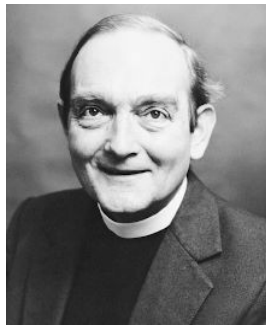


Freemasonry and Religion United in Diversity

This article is taken from an
Address to the Public School
Lodges Council's Festival given
recently by The Venerable
Dr Mark Dalby



An article published in

Masonic Quarterly,
the official Magazine
of the United Grand Lodge of England

Issue No. 16, January, 2006

Ecclesiastes is not the best-known book in the Bible, but I was introduced to it at a very early age. At the end of term service at my prep school, the reading was invariably from Ecclesiastes, Chapter 12.

There is a marvellous poetic description of old age in that chapter, and at eight, ten or 12 years of age we understood nothing of that, but then the author comes down to earth. He writes: 'Of the making many books there is no end; and much study is a weariness of the flesh'. That we could understand. Different as we were – all children are – in this we agreed 100%. Here in our diversity we were united.

Psalm 133.3 states: 'Behold, how good and joyful a thing it is, for brethren to dwell together in unity'.

Just as Lodges are different, so, too, are we as individuals. One Mason appreciates primarily the simple gifts of friendship and comradeship, another the dignified ceremonial and the moral and ethical lessons he learns in Lodge.

There is in Masonry a wonderful diversity, and we all have our own particular perceptions of it. But there is also a deep underlying unity. For all our diversity, we do indeed dwell together in unity, and at the heart of our unity are our three Grand Principles: Brotherly Love, Relief and Truth.

We hear a great deal these days about the plight of the so-called sink estates in some of our inner cities – and that plight is real enough. But suburbia, too, has its problems. Man is a social animal. He was made to relate – to care and to cry, to love and to laugh – but in so many areas community has collapsed.

You can live in the same house for years, and you probably know the people next door, but you do not necessarily know the people next door but one and you certainly do not know the people next door but two. There is so little nowadays to bring people together.

But Masonry does bring people together – people of different backgrounds, jobs, cultures and faiths. My own Masonic roots are in East Lancashire. In Manchester, where the Jewish community holds an honoured place, it was Masonry and Masonry alone which introduced me, a Christian minister, to members of that community.

Masonry lifts us out of our narrow ruts. It helps us to dwell together in unity – and that means not just the absence of conflict – but the deep fellowship we enjoy when we relate positively and harmoniously to one another.

The cement with which Masonry binds us together is that of our first Grand Principle – Brotherly Love. But love is one of the most ambiguous words in the English language. It can refer equally to the deepest self-sacrifice or to the sloppiest sentimentality. But in Masonry, love is always practical.

The second Grand Principle on which our Order is founded is Relief. We seek to care for one another and for our dependants, and to offer relief in times of need.

Although, when we toast our Masonic charities, we often add the phrase: 'May we never need them', as none of us can know the future. It is a sobering thought that our first Grand Master was himself a recipient of the charities in his old age.

Masonic charities have brought relief to many thousands of brethren and their dependants, but if charity begins at home, it certainly does not end there. Masonry has extended its charity far beyond itself, and there must be very few worthy humanitarian causes which it has not helped in one way or another.

'Blessed is he that considereth the poor and needy', says the psalmist. The giving of alms has always been regarded as a fundamental religious duty, and for us relief is a fundamental expression of brotherly love.

Our third Grand Principle is Truth. The manner in which we communicate that truth is peculiar to Masonry – a series of ritual dramas based partly on ancient mythology and partly on the customs and tools of the old operative Masons.

The truth itself is not peculiar to Masonry – civil and moral duty, dependence on others, fidelity, natural equality, the rewards of labour and the inevitability of death. But we see these things 'under God' as it were, just as we see the common brotherhood of man resting ultimately on the common fatherhood of God.

In England we recognise as authentic only that Masonry which is based on belief and trust in a Supreme Being. But the fact that we believe in God, and that we offer prayer in our Lodges, does not mean that Masonry is a religion or a substitute for religion. Many of us in our own personal faiths would want to say much more about God than Masonry itself says, and that is quite right, and Masonry does not in any way discourage us here.

In the earlier days of Masonry, belief in God was well-nigh universal and religious faith could almost be taken for granted. Ours is a more secular age, but perversely (and I find it very perverse), Masonry is attacked nowadays not so much by unbelievers, as by those believers who have adopted a sort of 'back-to-the-wall' or siege mentality and who have become more and more exclusive.

Time was – and not so long ago – when most bishops were members of the Craft, and often high officers, but that time has passed. Many senior clerics, even in the Church of England and other mainstream churches, seem very suspicious of Masonry, if not downright hostile to it.

But we have nothing to hide, and I am sure our increasing openness will help to convince people of this. Brotherly Love, Relief and Truth – the Grand Principles are sound. Where we fall short – as we have done and still do at times – the fault is not with our principles but with ourselves.

So let us dedicate ourselves anew to these principles, that Masonry may continue to flourish, and that we may make our daily advancement in it.

The Venerable Dr Mark Dalby is Archdeacon Emeritus of Rochdale