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THE AIM AND SPIRIT OF FREEMASONRY.

A SERMON

Preached at WORCESTER CATHEDRAL, Aug. 28th, 1884.

ON THE OCCASION OF

THE ANNUAL FESTIVAL OF

The Provincial Grand Lodge of Worcestershire,

BY

ARTHUR P. PUREY-CUST, D.D.,

DEAN OF YORK.

P. Grava Chaplain of England ;

P. D. Prov. Grand Master of Bucks. and Berks.

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ACTS X. 35.

“ IN EVERY NATION HE THAT FEARETH HIM AND
WORKETH RIGHTEOUSNESS IS ACCEPTED WITH HIM.”

STRANGE and startling utterance from Jewish and exclusive lips, in the ears of those who heard it. What did it portend? Not surely that the one only divinely revealed creed was henceforth to vanish away before a vague fear of God, and an indefinite life of morality, according to each man's ideal standard, but rather, I think, an acknowledgment of God's recognition of those who had grasped or were seeking to cultivate simple truths which were the initial elements which must underlie all religion; a conviction that God would lead on such yearning hearts to a brighter light and a clearer knowledge of Him and of His ways; would bring such thirsting spirits to the fount at which they might drink to the full of that for which their souls panted; would reveal to them the clear manifestation of that ideal life of which they had as yet but caught indistinct and shadowy glimpses, and would commit to them the power of becoming that which their consciences approved, but which they lacked as yet the power to produce. Nay, such commendable, but Utopian generalities as those in the text, were not the sum of the religion which he, the preacher of the Gospel of the Crucified, was to preach, but they lay at the threshold of it; nay, they could only be attained by it; without it they

were but a dream, but a theory ; by it, and by it alone, could they become substantial realities. These were but the utterance of the voice of the natural man, yet even that, perhaps, the token of the Spirit brooding within on the unresting troubled chaos of the soul. The feeling, God-implanted, which ever had pervaded, still pervades and ever will pervade, all reasoning humanity, all intelligent beings who are made in the image of God, as the created being surveys the creation and those who are denizens with himself therein, viz., that there must be a great first cause which is to be feared, and that there must be eternal laws of purity and order which are to be cultivated, for peace on earth.

To go no further than this, would be to halt at the threshold. To ignore this, or never to have felt this would be indeed never to enter, because never to find, never to enquire for, never to care about, the golden gates. Surely to satisfy this divinely-implanted craving, Christ came, to make possible the fitful anxious longing of the soul the Spirit descended and abides. And the Gospel is the satisfaction of an appetite inseparable from all intelligent humanity, the bread of life to those who are hungering for food convenient for them.

And what is our Craft but the utterance of this primæval universal voice ; an utterance which has been sounding through all the ages, and is sounding still. Ours is no creed, nothing which is either to supplant or supplement Christianity. It expresses, we believe, the conviction of the human heart long before the Sun of righteousness arose to dispel the dark clouds of human ignorance, the thick mists of superstition,—while as yet only solitary individuals amidst all the nations of the world knew and walked with God, before ever God's chosen Israel witnessed to the world, by their solemn ritual, that He had

revealed Himself to men, though as yet only in a measure, whether as regards knowledge or persons.

Unless our traditions are utterly imaginary and fictitious, we believe that our Craft expresses the voice which has been crying since the earliest days of the existence of humanity, the voice, as it were, of one crying in the wilderness,—crying for light, crying for sympathy, crying for order, crying for power. Shaping its ideal by some graphic analogy which seemed to express most distinctly what it had at heart, like the fabled sculptor who, having shaped from the mass of marble his ideal of perfect humanity, looked up to the gods to give the life which he lacked the power to give, and did not look in vain.

What then is our ideal? Surely a commendable one. One which God accepts and which man should therefore acknowledge and honour. To fear God and work righteousness is the *raison d'être*, the essence, the aim of our Craft. We but represent generations and generations of thoughtful earnest men who have felt the same; yes, and of thousands amongst them who have embraced or prized Christianity, because they have found therein and thereby that which their souls lusted after.

If our "clothing" is quaint, our diction conventional, our ritual archaic, they simply illustrate that which I have endeavoured to indicate; they simply refer to the time at which and the means by which the great principles which our Craft has ever held and desired to promote were embodied and classified and given intelligible and lawful form and utterance. It were surely nothing irreverent nor incongruous that men should perceive, in their simple handicraft, an analogy of that after which their soul was longing, that in the sure foundation laid, the stones carefully prepared and accurately fitted, and the mutual order and co-operation of the several degrees of

Craftsmen essential thereto, they should see types and expressions of those principles which they felt essential to the peace and stability of daily life, and should adopt them as illustrations and exponents of those principles of faith, and order, and conduct, which they would inculcate and practise. If the weapons of warfare became, in mediæval times, the epic of Chivalry, surely it is not strange if, in more ancient days, the implements of a peaceful and necessary craft became the epic of Freemasonry. And is it unreasonable that men should have sought to fence their order from the prying gaze, the officious interference, the ridicule, sarcasm, and contempt of those who had neither part nor lot with them in the matter, by signs and tokens which should not shut in secrets which they were ashamed to acknowledge, but exclude from their community any but those who had given solemn pledges of their sincerity to the truths and principles which they would vainly preserve untampered with and inviolate.

Look back, through the long vista of past years, into the dark ages, when civilization was scarce, when the world seemed peopled with a very race of Ishmaels, each man's hand against every man and every man's hand against him—when the foundations of the earth seemed out of course when violence and lust were for the most part simply limited by opportunity and controlled by capacity—when rapine and plunder were the rule rather than the exception, and there flourished, in all its cruelty and enormity,

“That good old plan,”

“That those should take who have the power,

“That those should keep who can.”

and when troubled Spirits sighed for the wings of a dove that they might flee away and be at rest.

Shall we despise or scorn any of their simple efforts who strove, according to their lights and opportunities, to mitigate the trials or provide for the needs of men in these dark and troublous times. Shall we cut the cord of love and trust and order, whose strands, drawn together from all corners and all nations of the earth, are twined together in one bond of fellowship which runs like a golden thread adown the lapse of time?

Is it a condemnation that all our members have not always grasped this high ideal; but, for less exalted motives, have become members of our Craft? Is there occasion for contempt because our fellowship has been abused, and made occasions merely for conviviality and even for excess? Shall we be repudiated because, in other lands, never in our own, Privy Councils of our order may have provided opportunities for plots and conspiracy? Shall we forfeit the respect and confidence of the men of this generation, because the reputation of all the members of our Craft has not been always spotless; because men can put their fingers upon some blots in our community, and say, "Ex uno, disce omnes?"

Nay, but what community of imperfect and frail humanity can stand a criticism so scathing, a requirement so exacting? What body of men are free from mixed motives; what flock, not excepting the flock of the great Shepherd Himself, is altogether without black sheep? That we do not profess a form of godliness while we deny the power thereof, is manifest from our deeds as well as words, our schools for the young, our refuges for the aged, our seasonable and substantial help to almost innumerable cases of distress. That our gatherings are conducted in harmony with true religion, is manifest from the number of clergymen amongst us. That they are compatible with true loyalty, from the fact that the Heir apparent to

the throne is our Grand Master, and that members of his family are our brothers too. If we still seek to ensure that none but those who are at one with us should be members of our order, is there any cause for blame that we are endeavouring, by the maintenance of the ancient customs of our predecessors, to secure for ourselves simply what each other communities are endeavouring, in their own particular way also, to secure.

But it may be urged that these things are now out of date. What our predecessors professed to seek, has been found, what they essayed to provide has been, long ago, established, and that, therefore, for all practical purposes, in these practical days, our Craft may well be swept away as something which has served its purpose, and is effete.

I venture, on the contrary, to submit that such a community as ours, with its high object, its long history and its grand traditions, is as much, if not more than ever, needed. It is an age, forsooth, of civilization and light and knowledge. But is it not an age also which, in its specious self-sufficiency, is spurning the old principles for which our fathers laboured, aye, bled and died, and pressing on in quest of new and vague theories which are to supersede these dry and played out superstitions and conventionalities, and to be the religious and political creed of the future.

When the recognition of a God is being swept away from our legislature—when the voice from the Throne no longer exhorts, at each assize, the people to morality and purity,—when “National education” is becoming, more and more, mere Secular instruction,—when an invertebrate and jelly-fish Agnosticism is paraded as the panacea for all the differences concerning the faith,—when the infinite and incomprehensible mysteries of Heaven are to be subjected by finite minds to a captious Positivism,—when things

Secular and things Sacred are being separated as by a gulf impassable,—when the wise men of the day meet in Congress, and the very mention of the name and existence of a God is hushed as at variance with scientific enquiry,—when a pseudo-liberality is clamouring that the Church shall be disestablished and that the last traces of any national acknowledgment of God shall be blotted out,—is it a time to disparage those who, at least, put the being and attributes of God in the forefront of their Society, and never meet without His name and attributes being frequently and reverently uttered, and the Bible, “the centre light of masonry,” open in the lodge.

When morality is depreciated, and the papers, day by day, contain the unsavoury records of impurity, dishonesty and vice,—is it a time to discourage and look coldly on an Association whose members are pledged to respect the laws of chastity and honour, and the dignity and obligation of which are rehearsed at almost every meeting.

When order is derided, and submission to any thing or any body is coming to be disregarded as antagonistic to freedom and intelligence, and ancient loyalty is rapidly disappearing under the name of modern independence,—is it a time to set at nought that which still, as throughout many generations, sets forth the beauty and power and liberty of discipline, obedience and subordination.

In days when the storms of Political and Religious controversy are piping so loudly that those who are actuated by the same motives and have the same ends in view, are sundered wide as the Poles, and regard each other as Heathen and Publicans, or turn aside, disgusted thereat, to deem Religion and Patriotism alike to be shams,—or when distinctions of social rank and position must make many strangers to each other, who are one in heart and hope as they are by name

and in profession,—is it not surely something that there is one place in the world where these considerations do not enter, a neutral ground, where, without any unreality or compromise, man meets his fellow-man and learns to know him apart from any differences or inequalities which prevail, and must prevail without, and thus to cultivate those feelings of mutual kindness and respect which, if they do not prevent, shall at least leaven and soften any differences in the outside world for the future. Say, O ye lovers of your country, ye lovers of your Lord, is it a time to disband or disparage a community where, not from mere Ecclesiastical or professional ties, but from men of all classes and callings amongst us, the young may hear the principles of religion and virtue and morality continually rehearsed and extolled.

Surely, my brethren, the temper of the times calls for something exactly opposite to this. From those who are not of us, it demands respect; from those who are members, it requires that we should be more than ever circumspect in our lives and conversation, more than ever careful to proclaim and to promote the principles which our Fathers through many generations have tried and proved.

O my brethren, my twofold brethren, brethren in the faith and in the craft, the appeal to us is to make the principles which we profess more than ever realities.

If our craft had been mere antiquated pageantry, mere parading of costumes, mere histrionic ceremonial, we had no place here to-day, and my tongue had been silent on such a subject in this holy place; but, because I believe it is far otherwise, and that it has been, is still, and may be made far more than it is, a mighty engine for the religious, moral and social stability of our nation, I rejoice to acknowledge myself as one amongst you, and to

speak to you here, and from hence, to-day. The times are too momentous for mere trifling, however harmless or picturesque that trifling may be; and words, however commendable and portentous, if they are but words, had better remain unspoken. It is said that every Institution in these days is on its trial: and Freemasonry therefore among the rest; and men are watching and asking "what mean ye by this service," and forming their own opinions as to whether it is worthy to be preserved, or relegated to the tinsel and fripperies of the past.

And better that it should not be preserved, than that, in these days of terrible earnestness, alike for good as for for evil, we should still retain solemn words and significant ritual, which have lost their meaning and cease to have any hold upon the life and conversation. It is not enough to assert the antiquity of our order in the past, its efficiency for the present; it is not enough to point to the roll of honoured and illustrious names which fill or have filled our ranks; it is not enough to claim for it an expediency in the present days, and to prove all these things, even to a demonstration. It will be weighed, and is being weighed, in a sterner, less sentimental and sometimes less friendly balance, and by what we, ourselves individually are, not by what we profess our Craft to be, it will be approved or condemned as regards its worthiness to be professed by Christian men. And if we would walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise men, we must take heed to ourselves.

There are, as there must be in every ancient community, deteriorations which need restoring, abuses which need reforming, principles, forgotten or overlooked, which need to be re-asserted and re-affirmed. We have, as all communities have, our peculiar besetting dangers and temptations; we are liable to be discredited by false brethren,

and by those who, from selfishness or indifference, expose us to obliquy and contempt. It is possible to pervert even the soundest principles and the wisest aims, and we, like all others, have to bear in mind the Apostle's significant caution, "let not your good be evil spoken of."

Much has been done to reform, to cleanse, to restore and give increased efficiency to our order, and we can thankfully and boldly declare, what so many of our national institutions may declare, that very many of the blemishes and shortcomings of former days have long ago become things of the past. But it is never the time to fold our hands and rest contented; never the time to assume that we are perfect, that we are doing all that we ought to do or can do with the means and opportunities in our hands. I believe that a great future is open before our Craft, in the coming difficulties and complications of the future, if we will only be faithful and loyal members thereof. And that, as we may look back upon the past with gratitude and pride, so we may look forward to the future with confidence and pleasure. The more genuine we are, the better we shall be appreciated, and the misunderstandings and misrepresentations about us, which are fast dying out, will take their place amongst the "old wives' fables" of the past. The best and only answer to such calumny is ourselves; and according as others estimate our daily life, will they form their opinion as to whether that to which we belong is, or is not, unworthy or unbecoming.

"Is thine heart right as mine heart is with thine heart, if it be, give me thine hand." And surely the touch will not defile us, even if our brother be neither almost nor altogether such as we are. Nor will "hand join in hand" in vain, if one troubled heart, wearied with "the burden and heat of the day," or buffeted by the

storms of life, be assured thereby of another's sympathy, —or if one weaker brother's tottering steps be upheld and guided as he treads, with failing heart and bewildered eye, the "slippery places" of life. Surely it is something that we have been brought here together, hand in hand, to-day, and who can tell whether the brotherhood, thus sanctified, may not be cemented by the common fellowship of the bread of life, and find its even fuller and closer unity at the altar of the living God. For here is the fulness of our profession, for hence proceeds the full harvest of the fruit which we would cultivate.

Brethren of the Craft, with all reverence be the words spoken and applied, "many prophets and kings have desired to see the things which you see and have not seen them, and to hear those things which you hear and have not heard them." What they desired was but, to them, a mirage on the horizon of life, but an ignis fatuus in their path, something which they saw, desired, wondered at, but could never really attain to, never hold within their grasp. To us it is no impalpable vision, but a great reality,—no fond and impracticable theory, but what is possible and profitable for all; for the eye which longs to find God and holiness and order and unity, sees Him who has said "I am the way, the truth, and the life," and the ear which is listening for some encouragement to the cravings of the heart, hears the voice which says, "If any man thirst let him come unto me and drink."

Yes, my brethren, our Craft remains to remind us continually of what men yearned for in the past; what the imperfect vision of those who could but "see men as trees walking," discerned to be the outline of that which was necessary for the peace of the human heart. The brightness of the Gospel light has revealed the fulness and practicability of its details in all their beauty, stability

and satisfaction. The former is the attestation of antiquity to the truth of the claim of the latter to be a "reasonable service." The former shews us man's estimate by nature of what was needful for his welfare, and how he turned to the ancient dispensation which partially, but only partially, provided for it. The latter exhibits the full satisfaction thereof, and offers to all who are really hungering and thirsting after righteousness the means of living it, *i.e.* the Bread of Life. And so when men taunt us with questionings and doubts, and, offering their crude theories and stilted precepts, invite us to barter our birthright for a mess of pottage, we cling to the principles of ages in preference to the aphorisms of yesterday, and the speculations of to-day. And, conscious that in our Craft we have the sound ideal, and in our Faith the unfailing power, of a really noble, wise, pure, and useful life, we abide where God hath called us, in thankfulness and peace.

F. Sampson, Printer, Coney Street, York.

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