

Three Principal Rounds

Unknown

“And Jacob went out from Beersheba, and went toward Haran. And he lighted upon a certain place, and tarried there all night, because the sun was set; and took of the stones of that place, and put them for his pillows, and lay down in that place to sleep. And he dreamed, and beheld a ladder set upon the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven; and beheld the angels of God ascending and descending on it. And, behold, the Lord stood above it, and said, I am the Lord God of Abraham thy father, and the God of Isaac.”

These words (Genesis XXVIII, 10-13 inclusive) are the foundation of that beautiful symbol of the Entered Apprentice's Degree in which the initiate first hears". . . the greatest of these is charity, for our faith may be lost in sight, hope ends in fruition, but charity extends beyond the grave, through the boundless realms of eternity.”

At least two prophets besides the describer of Jacob's vision have spoken aptly reinforcing words Job said (XXXIII, 14-16):

“For God speaketh once, yea twice, yet man perceiveth it not. In a dream, in a vision of the night, when deep sleep falleth upon men, in slumberings upon the bed: Then he openeth the ears of men, and sealeth their instructions.”

And St. John (I,51):

“And he said unto him, Verily, verily I say unto you, Hereafter ye shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.”

Since the dawn of thought the ladder has been a symbol of progress, of ascent, of reaching upward, in many mysteries, faiths and religions. Sometimes the ladder becomes steps, sometimes a stairway, sometimes a succession of gates or, more modernly, of degrees; but the idea of ascent from darkness to light, from ignorance to knowledge and from materially to spiritually is the same whatever the form of the symbol.

In the Persian Mysteries of Mithras, the candidate ascended a ladder of seven rounds, and also passed through seven caverns, symbolized by seven metals, and by the sun, moon and five planets. The early religion of Brahma had also a seven stepped ladder. In the Scandinavian Mysteries the initiate climbed a tree; the Cabalists made progress upward by ten steps. In the

Scottish Rite the initiate encounters the Ladder of Kadosh, also of seven steps, and most of the early tracing boards of the Craft Degrees show a ladder of seven rounds, representing the four cardinal and three theological virtues.

At one time, apparently, the Masonic ladder had but three steps. The Prestonian lecture, which Mackey thought was an elaboration of Dunkerly's system, rests the end of the ladder on the Holy Bible; it reads:

“By the doctrines contained in the Holy Bible, we are taught to believe in the Divine dispensation of Providence, which belief strengthens our “Faith,” and enables us to ascend the first step. That Faith naturally creates in a “Hope” of becoming partakers of some of the blessed promises therein recorded, which “Hope” enables us to ascend the second step. But the third and last being “Charity” comprehends the whole, and he who is possessed of this virtue in its ample sense, is said to have arrived at the summit of his profession, or more metaphorically, into an ethereal mansion veiled from mortal eye by the starry firmament.”

The theological ladder is not very old in Masonic symbolism, as far as evidence shows. Some historians have credited it to Martin Clare, in 1732, but on very slender evidence. It seems to appear first in a tracing board approximately dated 1776, and has there but three rounds. As the tracing board is small, the contraction from seven to three may have been a matter of convenience. If it is true that Dunkerly introduced Jacob's ladder into the degrees, he may have reduced the steps from seven to three merely to emphasize the number three, so important Masonically; possibly it was to achieve a certain measure of simplicity. Preston, however, restored the idea of seven steps, emphasizing the theological virtues by denominating them “principal rounds.

The similarity of Jacob's Ladder of seven steps to the Winding Stairs, with three, five and seven steps has caused many to believe each but a different form of the same symbol; Haywood says (“The Builder, Vol.5, No.11):

“Other scholars have opined that the steps were originally the same as the Theological Ladder, and had the same historical origin. Inasmuch as this Theological Ladder symbolized progress, just as does the Winding Stair, some argue that the latter symbol must have come from the same sources as the former. This interpretation of the matter may be plausible enough, and it may help towards an interpretation of both symbols, but it suffers from an almost utter lack of tangible evidence.”

Three steps or seven, symbol similar to the Winding Stairs or different in meaning and implications, the theological virtues are intimately interwoven in the Masonic system. Our many rituals alter the phraseology here and there, but the sense is the same and the concepts identical.

According to the dictionary (Standard) Faith is “a firm conviction of the truth of what is declared by another ...without other evidence: The assent of the mind or understanding to the truth of what God has revealed.”

The whole concept of civilization rests upon that form of faith covered in the first definition. Without faith in promises, credit and the written word society as we know it could not exist. Nor could Freemasonry have been born, much less lived through many centuries without secular, as distinguished from religious, faith; faith in the integrity of those who declared that Freemasonry had value to give to those who sought; faith in its genuineness and reality; faith in its principles and practices.

Yet our ritual declares that the third, not the first, round of the ladder is “the greatest of these” because “faith may be lost in sight.” Faith is not needed where evidence is presented, and in the far day when the human soul may see for itself the truths we now except without demonstrations, faith may disappear without any consciousness of loss. But on earth faith in the divine revelation is of the utmost importance to all, especially from the Masonic standpoint. No atheist can be made a Mason. Any man who misstates his belief in Deity in order to become a Mason will have a very unhappy experience in taking the degrees. Young wrote:

“Faith builds a bridge across the gulf of death
To break the shock blind nature cannot shun
And lands though smoothly on the further shore.”

The candidate that has no “bridge across the gulf” will find in the degrees only words which mean nothing. To the soul on its journey after death, the third round may indeed be of more import than the first; to Masons in their doctrine and their Lodges, the first round is a foundation; lacking it no brother may climb the heights.

Hope is intimately tied to faith: “Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.”

The dictionary declares hope to be “desire with expectations of obtaining: to trust confidently that good will come.” But the dictionary definition fails to express the mental and spiritual importance of hope. Philosophers and poets have done much better. “Where there is no hope, there can be no endeavor,” says Samuel Johnson, phrasing a truism everyone feels though few express. All ambitions, all human actions, all labors are founded on hope. It may be crystallized into a firm faith, but in a world in which nothing is certain, the future inevitably is hidden. We live, love, labor, pray, marry and become Masons. bury our dead with hope in breasts of something beyond. Pope wrote:

“Hope spring eternal in the human breast;
Many never is, but always to be, blest,” blending a cynicism with the truth.

Shakespeare came closer to everyday humanity when he said:

“True hope is swift, and flies with swallow’s wings; Kings it makes gods, and meaner creatures, kings.”

Dante could find no more cruel words to write above the entrance to hell than:

“Abandon all hope, all ye who enter here.”

Nor can we be argued out of hope; doctors say of a loved one, “she must die,” but we hope; atheists attempt to prove there is no God - we hope. Facts demonstrate that our dearest ambition can never be realized - yet we hope. To quote Young again, we are all:

“Confiding, though confounded; hope coming on, Untaught by trial, unconvinced by proof, And ever looking for the never seen.”

And yet, vital though hope is to man, to Masons, and thrice vital to faith. our ritual says that charity is greater than either faith or hope.

To those whom charity means only handing a quarter to a beggar, paying a subscription to the community chest, or sending old clothes to the Salvation army, the declaration that charity is greater than faith or hope is difficult to accept. Only when the word “charity” is read to mean “love,” as many scholars say it should be translated in Paul’s magnificent passage in Corinthians, does our ritual become logically intelligible. Charity of alms can hardly “extend through the boundless realms of eternity.” To give money to the poor is a beautiful act, but hardly as important, either to the giver or the recipient, as faith or hope. But to give love, unstinted, without hope of or faith in reward - that, indeed, may well extend to the very foot of the Great White Throne.

It is worth while to read St. Paul with this meaning of the word in mind; here is the quotation from the King James version, but with the word “love” substituted for the word “charity:”

“Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not love, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not love, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not love, it profiteth me nothing. Love suffereth long, and is kind; Love enveith not; love vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up. Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth.”

Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. Love never faileth; but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away.”

“When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face; now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known. And now abideth faith, hope, love; these three; but the greatest of these is love.”

It is of such charity that a Mason’s faith is made. He is, indeed, taught the beauty of giving that which is material; the Rite of Destitution shows forth the tender lesson in the first degree; Masonic Homes, Schools, Foundation, Orphanages and Hospitals are the living exponents of the charity which means to give from a plenty to those who have but a paucity.

The first of the principal tenets of our profession and the third round of Jacob’s Ladder are really one; brotherly love is “the greatest of these” and only when a Mason takes to his heart the reading of charity to be more than alms, does he see the glory of that moral structure the door to which Freemasonry so gently, but so widely, opens.

Charity of thought for an erring brother; charity which lays a brotherly hand on a troubled shoulder in comfort; charity which exults with the happy and finds joy in his success; charity which sorrows with the grieving and drops a tear in sympathy; charity which opens the heart as well as the pocket book; charity which stretches forth a hand of hope to the hopeless, which aids the helpless, which brings new faith to the crushed ...aye, these, indeed, may “extend through the boundless realms of eternity.”

Man is never so close to the divine as when he loves; it is because of that fact that charity, (meaning love,) rather than faith or hope, is truly, “the greatest of these.”

STB – April 1935