we sincerely, systematically, and usefully criticise our conduct from the point of view of the teachings we accept? My own answer to that question is that we do not. You may disagree, but it can do none of us any harm to face the question candidly and without complacency.

It is an individual enquiry not capable of complete discussion. But it may be worth while to reflect a little on what are described as the three great principles of the Order—Brotherly Love, Relief, and Truth.

"Brotherly love": an expression which means much. I need not attempt to explain. That has been done in the thirteenth chapter of Corinthians. I do not suggest that the spirit of that chapter does not exist in the Craft. But I do ask whether it has as full an existence as it ought to have, and whether the outward show of brotherhood is matched by a corresponding universal reality. Let us each ask ourselves this question, to be answered carefully and sincerely: Is there ever a time when there is not to our knowledge a dispute going on somewhere in the Craft: when there are not to our knowledge instances of brethren who are on terms of more or less acute disharmony, perhaps even for some trivial reason, a matter of precedence, a personal slight, a disappointment in office. And as resultant questions, may we not ask whether we are not at times too little regardful of the effects of our actions, too little sensitive of the feelings of others; and from the opposite point of view so little inclined to give credit for good intentions; too ready to take offence when none was intended.

I leave this to your consideration and pass to the second great principle—Relief. Now no one can question the great charitable work of the Craft. But who does it? Chiefly the Board of Benevolence administering the organised benevolence of the Craft. This is a good thing: by joining together we can do things which would be impossible to us as individuals. But it is proper to realise that there is the danger that we as individuals become separated from the art of charity, and it becomes necessary to ask the question: Are we as individuals sufficiently zealous to find the opportunities for charity and to use them?

Truth, the third great principle, is the most personal thing of all, and I can say nothing very material about it here. There is one small point. Sincerity is, I suppose, an aspect of Truth, and as we value it so highly I have long felt that we should be more careful of it in our ordinary Masonic exchanges.

I find it myself a little objectionable that we should be so excessively pleasant on occasions that don't matter. We tend to use a false coin. We are far too fond of congratulating each other on performances which both parties know were indifferent, of thanking each other effusively for matters of plain duty or custom. I don't suggest always a brutal frankness; but we might do better to emulate those who if they can truthfully find nothing good to say, say nothing.

I have spoken so far of our matters which lie within the Craft. But there is another and perhaps even more important aspect: What of the Craft in relation to the outside world? You and I are known to non-Masons as being members of the Craft. Does that mean to them that we are more likely to be honourable men, charitable men, and good men, than those who are not Freemasons? I venture to suggest that it does not mean this: it means no more than that we are known to be members of a Society whose doings are secret, and which is reputed to have great power and influence. The only way in which an institution can attain a reputation for good or ill is by the dealings of its members with those who are outside the institution. I ask you, as I ask myself, how much have you and I done since we have been Freemasons, and because we are Freemasons, which is likely to enhance the reputation of the Craft? And what have we done that may detract from it? Do we not take our membership too lightly; join the fraternity as we would join any other society, and being once in it, comfortably accept praise bestowed on the Craft as an institution as being justly bestowed on us as members?

The late Sir Alfred Robbins, in an address, used the following simple words which express much of what I am trying to say:—

"A Mason can put aside his Masonic clothing and his emblems, he can leave them behind with the Tyler; but he has to carry his principles into his daily life, into his home life, into his business life; and unless a man who is a Mason is a better man in his home life, in his relations of citizenship and his daily contacts with his fellow-man, that man is not a true Mason. He is simply a discredit to the great body to which he belongs, rather than one who brings it any glory."

Can any of us doubt the truth of the words? I think not. And if we admit their truth we are led back to my original question: How many of us can say that we have made an honest and sustained attempt to apply them to our own actions?

The passive reception of our Ritual is not enough. I concede that the constant repetition of the same injunction will have its effect in the end; but so will constant dripping wear away stone, and the process in both cases is desperately slow.

I have often heard it said, when financial matters are being discussed, that we get our Freemasonry too cheaply. If we actively—not passively—accept the principles of our system, we shall not get our Freemasonry cheaply. We shall pay a heavy price for it in daily steadfast Masonic conduct.

And I close with a question which, as Freemasons, we must answer: "Do we—that is, you and I—not an abstract body—do we pay that price?"