

DARKNESS VISIBLE

Michael Baigent, © Jan 2001

Every humane society allows room for variations in human aspiration. Those which do not, tend towards the fascist where all have to march to the same drum. Ancient societies, recognising this, often had, behind their domestic, commercial, military and religious activities, organisations called generically, 'The Mysteries.' Through the Mysteries, society allowed two ways of understanding the symbolism and rituals which were presented publicly. The Mysteries existed for the ultimate satisfaction of those who wished to know more, who wished to seek the very source of that divinity which was symbolically, but superficially, expressed in the popular religions and their public cult and practices. By knowing more, these initiates became better human beings. We can view Freemasonry as generally fulfilling a similar role in modern society. Freemasonry attracts not so much those who are dissatisfied - for that is another matter - but those who wish to enrich their lives by gaining insight and knowledge, and in so doing, enrich the lives of those about them through their morality and charity. Yet, Freemasonry itself is a society and within its rituals and practices we can also see evidence of a dual understanding of their meaning. The difference in Freemasonry is that the two perspectives are equally available to all brethren. They are separated simply by understanding; it is the way we look at what we are doing which is the key.

All too often we do not look clearly at what we are doing in our rituals, nor understand fully the words we are speaking. It is too easy in the struggle to remember the words, to let their meaning slide by. Ritual needs to be not just performed, but experienced. Each ritual takes place in a timeless 'now'. Each ritual involves a confrontation - as gentle or as intense as we wish to make it - with this timeless now. The Mysteries of the ancient world had, as their focus, an initiation. And this process, commonly, took place during a ritual period of 3 days. But the heart and focus of this period was the initiation itself, when the candidate experienced a great and shimmering light, the Light of Divinity which embraced him. The initiate into the great mysteries of Isis, Apuleius, described how he travelled to the underworld to stand at the very edge of death and that, in the middle of the night I saw the sun, a bright shining and glittering light; I entered the presence of the gods. After such an experience, the initiates were enjoined 'To keep silent'. To their credit, no-one divulged their secrets and consequently, no texts exist detailing their inner workings. Doubtless you will see the ready parallels with our own Mystery of Freemasonry. Symbolically the three degrees begin in the East at sunrise by the Master and the need for Light is made dramatically apparent. But, the candidate commonly understands 'the light' as that which he might see the external world - as a new-born infant might - for he has not yet been drawn into a deeper understanding of the term.

Our system teaching various things:

Firstly it demands a promise: to continue progressing through the initiation, to keep the secrets which are revealed and to obey the principles of masonry and its brotherhood.

Second, the responsibilities of the brotherhood are made clear: morality, charity and brotherly love.

Thirdly it involves a symbolic journey, a pilgrimage, a quest, which comprises the heart of the rituals. The work for the initiate is his quest, a quest for something lost.

The moral duties are well covered, well understood - and, exemplified by the huge amounts of money donated by Freemasonry to charity each year - well learned by all brethren. The quest, however, is rather more hidden, the peak moment of which is in the denouement of a symbolic and mysterious journey. This mystery speaks of the 'mysterious veil which the eye of reason cannot penetrate'; it expresses the relative darkness within which our lives are conducted, a relative darkness which cannot be relieved by means of our use of reason; something more is needed. Now most masons uttering this are not aware that it is a thoroughly revolutionary statement; one which grows out of an argument at least 2500 years old. The earliest philosophers, those who came before Socrates and Plato such as Parmenides, Empedocles and Pythagoras, were not just skilled in argument but were all healers, doctors and shamans as well as philosophers. They didn't just talk or argue about divinity, they also experienced it. They had, as both scholarship and archaeology have proved, very close links with the teachings of ancient Egypt. Archaeological excavation of certain early Greek tombs - particularly some at Thurii, in Southern Italy - have revealed thin gold plates bearing ascension texts deriving from the Egyptian Book of the Dead. But this title is modern, the ancients called it The Book of coming forth by day - or, of coming forth into the Light.

Unfortunately, in the late 4th century BC, Plato sliced off the experiential side from philosophy and developed the practise we now recognise, that is, a search for the heart of reality based upon argument, upon intellectual display. So, great as he was, he did us all something of a disservice. He began the process of cutting philosophy off from its mystical roots. Plato's student, Aristotle, completed the emasculation: he had no room for anything beyond that which could be apprehended by means of human reason. Reason, in his opinion, was the only way to truth. It was not until some 800 years later, in early Christian times, that a Platonist called Plotinus, who had a profound personal experience of Divinity, brought philosophy back to its mystical roots. And his younger contemporary, Iamblichus, proceeded to introduce the use of ritual as well as elements from the Egyptian temples. This broad and mystical approach is now called Neo-Platonism but this word is, of course, a modern nonsense. For these two philosophers just returned philosophy to its experiential origins.

Reason is all very well, it is certainly rather useful and it underpins our scientific and technological culture; and also, via Descartes and Kant especially, OUR philosophy. But it deals only with the phenomenal world and our reality is much greater than that. Reason alone cannot comprehend the irrational, the metaphysical, the spiritual. Reason alone cannot penetrate that mysterious veil which shields all of us from 'the prospect of that is, the vista - of futurity', in other words, the vista of eternity. It cannot do so unless and here is the point unless assisted by the Divine Light. This is pure mysticism. This is the Sun rising in the middle of the night of which Apuleius wrote.

The second great tenet is 'knowledge of yourself'. This echoes the preoccupation of the ancient Mysteries: above the door of the entrance to the Greek Eleusinian Mysteries was carved the text: 'Man, Know Thyself.' What does this mean? It means not just to know your own likes and dislikes, it means much more than this. It means to know, that is, to experience, what the true self is. Here again we are moving beyond the external superficial world in search of something much deeper, much more profound. It is asking, who are you truly? Why are you here? What is required of you?

The third part of the quest is to remember that we are mortal, and therefore we must continue to listen to the 'Voice of Nature'. This, Brethren, is asking that we act in harmony with ourselves and our world. To do so we need to seek those still moments when our true voice is not drowned out by the rough and tumble of modern life, and we need to seek these moments out, put time aside for them, and learn to trust them. When expressed concisely and dramatically, these important instructions help build our lives in peace, symbolised by the star of the morning. This, Brethren, serves to both humble us and to inspire us. For there is none too great nor too powerful for whom this is not directly addressed. The Morning Star could be Sirius of the ancient Egyptians or Venus of the ancient Babylonians, but is not to be taken literally, although it is a beautiful and refreshing symbol, a symbol of a new light following the darkness. This Morning Star arises within, it is the first vision of the Light from above. The New Testament (II Peter 19) advises, take heed-until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts. And the experience of this Light brings peace. By knowing this Light whenever in life it may come - you have passed through the veil which has previously shielded eternity from your grasp. It is this secret, open to all, but recognized by few, which lies at the heart of Freemasonry. It is a secret which needs to be experienced, not simply recited, and may it remain ever thus.