

Altar

By Unknown

A Masonic Lodge is a symbol of the world as it was thought to be in the olden times. Our ancient Brethren had a profound insight when they saw that the world is a Temple, over-hung by a starry canopy at night, lighted by the journeying sun by day, wherein man goes forth to his labor on a checker-board of lights and shadows, joy and sorrows, seeking to reproduce on earth the law and order of heaven. The visible world was but a picture or reflection of the invisible, and at its center stood the Altar of sacrifices, obligation and adoration.

While we hold a view of the world very unlike that held by our Ancient Brethren – knowing it to round, not flat and square – yet their insight is still true. The whole idea was that man, if he is to build either a House of Faith, or an order of society that is to endure, he must initiate the laws and principles of the world in which he lives. That is also our dream and design; the love of it ennobles our lives; it is our labor and worship. To fulfill it we too need wisdom and help from above; and so at the center of the Lodge stands the same Altar – older than all Temples, as old as life itself – a focus of faith and fellowship, at once a symbol and shrine of that unseen element of thought and yearning that all men are aware of and which no one can define.

Upon this earth there is nothing more impressive than the silence of a company of human beings bowed together at an Altar. No thoughtful man but at some time has mused over the meaning of this great adoring habit of our humanity, and the wonder of it deepens the longer he ponders it. The instinct which thus draws men together to prayer is the strange power which has drawn together the stones of Great Cathedrals, where the mystery of God is embodied. So far as we know, man is the only being on our planet that pauses to pray, and the wonder of his worship tells us more about him than any other fact. By some deep necessity of his nature he is a seeker after God, and in moments of sadness or longing, in hours of tragedy or terror, he lays aside his tools and looks out over the far horizon.

The history of the Altar in the life of man is a story more fascinating than any fiction. Whatever else man may have been – cruel, tyrannous or vindictive – the record of his long search for God is enough to prove that he is not wholly base, not altogether an animal. Rites horrible, and often bloody, may have been part of his early ritual, but if the history of past ages had left us nothing but the memory of a race at prayer, it would have left us rich. And so, following the good

custom of the men which were of old, we set up an Altar in the Lodge, lifting up hands in prayer, moved thereto by the ancient need and aspiration of our humanity. Like the men who walked in the grey years ago, our need is for the living God to hallow these our days and years, even to the last ineffable homeward sigh which men call death.

The earliest Altar was a rough, unhewn stone set up, like the stone which Jacob set up at Bethel when his dream of a ladder on which angels were ascending and descending, turned his lonely bed into a house of God and a gate of Heaven. Later, as faith became more refined and the idea of sacrifice grew in meaning, the Altar was built of hewn stone – cubical in form – cut, carved and often beautifully wrought, on which men lavished jewels and priceless gifts, deeming nothing too costly to adorn the place of prayer. Later still, when men erected a Temple dedicated and adorned as the House of God among men, there were two Altars, one of sacrifice, and one of incense. The Altar of sacrifice where slain beasts were offered stood in front of the Temple; the Altar of incense on which burned the fragrance of worship stood within. Behind all was the far withdrawn Holy Place into which only the High Priest might enter.

As far back as we can go the Altar was the center of human society, and an object of peculiar sanctity by virtue of that law of association by which places and things are consecrated. It was a place of refuge for the hunted or the tormented – criminals or slaves – and to drag them away from it by violence was held to be an act of sacrilege, since they were under the protection of God. At the Altar, marriage rites were solemnized, and treaties made or vows taken in its presence were more Holy and binding than if made elsewhere, because, there man invoked God as witness. In all the religions of antiquity, and especially among peoples who worshiped the light, it was the usage of both Priests and people to pass around the Altar following the course of the sun – from the East, by way of the South, to the West – singing hymns of praise as a part of their worship. Their ritual was thus an allegorical picture of the truth which underlies all religion – that man must live on earth in harmony with the rhythm and movement of heaven.

From facts and hints such as these we begin to see the meaning of the Altar in Masonry, and the reason for its position in the Lodge. In English Lodges, as in the French and the Scottish Rites, it stands in front of the Master in the East. In the York Rite, so called, it is placed in the center of the Lodge – more properly a little to the East of the center – about which all Masonic activities revolve. It is not simply a necessary piece of furniture, a kind of table intended to support the Holy Bible, the Square and Compasses. Alike by its existence and its situation it identifies Masonry as a religious institution, and yet its uses are not exactly the same as the offices of an Altar in a Cathedral or a Shrine. Here is a fact often overlooked, and we ought to get it clearly in our minds.

The position of the Altar in the Lodge is not accidental, but is profoundly significant. For, while Masonry is not a religion, it is religious in its faith and basic principles, no less than in its spirit and purpose. And yet it is not a Church. Nor does it attempt to do what the Church is trying to do. If it were a Church its Altar would be in the East and its Ritual would be altered

accordingly. That is to say, Masonry is not a religion, much less a sect, but a worship in which all men can unite because it does not undertake to explain, or dogmatically to settle in detail, those issues by which men are divided. Beyond the Primary, fundamental facts of faith it does not go. With the philosophy of those facts, and the differences and disputes growing out of them, it has not to do. In short, the position of the Altar in the Lodge is a symbol of what Masonry believes the Altar should be in actual life, a center of division, as is now so often the case. It does not seek fraternity of spirit, leaving each one free to fashion his own philosophy of ultimate truth. As we may read in the Constitutions of 1723:

"A Mason is obliged, by his Tenure, to obey the moral Law; and if he rightly understands the Art, he will never be a stupid Atheist, not an irreligious Libertine. But though in ancient Times Masons were charged in every Country to be of the Religion of the Country or Nation, whatever it was, yet 'tis now thought more expedient only to oblige them to that Religion in which all Men agree, leaving their particular Opinions to themselves; that is, to be good Men and True, or Men of Honor and Honesty, by whatever denominations or Persuasions they may be distinguished; whereby Masonry becomes the Center of Union, and the Means of conciliating true Friendship among Persons that must have remained at a perpetual distance."

Surely those are memorable words, a Magna Charta of friendship and fraternity. Masonry goes hand in hand with religion until religion enters the field of sectarian feud, and there it stops; because Masonry seeks to unite men, not to divide them. Here then, is the meaning of the Masonic Altar and its position in the Lodge. It is first of all, an Altar of Faith – deep, eternal Faith which underlies all creeds and over-arches all sects; Faith in God, in the Moral Law, and in the Life Everlasting. Faith in God is the Cornerstone and the Keystone of Freemasonry. It is the first truth and the last, the truth that makes all other truths true, without which life is a riddle and fraternity a futility. For, apart from God the Father, our dream of the Brotherhood of Man is as vain as all the vain things proclaimed of Solomon – a Fiction having no basis or hope in fact.

At the same time, the Altar of Freemasonry is an Altar of Freedom – not freedom "From" faith, but Freedom Of" faith. Beyond the fact of the reality of God it does not go, allowing every man to think of God according to his experience of life and his vision of truth. It does not define God, much less dogmatically determine how and what men shall think or believe about God. There dispute and division begin. As a matter of fact, Masonry is not speculative at all, but operative, or rather, co-operative. While all its teaching implies the Fatherhood of God, yet its ritual does not actually affirm that truth, still less does it make a test of fellowship. Behind this silence lies a deep and wise reason. Only by the practice of Brotherhood do men realize the Divine Fatherhood. As a true-hearted poet has written:

"No man could tell me what my soul might be;
I sought for God, and he has eluded me;
I sought my Brother out, and found all three."

Here one fact more, and the meaning of the Masonic Altar will be plain. Often one enters a great Church, like Westminster Abbey, and finds it empty, or only a few people in the pews here and there, praying or in deep thought. They are sitting quietly, each without reference to others, seeking an opportunity for the soul to be alone, to communicate with mysteries greater than itself, and find healing for the bruising of life. But no one ever goes to a Masonic Altar alone. No one bows before it at all except when the Lodge is open and in the presence of his Brethren. It is an Alter of Fellowship, as it is to teach us that no man can learn the truth for another, and no man can learn it alone. Masonry brings men together in mutual respect, sympathy and good will, that we may learn in love the truth that is hidden by apathy and lost by hate. For the rest, let us never forget – what has been so often and so sadly forgotten – that the most sacred Altar on earth is the soul of man – your soul and mine; and that the Temple and its ritual are not ends in themselves, but a beautiful means to the end that every human heart may be a sanctuary of faith, a shrine of love, and Altar of purity, pity, and unconquerable hope.

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