



Notes from a Preceptor's Handbook

A Preceptor:

(OED) 1440 A.D. from Latin *praeceptor*

one who instructs, a teacher, a tutor, a mentor

Symbols, Cathedrals and Freemasonry

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'The Masons who made Salisbury Cathedral...'

In his thoughtful book 'Reason and Reality' (SPCK 1991) Professor John Polkinghorne writes:

'Mathematics is the natural language of science: symbol, because of its poetic openness of meaning, proves to be the natural language of theology...'

However this short paper suggests that the use of symbolism extended far beyond theology. Both mathematics and symbolism played an essential part in the design and construction of Salisbury Cathedral. Later, during the evolution of Speculative Freemasonry, the C18 Christian churchmen who created the 'speculative' framework of Masonic rituals drew heavily not only on the theological belief and morality of their 'operative' masonic forebears but also on the symbolism and mathematics employed in the cathedral's design and construction. The paper goes on to conclude that 'symbolism' provided a language which, over the centuries, has helped the illiterate as well as the educated understand both the function of the Cathedral and the moral basis of Freemasonry.

(It is important to recognise at the outset that while Freemasonry requires all of its members to have a firm belief in a Divine Being and After Life, it is not, never has been, and never can be an alternative to any particular Faith or religion. Freemasonry is simply a system of morality. This morality has been veiled in Old Testament allegories with its values depicted by symbols drawn from the tools of the Cathedral's builders.)

The Design and Construction of Salisbury Cathedral

The design of the new Salisbury Cathedral was probably set out well before May 1198 by Bishop Herbert Poore and his brother, the Dean Richard Poore, when King Richard reputedly rode from Winchester to Old Sarum to see the plans. Turmoil in both Church and State – as well as the Bishop's illness - delayed construction until 1219 when the foundations were dug and the first wooden chapel (dedicated to St Thomas) had been erected. The foundation stone was laid in April 1220 and the Cathedral building completed by 1258. (The Spire was added some years later sometime between 1285 -1315.) The Cathedral was dedicated to St Mary, Mother of Christ.

Out of reverence for Bishop Osmund (later St Osmund), builder in 1090 of the first stone cathedral erected on the hill at Old Sarum, the design of new Cathedral was based on that of the old but expanded in concept to take advantage of the space offered by the Harnham water meadows. The floor plan was symbolically that of the cross, accurately aligned east-west, with a major transverse piece, or Great Transept, placed half way along its length and with a shorter transept to its east, creating space for additional chapels. The Nave, to the west of the Great Transept, was far larger than the size of the congregation would warrant but it offered another dimension for worship through its processional use.

Use of Symbols to represent Religious Values

Symbolism of the Floor Plan

The Cross formed by the East - West axis and the Great Transept is a basic symbol of the Christian faith. To the east, the eastern most chapel and the outer walls of the Eastern Transept form an equilateral triangle whose sides represent the Holy Trinity – all three being different in quality but identical in nature.

The three chapels in the east, the four chapels along the Eastern Transept and the six along the Great Transept totalled thirteen, appropriately representing Christ and his Twelve Apostles.

The Nave (in the west) containing the congregation symbolised the earth and earthly qualities, the Quire containing the choir and lay vicars symbolised the mental and spiritual nature, the High Altar with the Priest presiding over the Communion symbolised the Divine. In the Sarum Rite the momentum of the worship travelled steadily from west to east always rising upwards, by one or two steps at each stage until reaching the High Altar.

At the time the Cathedral was first conceived, a recent mathematical development suggested that a set of numbers ('the Fibonacci Series' – an overlay of a geometric with an arithmetical series) could explain the proportions found in plants, animals, sea shells and, significantly, in the bone structure of Man. The Series was based on a function (the square root) of the number 'Five'. It was suggested that if God had used such a series in his Creation then, in a building devoted to his Worship, it was appropriate for this same proportion to be adopted symbolically representing God's Temple.

[Thomas Cocke and Peter Kidson ('Salisbury Cathedral: Perspectives in the Architectural History' ; RCHME 1993) demonstrate that this number, the square root of five (2.23...) is to be found in all the major proportions of the building – e.g. overfall length to breadth of building, height to width of Nave, dimensions of both Transepts. This same number is also an element of the classical Golden Section which was employed elsewhere to give Salisbury Cathedral its spacious and graceful proportions.]

Symbolism in the Glass

A significant structural advantage of the Gothic cathedral design (as in Salisbury) was the opportunity for installing large windows of stained glass and, along the internal aisles, enabling worshippers to read the story the window told.

In an age when most of the congregation was illiterate this enabled young and old to become familiar with personalities and events from the Bible even though few manuscripts existed, few could read them and even fewer had access.

To assist the wider community religious personalities were given symbols to permit recognition. Symbolism could take the form of objects (e.g. the means used to kill a martyr) or in their

colouring.

Jesus is often found symbolised by the Cross, as a Lamb or as the Good Shepherd. The Holy Spirit can be found symbolised as a Dove or a Flame. The Tree of Jesse in the south Nave aisle symbolises the lineage of Christ from Jesse through David and Mary; the 'Blue Window' in the east symbolises the power of Christian Faith in succouring a 'Prisoner of Conscience'; the north window in the Morning chapel symbolises 'Jerusalem' and the Heavenly host.

Each colour had a special significance for the mediaeval artist. Qualities were symbolised as follows (in an alphabetical order):

Black	Death
Blue	BV Mary or Heavenly love
Brown	Spiritual death
Grey	Humility
Green	Charity or Life after death
Purple	God the Father or Royalty
Red	Love or Hate or Martyrdom
Violet	Truth or Love or Passion
White/Gold	Innocence or Honesty
Yellow	Treason or Jealousy or Deceit

Symbolism in Vestments

Colour was used from the earliest days as a symbol to communicate to a mainly illiterate congregation the significant periods of the Church Year.

In the early Western Catholic tradition the altar frontal and the vestments of the Priest would be changed in sequence from one Church season to the next – white, red, green, purple and black. In the Anglican church White often symbolised the period after Christmas, Red depicted Holy Week or a Saint's day, Violet symbolised both Advent and Lent. Local customs might alter these precise colours but the significance of changes in the Church Calendar remained.

Use of Symbols to represent Masonic Values

The Operative Masons

Although the precise numbers employed building Salisbury Cathedral are unknown the work force for Westminster Abbey, of similar size and date (mid-1250s) to Salisbury, is very well recorded. Numbers of course varied with the weather through the year but at their peak the following tradesmen could be present: 78 quarrying masons ('stone-cutters'), 49 monumental ('freestone or free') masons, 33 building construction ('cementarius') masons, 33 carpenters, 16 sanders, 20 blacksmiths, 15 glass makers, 6 roofers, and 220 labourers supporting all other trades. The total work force actually on site might average between 100 in December and 400 in June.

The 80 or so skilled masons presented special problems of management. Almost entirely they were illiterate and, arriving on site seeking employment, would possess no written reference as to

competence or to moral worth. The Master Mason who had apprenticed them had the duty of equipping them with appropriate verbal credentials, achieved over a long apprenticeship and through a lodge of instruction into a Masons' 'secret' mathematical skills. They were tested by a series of signs and tokens (unknown to an unskilled stone worker) and a lengthy catechism (often 60 and more questions) in which both mason and prospective employer needed to be word perfect.

The catechism embraced both hints of moral grounding and of technical knowledge. The following examples are taken from the (very typical) Halliwell MS (1724):

Q. How many lights? A. Three: a light east, south and west.

Q. What do they represent? A. Father, Son and Holy Ghost

Q. How many points pertain to a Mason? A. Three: Fraternity, Fidelity and Tacity.

Q. What do they represent? A. Brotherly love, Relief and Truth.

Q. Whence is an arch derived? A. From orders of architecture.

Q. How many Orders? A. Five: Tuscan, Delphic, Ionic, Corinthian and Composite.

Q. To what do they answer? A. To the Base, Perpendicular, Diameter, Circumference and Square.

The many symbols associated with masonry and their moral or technical meaning took on an increased level of significance with an itinerant, illiterate but highly skilled workforce. This aspect was seized on in the evolution of Speculative Freemasonry to best suit a global audience.

Speculative Freemasonry

Throughout the C17 gentlemen of leisure joined operative masonic lodges to seek the source of their constructional skills. In an age (C13) when domestic buildings were primitive, modest and impermanent, the creation of a vast building like Salisbury cathedral reaching 400 feet into the sky and with vaultings 40 feet across had been a Seventh Wonder. How had it been it possible? What had been the builders' secrets?

By the mid-C17, following the accession of Charles II, in a thirst for greater scientific knowledge of the world around them the Royal Society had been formed to draw together the enquiring minds of the Enlightenment, embracing early steps in the scientific method, alchemy, natural philosophy, astronomy, biology et al. Some of eh great names demonstrate (e.g. Sir Isaac Newton) following the question of how the universal worked posed the next question of what then was its meaning and purpose – and what moral guidelines should Man follow?

Of the first twenty leaders of Speculative Freemasonry twelve had been members of this Royal Society and of these three were 'Men of the Cloth': the Revered James Anderson (Presbyterian), the Rev'd Theophilus Desagulier (Anglican) and the Chevalier Charles Ramsay (R.C.). Drawing on

the roots of operative masonry they constructed three morality plays, based on a Candidate's firm belief in a Divine Creator, to offer guidelines both to create and to live by his own moral framework.

The C18 audience was no longer illiterate. It was intelligent and articulate. Symbols were no longer required as substitutes for the written word. Their function was now that of stimulating a thoughtful man to explore and develop his own ideas, to discover his own inner self and then live a life true to those values.

Speculative Symbols

The Speculative literature abounds in symbols for personal and constructive reflection. A few of the more basic are listed (in an alphabetic order):

The 24 inch Gauge or Ruler - a reminder that the 24 hours of each day should be devoted to worship, to due labour and to care of one's family and neighbours

Chisel – importance of education

Common Gavel - the force of conscience

Level – equality

Plumb Rule – justice

Square – a moral basis to life

Three Pillars – wisdom, strength to overcome difficulty, beauty to adorn inner man

Conclusion

It is tempting to conclude that 'symbolism' has indeed provided a language which, over the centuries has helped the illiterate as well as the educated to understand both the supportive function of the buildings within they worshipped their spiritual nature as well as the morality of their life together in a mutually dependent society.

They stimulated a thoughtful man to explore and develop his own ideas, to discover his own inner self and then live a life true to those very values.