

A Paper delivered in Lodge Dunedin, No.1316.

by BROTHER ROBERT B. REID, Right Worshipful Master, No.1316 Past Master, No.442

The word that I take up this evening is RITUAL. Here is the very basis of Freemasonry. I would not go as far as saying that RITUAL is what Freemasonry is all about, but without RITUAL we would not have Freemasonry as we know it. RITUAL has been described as the be-all and end-all of Freemasonry - it is not and never has been. Yet without RITUAL there is no such thing as Freemasonry. What is RITUAL?

You have all heard the Brother described as a good ritualist; the Brother admonished for not knowing his ritual; the Lodge which attracts visitors by virtue of its ritual work; the Lodge which is characterised by ritual books clandestinely slipped out of pockets, hurriedly glanced at, or secretly propped up for the convenience of the Brother who had not learnt his ritual before coming to the meeting. What is RITUAL?

For most people RITUAL is something they can recognise happening but cannot really explain. It is a word they use but only use in the vaguest sense. It is not confined to Freemasonry. It is part of all human experience. Indeed such a statement has to be amplified lest it is too lightly dismissed. Ritual is part of all human experience. It is probably an essential part of all human experience. Man cannot live without ritual - not just Masonic man, not even just modern man - but man at all times in history, and in all societies from the most primitive to the most modern, has needed and practised rituals. What is RITUAL?

RITUAL is the practising of RITES. That is a smug and self-satisfying definition. It is also most unhelpful. RITUAL, if we can simplify it, is the performing of certain acts in order to demonstrate some mystery. As a definition that again is no doubt very accurate, but it does not tell us what RITUAL really means. Let us rather approach the definition by examples. There are elementary rituals in social living. When we see a friend, we wave - not merely to exercise our muscles, but as an indication of friendship. When we greet a lady, we doff our hat - or at least we did when we wore hats and in the days when there were ladies. Presumably, we did not doff our hat to show off our waves or the sheen on our bald pate. The act of raising the hat conveyed our notions that somehow ladies were beings of another kind from us, who merited some show of respect. What we could only feel without expressing in words, we expressed in action. Similarly the salute exchanged between warriors shows a mutual regard and admiration for each other's skills and attributes - but you try explaining this to old soldiers and stand back. These then are three simple rites. Actions of a particular kind each conveying a deeper meaning.

Let us move on to deeper rituals. These rituals referred to are those practised between man and man and meaningful to each. There are other more significant rituals which indicate relationships not between man and man but between man and God. Those of you who are members of a Presbyterian church know that the service begins with the Beadle carrying in the Bible. This is the last remnant of ritual. The Bible is needed for the service. It could be brought into Church at any time during the week or left at the lectern from Sunday to Sunday. Instead it is brought in a dignified manner each time the service is about to commence. The simple physical act is charged with meaning. The act tells us that the service is concerned with proclaiming the Gospel as contained in the Scriptures. Because the Beadle is aware of the enormity of the message, he carries the Book with dignity and solemnity. The act of Communion likewise is a sharing of bread and wine, a simple act indeed. Yet it is treated with solemnity. It is carried out according to certain prescribed rules which in themselves have no sanction other than what those sharing in the rite give them. In the Roman Church the mere act of raising the bread or the cup of wine are charged with meaning and significance - the full force of sharing in such a Communion is not derived only from the acting out of a sequence but from how the sequence is acted out.

Ritual is weakened when the manner in which it is practised is divorced from the reason for its being practised. When the old soldier throws a salute and it is acknowledged in an offhand manner by a subaltern are they always seeing their actions as an exchange of compliments between warriors? The salute soon loses significance.

The ritual is weakened. When the Beadle thinks what a splendid figure he makes as he enters the church carrying the Bible has he not undermined the significance of the entry? The ritual is weakened. When the priest holds up the bread before the congregation a bell rings to draw attention to the act. But what happens when the act and not its meaning becomes the thing? We all know the phrase 'hocus-pocus'. When anything is trivial or magical in a childish sense it is dismissed as so much 'hocus-pocus'. Likewise no children's party appears to be complete without a magician who will say 'abracadabra'. Without 'abracadabra' the spells will not work and the children will not be mystified. But how many people know that 'hocus-pocus' derives from the action of the priest elevating the host, or the bread, before the people. He accompanied it with the words, 'Hoc est corpus,' Latin for 'This is my body.' When the meaning of the action was lost in the action itself, hocus-pocus was the derisory comment. In an obscure religious sect, long since forgotten, it was the practice to wear badges in the form of an equilateral triangle containing the opening words of their great prayer against the powers of darkness. The words of the prayer were 'abracadabra'; what came after is long forgotten and the significance of it all has been reduced to stage magic.

We meet this evening in a Freemasons' Lodge. We constituted ourselves according to certain

practices accepted by us and inherited by us. We would normally have welcomed a new member among us according to forms practised in this room for over fifty years and introduced into this room by those who had learnt these forms elsewhere and before they came. In these ways we have practised rituals. But then there are numerous bodies of men who meet, who constitute themselves, who welcome new members. In these things we are not unique. In these things other bodies have their rituals. They seek to show by handshakes or applause their friendship one to another. The rituals of most other bodies are human rituals. They belong to the plane of man-to-man relationships. The rituals of Freemasonry have a much deeper significance.

Freemasonry is nothing without man-to-man relationships. We lay stress on friendship. Indeed we push it further and refer to Brotherhood. But the rituals practised in a Masonic Lodge seek to give us an awareness of something more. There is another dimension to our thinking. Freemasonry seeks to illustrate truths which stretch beyond the here and now. The practice of Masonry is not confined within the walls of our Lodge room. Nor is it merely extended to the practice of rituals within any Lodge room or all Lodge rooms. Freemasonry seeks to demonstrate the truths of life itself. It is a man-made organisation and seeks to reveal to all who join those things which cannot be put clearly into words, those truths which underpin society. It realises the inadequacy of words and understanding. The words and actions of a Masonic Degree are both essential. Words require understanding intellectually, actions can often be appreciated more immediately. The philosopher who would hold forth and explain life, what it is about, what it means, and what is man's place in the scheme of things will use words. The Freemason searching after the same truths uses pictures and actions. He tells stories. He uses object lessons.

Two yardsticks can be used to measure the value of any action: will it lead to an improvement in the lot of mankind generally, will it lead to an improvement in the one who performed the act? Supposing we apply these criteria to our Masonry. Does our ritual contribute to the sum of human happiness, will it lead to an improvement in the lot of mankind generally, will it make those who perform it better people? I believe it can do both. It will be better able to do both if we all seek to realise the significance of what we are doing. When we know that everything we do, everything we say, is meaningful, then our ritual will be worthwhile. When we believe that what we are doing is worthwhile, then we will apply ourselves to the practice of our ritual. When we apply ourselves to the ritual, we may find our own experience enriched. It may be then that on Monday at work we will all be the better for having been in the Lodge on Friday evening. If we cannot be better men through joining any organisation, it is, in my mind, not worth joining. If men can look at your actions and praise them saying, "He's a Mason!" then you have succeeded and the Craft has succeeded. What is Ritual? Ritual is the performing of common acts in such a way that they show forth eternal truths and mysteries.