

\* Please note that any opinions expressed in these lectures are those of the individual writers and may not necessarily reflect the views of the Province or Supreme Grand Chapter.

### Lecture 3 CHRISTIANITY AND THE ROYAL ARCH

There is in each upright man and believer in the Christian faith the search for eternal salvation and this search will be coupled with and require, a high moral code of behaviour and actions. Such was the goal searched for by some of our ancient brethren.

The driving force of this search was within the GENEVA BIBLE and the BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER, and in particular a creed in the latter, not the well-known APOSTLES' CREED *but* the CREED OF SAINT ATHANASIUS or the QUICUNQUE VULT. It is stated that it should be used upon the following important feasts (and other saints days): Christmas Day, Easter Day, Ascension Day, Whitsunday and Trinity Sunday, which are the cornerstones of the Christian faith. This creed expounds the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation and adds a list of the important events in our Lord's life. It does, however, include anathemas against those who do not believe its affirmations. It is uncompromising in its statement of faith: "Whosoever will be saved: before all things it is necessary that he hold the Catholic faith. Which faith except every one do keep whole und undefiled; without doubt he shall perish everlasting." (and now comes the important implication) "And the Catholic faith is this: That we worship one God in the Trinity and Trinity in Unity,..." It is perhaps not surprising that in using the Christian Bible as a source of inspiration the founders of the RA Order were influenced to make the number THREE predominate throughout the Ceremonial – three principals, three sojourners, three sides and three angles in a triangle, three Tau's all with the inference that each third is incomplete without the other two as are the three aspects of the Trinity.

The Geneva Bible with its marginal notes (extracts from which form the cover of this text) also had a very strong and major influence on the material used for the formulation and transformation from operative to speculative freemasonry and there was a mixture of the Old Testament with the New Testament within early version of the Craft and Royal Arch degrees. The Christian nature of the Royal Arch degree was not amended until the formation of Supreme Grand Chapter in 1817. The salvation concept is now only contained in the so-called side degrees, in particular the Rose Croix Order. The emphasis of the Royal Arch is not focused on a person having a high moral code of behaviour and actions and having been a master mason for 4 weeks and upwards, whereas the "Christian" degree, Rose Croix, not only requires a candidate to be of high moral standing, and a master mason of at least a year's standing at the time of his election but, he must also profess the Trinitarian Christian faith, reflecting the important element of the QUICUNQUE VULT. The Christian nature of the ritual was presumably amended at the formation of Supreme Grand Chapter to reflect the spread of the order beyond Christendom during a period of great expansion of trade and commerce resulting in a need to make it attractive to followers of other faiths.

There are nevertheless still shadows and echoes of the Christian elements contained in the Royal Arch ritual and these residuals will now be highlighted in the various parts of the Royal Arch procedures and commented upon the order they occur in the Complete Workings printed version. Reference will also be made to some of the material which was removed from the ritual at the Union. At the opening of the Chapter the Principals leave their sceptres on their seats and go to the west then face east and advance in due form. Zerubbabel says: OMNIPOTENT, which is quoted from Revelation 19,6- "and I heard as it were the voice of a great multitude, and as the voice of many waters and as the voice of the mighty thundering, saying, Alleluia; for the LORD God omnipotent reigneth." Then the First Principal follows with a PRAYER, which is in fact drawn from Holy Communion service of 1662 being the Collect for Purity which follows the Lord's Prayer at the opening of the communion service: -Almighty God, unto whom all hearts be open, all desires know and from whom no secrets are hid; cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of Thy Holy Spirit that we may perfectly love Thee and worthily magnify Thy Holy Name." Only the final phrase – "through Jesus Christ Our Lord." is omitted. What a wonderful additional use for this Collect of Purity to open both the Holy Communion Service of 1662 and the Royal Arch Chapter and purifying them before they then fully commence their respective spiritual operations. Next the Principals, supporting the VOSL (almost certainly the King James version of the Holy Bible containing of course the New Testament) on their left hands and forming a triangle with their right hands. An equilateral triangle is the geometrical representation of the Trinity in a Euclidian plane, because it has three equal sides and the magnitudes of its interior angles are also equal. The shape occurs commonly in Christian architecture.

In the sharing and repeating ceremony which then follows – "We three do meet and agree ....." they are now reflecting from QUICUNQUE VULT- "And in this Trinity none is afore, or after other; none is greater, or less than another; but the whole three Persons are co-eternal together; and co-equal." And so with more than a little borrowing from Christian liturgy the Chapter is duly opened!

In the closing of a Royal Arch Chapter no feature is more truly Christian than that drawn from the gospel of Luke, when the Principals form with their sceptres an equilateral triangle in the vertical plane (again a symbolical arrangement of the Trinity) and say from Chapter 2, 14 "Glory to God in the highest, on earth peace, goodwill towards Men", which is the song of the angels. One of the main blessings of the age of the Messiah would have been "on earth His peace" to be enjoyed by all those God had chosen to so benefit.

Before the ceremony of exaltation: a procedure of "Passing of the veils" was at one time used. It was removed from the ritual in or possibly before 1834. It contains references to the former Christian nature of the order although, nobody knows the exact origin of this portion of ceremony, but it is sometimes associated with 7 steps taken by the candidate and in some chapters, it was linked to the biblical account of the mysterious veil that was rent asunder when our Lord was crucified, as the candidate passed through it: St Luke 23, 45 "And the sun was darkened, and the veil of the temple was rent in twain from top to bottom" What those Royal Arch Companions in some of those 18<sup>th</sup> Century Chapters were being guided to was the veil of the temple woven of the Royal Arch colours of purple, blue and crimson, which when thrust aside symbolically represented the event recorded in these two quotations from Luke and Matthew so that they may see a trio of Rulers, whose union – 'We three do meet and agree...' – represented the Holy and Undivided Trinity.

In the "story" part of the ceremony itself much of the Christian association has been expurgated but as it is based principally on extracts from the Old Testament there may not have been too much to eliminate even from the earliest workings.

The breast Jewel worn by the companions has links with the New Testament. From 1 Peter 2; verse 7 reads "Honour all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the King". This wording corresponds to the Latin wording on the two concentric circles on the reverse side of the jewel, which approximately translates into "To God, King and brethren be honour, fidelity and benevolence".

The Historical lecture is entirely devoted to events to the Old Testament, but in the other two lectures there are many overt and several covert allusions to Christianity. In the early 18<sup>th</sup> Century manuscripts of the Symbolical lecture, we find, in the portion: "We acknowledge six lights (the lesser and greater lights are arranged in equilateral triangles which are similar, echoes of the Holy and undivided Trinity). The three lesser lights represented the names of the three Grand Masters, and the moral and religious light to be drawn from the law and the prophets; while the three greater lights represented the sacred name pronounced in three syllables and also reflected that all-encompassing light shining from the gospel message and among Christian masons, the great mystery of the Trinity and gift of divine salvation as promised in the QUICUNQUE VULT – "...and they that have done good shall go into life everlasting".

The current ritual describes the banners as bearing the symbols of the twelve tribes of Israel. It could be conjectured that the ensigns borne by the companions on their staves were symbolising the twelve apostles as the tribes of Israel were the forefathers of the twelve apostles of Christ. The apostles were tasked to spread the Word and the opening words of the Gospel of St. John – "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God; and the Word was God" were undoubtedly the contents of the discovered scroll prior to the Union. Likewise, the four principal banners could arguably be the emblems of the four gospel writers. In Christian theology St Matthew is represented by a man, (or water); St Mark is represented by a lion, (or fire), St Luke is represented by a bull (or earth), St John is represented by an eagle (or air). The water, fire, earth and air are the four Greek elements and correlate with the first four Platonic bodies found on the floor of the Chapter. The four creatures feature in the Revelation of St John the Divine Chapter 4; 7 – which is apocalyptic in nature representing information which is now hidden and is to be revealed in the future, an approach which is especially appealing to the Masonic thinker! St Irenaeus, a second century saint ascribed these four sacred symbols, to the four Evangelists in a book so they must have acquired a Christian significance at a very early date. The Old Masonic Charges gave importance to the eagle symbol. The presence in an old lodge of carved eagle possibly mean wither the lodge was dedicated to St John the Evangelist, as lodges commonly were, or is evidence of a Royal Arch association. In the Chapter of St James No 2 is an eagle carved and gilded. In their Christian application a winged man represented the incarnation of Christ, a winged ox His passion, a winged lion His resurrection, and winged eagle His ascension. The lecture continues with an explanation of the bearings on the sceptres followed by reference to the VOVL, the square and the compasses as being "the appropriated emblems," a phrase that indicated the former Christian elements embedded in the ritual. We should remember that the New Testament lies hidden in the Old Testament and the Old Testament is manifested in the New Testament as we later find with a change in the lecture to: His wisdom is amply exemplified in the Volume of the Sacred Law Certainly, after the explanation of the monitorial sign in the first part of the Mystical lecture, there is drawn part of the second Collect at evening prayer; "O God from whom all holy desires, all good counsels, and all just works do proceed: Give unto thy servants that peace which the world cannot give-". In the second part of the mystical lecture a lengthy explanation of the Tau is given. The TAU is of great and

fundamental significance in Christianity. It is conjectured, that it was the form of the cross on which Christ was crucified. This form of T-configuration is also seen in many depictions of the crucifixion on early paintings, rather than the more formal shape of the Latin cross. The TAU form was able to support the body more effectively. The shape of configuration of the triple TAU could also allude to the Trinity in some circumstances. The three elements of the triple TAU each resemble a 'tau' – the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet (and also a Greek letter) and is regarded as an emblem of life. A letter T joined at its foot by the "feet" of two additional T's lying left and right horizontally is, of course, the RA emblem. It is conjectured that it could equally be a Christian symbol. In a later part of the lecture the plate of gold is described using several phrases from scripture, for example Rev 1: 8-"I am the Alpha and I am the Omega". The whole of the paragraph following is laced with Christian overtones, and also hints at the Holy and undivided Trinity.

Royal Arch tracing boards are not used nowadays but many still exist. These so-called Harris boards are generally found framed and mounted on lodge-room walls. Although not now used in the ceremonies they give a time frozen picture of the Christian elements in Royal Arch in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Many of them have the bible illustrated opened at St John's Gospel chapter 1, verse 1: "In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God". In the "Harris boards" we find elements, rich in Christian symbolism: we have phrases such as "the cubical stone exuding blood and water", "the most excellent High Priest of our Salvation" and "working our redemption within two natures human and divine". These phrases were not the type of fundamentals to draw non-Christian brethren to be exalted into this 'sublime' degree. Furthermore, they imply in their design that Pure and Ancient Freemasonry consists of seven steps which contradicted the terms of the Union agreement of 1834 and they were therefore suppressed. It is interesting to speculate that the latest interpretation of the interrelationship of Craft and RA, i.e. now that the requirement of being a past master before taking the RA chairs has been dropped, can now justify seven steps. The exalted candidate is told that a perfect knowledge of this Order is only to be obtained by passing the three Principals' chairs. In attaining this perfect knowledge of Pure and Ancient Freemasonry the mason will progress through seven steps viz: EA, FC, MM, RA, J, H and Z. So perhaps we may soon see approval for the Harris Boards to be reintroduced!

We finally reach the after proceedings to enjoy a meal preceded and followed by a neat Latin grace almost certainly composed by a well read Christian Monk; after which there is a constant reminder in the third toast that the Third Grand Principal is, and to date has always been a clerk in Holy Orders. What more conspicuous acknowledgement of the early Christian nature of the degree could there be?

To try to understand the former integration within Royal Arch and Christianity pre-Union agreement; I am drawn to a letter from Sir Isaac Newton to Robert Hooke: "I do not know what I am to the world, but to myself I now seem to be a boy playing on the sea shore, and diverting myself now and then finding a smoother pebble or prettier shell than ordinary, whilst the whole ocean of truth lies before me". This quotation encapsulates my current understanding of Royal Arch Masonry and I would like to advance myself to the whole Royal Arch "ocean of truth" which lies ahead of us all in its wonderful and revealing glory!

Presented to the Wiltshire Chapter of First Principals No 6731 on Wednesday 8<sup>th</sup> June 2005 by E Comp Dr J A Milsom PPrScribeN.