

**Oration by the Provincial Grand Chaplain at St Laurence Lodge No 5511
on the 26th May 2012**

I congratulate you my brother on becoming a member of our wonderful organisation. Much of what has happened today will not sink in for several days, indeed it may not become clear until you witness somebody else being initiated. An address such as this is very rare at an initiation but today it has been requested for you and indeed the members of this Lodge and their visitors. Now if you cast your mind back a few minutes to the charge after Initiation you may well recall that you were informed that as part of your obedience you must refrain from every topic of religious or political discussion whilst in the presence of your brother Masons.

One of the most admirable features of Freemasonry as practised in this country is the fact that it not only permits, but actively encourages, those who profess different religious beliefs to enter its ranks, true it was not always so, for until the 1830's, or thereabouts we were an exclusively Christian order, but our own tenets led us to be open to all who profess a belief in a Supreme Being.

Indeed Masonry provides one of the few instances in today's world where those of very varied spiritual backgrounds can meet and share in a common task. When Jews, Muslims, Parsees and Christians come together willingly in a lodge in Israel it is, and ought to be, a cause for real rejoicing. Now when your blindfold was removed you beheld the Volume of the Sacred Law and doubtless recognised that it was open on pages of what we would call The Old Testament. Indeed you will have realised that the Volume of the Sacred Law is none other than the Bible and is to be placed on the Master's pedestal or close to it in all Lodges under our constitution. Had you have been of a different faith, then your holy book would have been placed beside the Volume of the Sacred Law for you to place your hand on, it would not replace it or be placed upon it.

The basis on which such gatherings can take place is due, of course, to this very long-standing agreement not to discuss any point of theological or political concern.

Such an agreed restraint meant that when British Freemasonry spread from being simply a practice in Europe to being a feature of Empire, those from an increasing range of beliefs could seek and enjoy membership. The writings of the masonic author, Rudyard Kipling, clearly illustrate this part of the story. In the countries of the Middle and Far East such a development was both sensible and necessary. When time permits I would recommend that you seek out and read a copy of Kipling's poem 'The stationmaster'.

Now that such an agreed form of behaviour is both followed and understood it is perhaps as well that we should understand how the Craft came to adopt this helpful way of conducting their affairs. For masons, its origins go back to the early days of the Free and Accepted Craft.

In medieval times all working stonemasons were born into a society which accepted one form of Christian belief. In such a situation it was obvious that there was not likely to be any dissension in religious matters but there could be, and was, a visible and constant involvement of these craftsmen with the local church institution that taught and upheld that faith.

Indeed, as far as these stonemasons were concerned the connection was not just that they worshipped in these church buildings. The fact is that they were responsible for having built the places in which the Faith was taught. Christianity was not merely a matter expecting their support; it was the very source of their livelihood. Their common acceptance of belief was as natural as the very air they breathed.

Even when the Church's long-standing beliefs and customs were partly altered in England and Scotland by what we call the Reformation, the stonemasons' guilds and the lodges linked to them were not at first affected. Indeed, one of the most notable features of these masonic bodies was a continuing tie with the medieval past. Here are still found the patron saints, the Virgin Mary and the two saints John. Here was a link with the Mystery Plays and services in the parish church. Here were banners, prayers and an annual feast. The masons, specially having this unique attachment to their court, the lodge, not only valued but kept so many reminders of the past.

With the arrival of the next century the comparative calm began to be broken. The Gunpowder Plot was a sign of deep disagreement and frustration. On the continent the outbreak of the Thirty Years War was a direct encounter of Catholic and Protestant powers in which King James I's daughter was closely involved. German historians now often regard this conflict as a more horrendous event than even the two World Wars. Meanwhile, back in England, we were to suffer a civil war that brought even greater political and religious division.

Is it any wonder that undergoing these events and long remembering them, the members of a developing Freemasonry and their colleagues in the Royal Society, should adopt the rules which we still follow; discussion of theological and political matters are unwelcome topics for our meetings.

What does this say about the whole matter of sharing spiritual information? If, as is now increasingly the case, I find myself sitting alongside those of another faith such as a Sikh or a Mormon, is it utterly forbidden for us to share with each other facts about what we do and why we do it? Certainly I have had this point put to me on several occasions and therefore I have had to think about what response I should give.

If we consider the words in our Grand Lodge's 'Aims and Relationships'. We are there required to avoid discussing or advancing 'views on theological and political questions'. This is clear and unmistakable. Not to keep this direction will soon cause discord among the Brethren. But if my brother mason is absent because it is Ramadan or he is keeping Yom Kippur is it also wrong to ask him to explain why those occasions are so important for him? Ignorance can only breed ignorance and in some cases leads to fear and resentment which in turn may lead perhaps to open hostility.

A Sikh may know why I wear a cross but am I forbidden to ask him why he wears a pagri or turban? Surely, as long as what is shared is not a matter for debate or controversy then we know how far this sharing may be allowed. Indeed, as with a better understanding of the ceremonies we masons share in, to understand, but not question, the practices of others can only improve our fellowship.

The step you have taken this day is but the first of what, if you so desire, can become many. So I hope your horizons will be duly expanded and that you greatly enjoy your time as a member of this Lodge, for in Masonry you should always find the bonds of fraternal affection and that love and harmony that the outside world so desperately needs.