



Provincial Grand Lodge of East Lancashire

Living Symbols of Freemasonry



We are told on the very highest authority, that of the Ritual itself, that Freemasonry is a peculiar system of morality, veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols, but there the matter is left without further elucidation or comment.

The mind of the thoughtful student of such matters often turns questioningly to such a statement, and it may therefore be profitable to give it our serious consideration.

‘What then is meant by “a peculiar system “of morality? The word peculiar is not used here in a sense of being odd or strange, but in its purer and more original connotation of individual. It is, in fact, a system of morality which each brother must come to understand and practise for himself. True morality is a science of conduct, and its application is an art requiring great technique and skill.

Again, why is it “veiled in allegory”? In the days of the Ancient Mysteries the most profound truths were veiled from the eyes of the profane by means of the allegory or myth. In this manner the richest of spiritual treasures could be metaphorically suggested, but not expressly stated, so that only those could perceive them who by appropriate intellectual discipline had earned the right thereto.

In the Mystery Teachings of Christianity, the parable was similarly used to reveal and yet to conceal, in such a manner that the simplest minds could obtain comfort from their more obvious and outer significance, while the trained mind of the enlightened Mystic could not exhaust their profundity.

Furthermore, in what manner is Freemasonry illustrated by symbols ? This brings us to the chief subject of our inquiry. A symbol is the outward and visible sign of an inner Spiritual Idea; and symbology is that science of correspondence which deals with the relationship of the one with the other.

Masonry is replete with all various symbols, but they are not isolated and unconnected, for remember that Freemasonry is a system of morality. It is an ordered wholeness from the entrance of the candidate in a state of darkness until he is raised to the sublime degree of a Master Mason.

In its totality it represents the journey of the soul through all the intricate windings of this mortal life, from birth to death, with more than a hint of that which lies beyond.

There is an ancient maxim of our Hermetic ancestors “As above, so below,” which implies that symbols are reflections of Spiritual Realities, and it is thus that our masonic symbols should be regarded.

The pageant of the degrees is a symbolic enactment of the Mysteries of Life, not only in its entirety but also in the wealth of its varied detail.

With the foregoing considerations in mind let us direct our earnest attention to our Ritual and see what we can discover.

The first degree is a degree of birth: it is a descent of the soul from its immortal dwelling place, into the dark tenement of the body, and so we would expect to find, as indeed we do find, the candidate in the first degree in a state of darkness.

He has not, however, forgotten his Divine parentage, for when asked at the threshold of his new adventure in whom he puts his trust, he unhesitatingly declares "In God."

God, the Great Architect of the Universe, is the Father of all symbols, for all outward forms have their source in Him, All things that ever have been, are, or ever will be, in some measure symbolise His Eternal Perfection, and so not even the remotest atom in the Stupendous Cosmos is unrelated to Him.

Man is, in a very special manner, related with his Creator for he is made in the Divine Image or likeness. This is not man as he ordinarily knows himself, wayward, imperfect and selfish, but Ideal Manhood as exemplified by those who have achieved the Great Realities of Life, the Perfected Souls, the true Master Masons.

Let us, however, from this vision of the end of our journey, return to our candidate, in darkness. All the world is to him a great unsolved mystery, as he gropes his way—whither he knows not. Yet he has confidence that he is on the road to the solution of his problems, for of his own free will and accord he has applied for admission into the Mysteries of Life, humbly soliciting to be admitted to their privileges.

The brethren in the four quarters (those in the North, the East, the South and the West) representing the four-square universe, are asked to take notice that his preparation is complete, and that he is properly qualified for that which lies before him, that though he comes in darkness, he is seeking light, and is prepared to be initiated into the mysteries thereof.

The t... s... by which he advances to the pedestal of the Master for his obligation are the candidate's first introduction to that threefold symbolism which runs so consistently through the ceremonies of the Craft. There are three principal officers, three working tools in each degree, three greater and three lesser lights, to name only a few.

Three is symbolised by the triangle, which is the first enclosed figure in Geometry. It is a symbol of creative power, for whereas one is that which is, and two is that which moves that which is, three is that which moves that which is with intelligence; so that without numerical progression there could be no manifestation at all.

At this point we are told that Masonry is free, and requires a perfect freedom of inclination in every candidate for its mysteries. This is symbolical of the free will of man, one of his most priceless treasures, one of the characteristics which raise him above the creatures of nature. Furthermore it implies that he is free to work against the order and harmony of the universe, and suffer the consequences, as well as to unite his human will to the Divine will and thus fulfil his immortal destiny.

Next comes the obligation, and with it we are brought face to face with the whole problem of secrecy. We often hear the remark: "Why all this secrecy?", "Why do we hide so carefully from the world our symbolism of the builders art?" In one sense all things are secret to those who do not understand them! The apprenticed trades, the liberal arts, the healing professions, inspired prophecy and the inner and outer life of the mystic—all are mysteries to the uninitiated.

The true secrets of Freemasonry are not so much the outward symbols as the Spiritual Truths symbolised, which it is our solemn duty to endeavour to understand and actualise in our lives. There are certain truths which, if taken out of their proper setting and promulgated indiscriminately, produce more harm than error itself. That is why the deeper Mysteries have always been veiled from the profane. That Freemasonry is derived from an exalted spiritual ancestry, and that it most surely contains these deeper Mysteries, is clear to those who have given the subject adequate consideration.

Thus he who has sought light, finds light. At first, in the Entered Apprentice degree it is material light that is regained, the birth of the soul into a new world of symbols, the lodge room of the universe.

The candidate is shown the three greater lights which point out the way to the heights, and each of which has a very special significance for students of the Mysteries, for the S... W... are for the illumination of the mind and the awakening in it of that true faith which is the vision of the soul. By its Prophetic and divinely inspired writings we are enabled to behold Truth itself. The S is an emblem of the will and its ordinate action. "Acting on the S" has come to have a meaning of right action according to high moral standards even in the outer world, among those who are not Freemasons. How much more fully, therefore, should we appreciate this symbol of enlightened action?

The C designate the emotional nature, the light that shineth in the heart. To know all is to love all; but we must remember that at this stage both p are concealed, so that full illumination is not yet.

The three lesser lights which the candidate next beholds, symbolise the fields of his activities: the S... to rule the day, the M... to govern the night, and the M to rule and direct his lodge. Day and night have an endless alternating sequence, which proceeds from and returns to itself like the heart beats of life; but the M... , he who has gained a knowledge of the mysteries of nature and science, abides in stability, serene and untroubled in a world of change.

The candidate's, attention is now directed to three dangers, two of which he has escaped, but the third of which will ever remain. These are not idly mentioned but are pregnant with meaning, for the P is the curb to excessive zeal. If in Masonry or in life we rashly attempt to rush forward without discrimination, to force our way into the Holy of Holies when we should be humbly sitting in the outer courts, we are restrained by the p... of a s... i.... presented to our n... l... b. It is the flaming sword of the Cherubim, in the old story of the Garden of Eden, which kept the way to the 'tree of Life, and which still keeps it, for no one

may- enter this Garden save in purity and humility. Only he who is properly prepared in his heart may pass this test. His must be a slow moving but intent zeal.

The penalty of the C... T... is inflicted where there is an evidence of fear. Those who have started out on the path of achievement must persevere to the end. Courage and fortitude are splendid qualities, and fear is the negation of these. It is a horror haunted emptiness.

Thus it is that fear on the one hand, and rashness on the other, are both undesirable. But after these have been overcome and the candidate has with calm confidence faced the initial problems of life, even so the penalty of his obligation will ever restrain him from divulging unlawfully the secrets which have been entrusted to his keeping.

He is given a s..., a t... and a w...; again the mysterious three; a s... which may be seen, a t... which may be felt, and a w... which may be heard; thus three of the most vital of the five senses are brought into operation, so that a Mason may be known by night as well as by day. Even if distance intervenes the s may be seen, even if enshrouded in darkness the g... or t... may be felt, and even in the midst of the uninitiated the w... may be whispered in the ear of one who has shown himself to be of the brotherhood.

Much has been written about the apron. It is in itself a little world of symbolism. In the degree of Entered Apprentice it should be of spotless lamb skin, and is thus a symbol of purity. Its form, a square with a triangular flap, is also significant, for they represent the square of materiality and the triangle of spirituality.

The candidate (or soul) is invested with this symbol to indicate the two possibilities which lie before him. He may either turn downward and outward to earthly things and dwell in the land of semblances and shadows (the square), or he may turn inward and upward to the Heavenly Kingdom, and dwell in the realm of Spiritual Realities (the triangle).

Man is himself three-fold, being body, soul and Spirit, but it is the soul which is the true man, and it is the soul which determines its own destiny. Invested with the power of choosing, the choice of the soul is immediately put to the test.

The candidate is placed in the N... E... c of the L... and to all external appearances he is now a just and upright mason; but who is to tell by outward signs what is hidden within the heart? And so the test is made. The candidate, though poor and penniless, is asked to give and is humiliated by his inability to comply with the request. He is taught humility and asked to set a value upon material giving, but in this moment he may realise that there is within him a capacity of spiritual giving which is never restricted in its flow. Loving fellowship, and sympathy to those less fortunate than himself he can always give, and such gifts are often of greater value than all the riches of the Indies! The perfection of giving is a true blend of spiritual and material gifts, and while it is more blessed to give than to receive, yet there is a certain beauty and fitness in receiving with gratitude that of which we are in need, from one who is able and willing to give, and especially is this true of gifts of enlightenment of the mind.

In every age there have always been those who have taught and those who have been instructed. In such ancient systems as those of the Pythagoreans and the druids, the novices were expected to remain silent for long probationary periods before they were entrusted with the more recondite doctrines, so that ultimately they became teachers in their turn.

Thus we come to the close of the first degree where the candidate is entrusted with the working tools (again three in number) that he may work out his appointed task, and these form an ascending scale, for the t... f... i.... g... is for the measuring of space and time, with very clear indications as to the method, The g... denotes that splendid guardian of man, his conscience, which shows him how his words and actions in time should be regulated and directed to the highest possible ends. While the c shows how by education these ends can be known with exactitude, so that all potentialities may be actualised, as should be the case in a regularly organised society.

We now come to the consideration of the second degree, which is symbolical of life and its maturity. The sun of man's destiny is now at its highest altitude, It is high noon, and this is closely associated with illumination and with truth, in this degree we are especially concerned with the intellectual faculty which traces its pilgrimage through all the paths of heavenly science even to the Throne of God Himself.

The candidate here advances by f s which indicate how man may be considered in his fivefold aspect. The ancient Alchemists depicted man with his limbs outstretched upon the figure of a five-pointed star or pentagram, with his head, two arms, and two legs upon the corresponding joints. Even as his body is five-fold, so also are the faculties of his mind; and even as his body, as such, binds and restricts, so his mind illuminates and makes free, In most of the ancient diagrams the pentagram with its human figure is enclosed within a circle, which is a symbol of eternity.

At this stage of our pilgrimage, however, the circle has not yet made its appearance, for when we are shown the s and c at a certain stage in the degree, one p., of the latter is still hidden and inoperative. We are mid-way in Freemasonry, superior to an entered apprentice, but still unable to work with both the p..... .

The three-fold nature of the s of this degree indicates the manner in which we should conduct our life at this most important point in its development. We should preserve all secrets that are entrusted to our keeping with the most perfect and undeviating fidelity. Unless we do so we are not worthy of those greater responsibilities which later degrees and a wider knowledge bestow.

Likewise prayer and perseverance are qualities which are undoubtedly necessary on our quest. The most helpless individual is he who lacks interest in life, and who is too lethargic to have an aim of any sort or to pursue it. If a man is active, even though misguided, there is some hope for him. His energy will bring him to problems which he must solve or experience consequent discomfort, and so ultimately he will be led to truth, for it is everywhere. The G... G... has blazoned the universe with a most marvellous galaxy of symbols, the discovery of the meaning of which brings enlightenment. So it is that by perseverance we wend our way, often painfully and with difficulty, but usually profitably,

towards an ever wider and deeper understanding of the mysteries of life.

Lastly we should be ready to suffer the most supreme penalty should we ever unlawfully disclose the secrets entrusted to us, and this follows so logically from our undeviating loyalty, that the necessity for the imposition of the penalty is happily remote.

Now we make the liberal arts and sciences our future study. By the sciences we classify the all-various kinds of knowledge from the mighty mysteries of the G... G... Himself, as exemplified in the Divine Science of Theology, downward and outward to the most detailed of the more particularised sciences, between which extends the whole domain of knowledge.

That which we come to know by means of science, we apply by means of art. Having extended our researches into the hidden mysteries of nature, and science, we begin truly to qualify for mastership.

Wisdom is the right application of knowledge; it is the marriage of science and art, the progeny of which are good, true and beautiful acts. The master is that wise man whose every act is made with perfect conformity to the Divine Law, so that all his thoughts and deeds are a perpetual benediction upon the whole human race. His life is a constant exemplification of the appropriateness of the working tools of this second degree.

The term "square conduct," though colloquial in character, has taken a firm root in our language, and possesses a freshness and a spontaneity which more elegant language might fail to express. "On the square" means more than just being a mason, though it is often thus used. It means a man that one can unhesitatingly trust. 'A man whose moral fibre is closely woven; not a fair-weather friend, but one who will not fail a friend or brother in time of need.

The level steps of equality are directed in the middle path between the pillars of the mysteries. They are steps which are neither too ardent nor too sluggish but which persist until achievement is attained.

The candidate for mastership must be perfectly just and weigh all things carefully and with a finely discriminating deliberation. Upright intentions, made potent in act through wisdom, lead to the highest and most perfect mastery.

It is thus that we come to the portals of the degree of a Master Mason, and enter it.

It is a degree of darkness and of death, but it also leads us beyond the valley of the shadow. One of the most moving things in all the craft degrees is the prayer at the portal of this third ceremony. How little we can do by means of our own unaided efforts. Yet strengthened by the blessing of the Most High we can achieve mighty things, face fearlessly the terrors of the unknown, and rise from the tomb of transgression to shine as the stars for ever and ever.

This prayer will repay careful study, not only on account of the majesty and beauty of its language, but because of the lesson which it teaches of calm fortitude in the face of our last

and greatest trial. In the third degree we are taught how to die. This is a solemn thought but it need not be a gloomy or depressing one. No natural thing, viewed from the right angle of vision, is either ugly or inharmonious. Furthermore it is not the soul which dies, since it is immortal, but the body, which returns to its elements in accordance with the wonderful laws which govern natural concerns.

So let us as candidates in this Mystery advance to the East by the steps of perfection, and take our obligation as men and as masons fearlessly, facing unflinchingly whatever may be before us.

To give us courage we are told that both p.. of the c... are now disclosed, freed, so that we may render the c... of our masonic duties complete by tracing the C... of Eternity.

Through all the ages of Freemasonry we are given symbols of wood and stone, dead things, immovable jewels, the pomp and trappings of this earthly dwelling-place, but we also have the power within us of making them live.

Even as the sculptor takes a rough unhewn stone and fashions it into a thing of moving beauty, so we can not only make the symbols and ceremonies of Freemasonry living, but life itself alive.

We are informed that the light of a master mason is darkness visible. His knowledge, when achieved, illuminates even the void of the uttermost materiality. Yet the unaided eye of human reason cannot penetrate this darkness, unless assisted by that Light which is from Above.

So it is that he who would live must first die and he re-born, for who would know light must first descend into darkness, even the darkness of the tomb, that he may become alive for ever more, and attain the perfect illumination.

We are enjoined to know ourselves: this is a cry which has resounded down the ages and we must achieve this knowledge while it is yet day, that is, while we still have an earthly body by means of which physical things may be contacted. That, after all, is the purpose of our material body—like contacts like.

Life is like a ladder, its lowermost extremity rests upon the foundation of the earth, but it ascends even unto heaven. A knowledge of material things is only our beginning; matter is a veil which enshrouds the Spiritual Realities.

If we have a body and sensible faculties for contacting material things, so also we have a mind possessing an ever-ascending scale of faculties and powers by which we may obtain a knowledge of that which is Unchanging and Divine.

The soul is always given its choice—it may work upon the rough ashlar in the quarries of life, content with the uninspired and mechanical round of daily toil, never looking beyond; or it may determine that it will never rest until its immortal destiny is achieved, until its darkness is illuminated and the perfect ashlar is wrought.

The symbolism of the third degree is that of the great mystery of life's ending which is a new beginning. Do we believe that the grave ends all? What a mockery that would be! All this mighty fashioning to end in nothingness! The feeblest mind could conceive something more exalted than that, how much more the blind of Minds, All-Wise—Omniscient.

Loving fellowship, with its five points, has in itself a kind of immortality, for even as men live in their works, so true fellowship lives on in the memory of the brethren.

Immortality, however, is even more than this. The soul which, through the enlightened mind has come to know spiritual realities, has thus united itself with Spirit and become consciously immortal.

There are signs in this degree corresponding with the points of fellowship which relate to the duties of brother to brother, and the joy and privilege of service, for Mastership implies service, and the greatest Master is he who is servant of all.

There are also working tools, again three in number, which have to do with foundations and plans and the finished production, for with the c... we form the immortal Symbol of Completion.

The soul is a circle which has its centre everywhere and its circumference nowhere, and when man comes fully to realise the significance of this, he has reached the end of the quest.

We are the Living Symbols of Freemasonry; the Lodge Room is our world, and all our perambulations are our outward acts, yet beyond even this is a greater reality, a still more living symbol.

The human soul is a unity; through all its acts runs the thread of its own one-ness which enables it to say: "It is I who will do this or that."

This one-ness of the soul, however, depends upon a Mightier One-ness: the Unity of God; and thus it is that the last and greatest trial leads to the last and greatest achievement.

The soul which has triumphed over death is none other than that which has united itself without reservation to its own Source.

There is only one way in which symbols may be made truly living. One by one material things come to be known for what they are, beautiful symbols of still more beautiful Realities. One by one they are taken into the mind and their outward forms transcended until in the end only the Realities themselves are contemplated, and at last the soul comes to behold the One Reality face to face, and symbolism is overpassed.

It may be held that here we have passed beyond the confines of Freemasonry and its symbols altogether, but such is not the case. When the entered apprentice in the first degree affirmed that he put his trust in God, that trust was not misplaced. Nothing less than the highest will ever permanently satisfy the soul, and so after all the intricate windings of

this mortal life, however devious the ways may be, we will ultimately find our way back to the Great Father of All. This then is what it means to be a Master Mason.

He is one who has taken the entire symbolical scheme of things into his consciousness, knows the rightful place of every detail, and the perfection of its wholeness or unity.

He is one who has no unanswered problems, to whom the mysteries of life are like an open book, all his acts are just, perfect and regular, and his love of all his fellows is only surpassed by his love of God.

If this seems too high an ideal to set before ourselves, let us not blame our wonderful system of symbology, but rather our own incapacity to understand and respond to it.

There have been those who have attained Mastership. The sacred scriptures of the world bear witness to this glorious truth, and all the Great Ones acclaim that what has once been done, however difficult and seemingly impossible, may be done again and they invite us to fellowship in their exalted company.

They too have passed through the valley of the shadow, but now all their symbols have become Realities, even as ours will also in the fullness of time, if we resolutely endure.

If we imagine that in our spiritual ascent, the leaving behind of our symbols is in any real sense a loss, we are mistaken, for the greater always includes the lesser, for God Who may not be completely symbolised, is yet perpetually symbolised in all that is, and in a very real way He may be said to be the Great Reality behind all symbols, the Centre of the Circle as well as its Circumference, and the Source and Goal of all the living symbols of Freemasonry.

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