

A New Way of Thinking A Masonic Spirituality

by Reverend Sir Knight William Peake

I am a Christian. That statement is open to vast interpretation. My liberal friends understand Christianity to be an action oriented faith where wrongs are made right and injustices corrected. Their spirituality is full of feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and caring for widows and orphans. It has jokingly been said that their aim is to "comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable." Liberals tend to look askance at what my conservative friends call a simple faith. Conservative Christians study the Bible and specifically the Gospels. They have put the words of Jesus in red in many Bibles. They spend much time with apologetics, a defense of the faith that invites men and women, boys and girls to make a personal commitment to the gospel by inviting Jesus to be their Lord and Savior. I have tried in my 56 years both emphases at different times in my spiritual pilgrimage. I've learned much from both, and yet each emphasis, alone, has left me wanting. Like most dualisms, the liberal/conservative battles in the Christian faith demand our all. Their competing and unsatisfying demands lead me to look at alternatives.

Even nature, the first revelation of the Divine, reveals the darkness of the pre-dawn hours gradually becoming bright before fading again into darkness. Each moment is different from that which preceded it and also that which will follow it. These minute gradations which occur are so subtle and gradual that our busy paced lives rarely notice them. The continuum however reveals a myriad of intensities between dawn and dusk. This awareness has led me to recognize the reality of the many grays between darkness and light. I've even heard it said that you can never step into the same stream twice; the moving water makes each step a different experience from the one you've just taken; the water is different, the pebbles under foot are different, and even I am a different person from one step to the next!

This article is my attempt to find an alternative to the restrictive dualism of both my faith and my experience. Christianity, for me, should afford the opportunity to grow as I age. It should not bind me with the shackles of either yesterday's or tomorrow's experience and/or faith. Even St. Paul urges us to "be transformed by the renewal of your mind." I don't claim either orthodoxy or heterodoxy in what follows. I am simply thinking out loud with the hope and prayer that my wandering will be progressive and ultimately helpful. My goal is not to convert but to encourage new ideas which in my estimation is the 'renewing of our minds,' and if the scripture be true, this must be transformative.

In addition to the discipline of my personal faith, I am a Freemason. It was thirty-three years ago when I knelt at the altar in a small town lodge in southern Iowa and took my obligations. I heard words that intrigued me then and linger with me now. I was told that "Freemasonry is a progressive science..." It is not static. Its goal is not solely to defend the time tested patterns of what we already know but to put our certainties to the test.

Often our certainties stand. Occasionally the unexpected occurs. New insights are born, and the progressive science of Freemasonry reveals the nature of an exciting and vibrant life.

Much has been written about how faith/religion and Masonry interact. Some would say the two are like oil and vinegar - they do not mix. This has not been my experience. In fact I have found my Masonic experience to truly compliment my religious one. Our history, both secular and sacred, has been positively impacted by men of faith who have been Masonic brothers and craftsmen. If Masonry can be a progressive science, why not the Church, why not my own faith and practice?

My Christian experience has been a pilgrimage. It truly is a journey to "that house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens." 2 Most people focus on the destination, and this has been a major emphasis of much Christian theology. Frankly, heaven has been so much the focus of Christianity that it could be argued that this temporal life has gone to hell! It was because of a "heavenly" focus that Karl Marx labeled religion as "the opiate of the people." 3 We've heard people speak of someone "being so heavenly minded that he's no earthly good." It's true; heaven can be a diversion from the reality that true faith should transform the temporal. Even in my own religious tradition, unspeakable evils, most recently the institutionalized racism of apartheid in South Africa, was legitimized with a call to Scripture and Christian theology! 4 Such travesties abound when faith becomes the defender of the status quo instead of the transformative force that renews human minds and societies. Heaven, as our spiritual destination, must not be forgotten. However, heaven is but one reality among many in a vibrant Christian faith. Perhaps it is the journey itself that should occupy our attention, the joys and sorrows that fill our everyday lives. Such an activist faith is controversial. In fact our theological ancestors have even denigrated one book of the Bible for emphasizing an active faith that seeks to make a difference in the present world. The Epistle of James goes so far as to proclaim "...show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith." 5 Detractors of an active faith, even the venerable Dr. Martin Luther, called the Epistle of James a "straw epistle" 6 and relegated it to a lesser place in the canon. I reject such a focus in theology and personal piety in favor of a progressive faith and a progressive science. Faith in what can be should transform the reality that is.

In an effort to further this conviction, I believe that our subjective experience and the objective reality of holy writ must be seen with new eyes. Perhaps what we have long seen and held to be one thing indeed points us in the direction of new ways of thinking and living. I hope you will find the following presentation informative.

No other segment of Jesus' teaching ministry has received more focus than his "Sermon on the Mount." It can be found in Matthew's Gospel in chapters 5-7. One gem, often quoted, is found in Matthew 7:7-11:

"Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a

snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!"

I've read this text many times and children in Sunday Schools often commit it to memory. The trinity of 'ask...search (seek)...knock' has been shared with us as to underscore our responsibility to pursue the riches of God. This should come as no surprise to any of us. In the past, I have interpreted the three challenges as being synonymous. Repetition added focus. Recently I have begun to look at this verse with new eyes. Is it possible that asking, searching and knocking are not synonyms? Could they, in fact, be three distinctive actions and activities of the faithful seeker of wisdom and truth? Might there be a progression of activity here in the diversity of these three individual acts? For too many men and women of faith, our requests go unsatisfied, our quests go unrewarded, and our knocking only yields scraped knuckles. In fatalistic disappointment, we preserve orthodoxy by claiming that our lack is somehow the will of God. Not only is this outcome personally unsatisfying, I believe it to be theologically unsound, particularly for men interested in a progressive science and a progressive faith.

Asking is not searching. Neither is searching the same as knocking. As long as these three distinct activities are deemed synonymous, we will not receive, nor will we find or have new doors opened to us. There may even be in these three distinct activities a parallel to the three degrees in our symbolic lodges, the three principal officers of the lodge, and even the three persons of the Godhead.

"ASK AND YOU SHALL RECEIVE"

Several years ago I was delivering Holy Communion to the shut-ins of my congregation. Mine is an older church with several shut-ins. It has been my practice to bring the sacrament to every shut-in requesting this ministry. I had finished my rounds and was cleaning my communion set in the church kitchen when the phone rang. A very irate parishioner lambasted me for not bringing her the sacrament when I was at her apartment building. I asked if she would like me to bring it to her right away. "YES," she replied and slammed the receiver with more passion than any shut-in I know could muster! I made the visit, administered the sacrament, and visited with the indignant lady. I shared the communion policy and that I did not want any of our parishioners to be without the sustenance of the sacrament. The lady loved her Bible, so I asked if I could read a passage. She handed me her well worn copy, and I found the text that read: "Ye have not because ye ask not, or ye ask amiss." 7 The lady began to cry. She realized her pastor could not knock on the door of every shut-in, but that if she requested this grace, it would be given. We prayed together, and that lady became an ardent supporter of my ministry until the day I laid her to rest.

The first step for anyone who realizes how little they know is to ask questions. Christ knew this and promised us that if we dared to ask questions, there would be answers. I've learned that they may not always be the answers I desire, but answers do come and point out the way to the future. The act of asking questions has a way of involving us in the process of discovery. Too often people assume that their needs and desires are known. This is especially true in small towns, small lodges, and churches. Ours is often called an

entitlement society. We assume that with a minimum of effort doors should open, needs should be met, and lives fulfilled. The questions we ask reveal desire. For this reason men have been introduced to the mysteries of Masonry only when they seek out those mysteries through a petition. If it is true that our questions reveal our desires, our lack of questions betrays a hesitation to become involved. Can there be satisfaction without involvement or investment of our person? Perhaps our churches and our lodges have become empty of satisfaction because we bring assumptions without involvement and have desires without investment. The antidote for such sterile realities is the prescription of Christ: "Ask and ye shall receive."

"SEEK AND YOU SHALL FIND"

Answers are factual responses to questions. Sometimes answers satisfy, but often they open a whole new venue of unknowns. There is plenty ahead of the newly initiated Entered Apprentice. He is learning in a way he has not experienced before this event. My own first degree was like an appetizer that gave me a foretaste of what was to follow. I wanted more. In our lodges, we know that the Entered Apprentice is placed in the northeast corner of the lodge. It is a dark place. The new brother has been obligated to secrecy yet without access to any of the mysteries that await him. In order to attain the mysteries he must journey. In days gone by, there was the posting lecture to commit to memory. More than ritual memorization, the time the new brother spent with a seasoned member was precious, and the bond of friendship conveyed much about our fraternity. The hours spent were indeed a journey from darkness to light. They could be frustrating at times, but the bond of brotherhood was growing. The apprentice had a guide upon whom he could depend for answers to his questions and guidance for his journey to "more light in Masonry."

The wife, who asks her husband if he loves her, wants more than a factual response. "Yes" or "no" simply does not satisfy. As this is true in life, so it is true in our spirituality. The assurance of an answer leads to a journey or quest. The Hebrew children who had followed Moses out of Egyptian slavery may have wondered if God would protect them - particularly when Pharaoh's armies pursued them to the edge of the Red Sea. God's answer was given in the miracle of their safe passage to the other side and the devastation of the army washed away by the same waters through which they were saved! Yet this was merely the beginning of a 40 year trek in the desert. That journey was fraught with dangers and difficulties. It was the next generation who would know the blessing of entering the Promised Land. The journey taught the Hebrews much. They could trust that God would not abandon them. They learned to trust that God would provide for their needs.

We have heard it said that 'the journey is more important than the destination.' Journeys and quests have a wonderful way of discovering unexpected realities. They surprise us and add to the very fabric of our being. Journeys however demand movement - physical motion that encounters the unknown. The resulting discoveries may puzzle and even frustrate, yet once experienced, they transform all that follows. Pilgrims become transformed people with a breadth of experience impossible to a sedentary questioner!

"KNOCK AND THE DOOR SHALL BE OPENED TO YOU"

Have you ever asked tough questions then followed through by braving a new journey only to freeze outside the door of your destination? When I was fourteen, my heart skipped a beat at the thought of Donna Salamone. Her family owned a small department store in our blue collar neighborhood about five blocks from my home. I remember walking past the store time after time hoping, wishing, and praying she would come out and notice me. She never did, and today, more than forty years later, she has no idea how I felt. I could not work up the courage to seal the deal, ring the doorbell, and ask Donna to come out and talk to me. She might have told me to get lost; that is the rejection I feared. She might also have come out and become aware of not only how I felt, but more importantly, the person I was.

Journeys and pilgrimages do lead to opportunities as real and as ominous as Donna's door! Each of those opportunities demands action - courageous action. It is the foolishness of a 14 year old, who goes the distance and then fails to take the final step! That foolishness is really fear. The fear of rejection is so strong, so daunting that it can freeze us in our tracks. I wanted to be liked, appreciated, and cherished, and still do! This is not a bad desire. But is it realistic for everyone to like, appreciate, and cherish me? Of course not! I didn't realize until I was in my forty's that I am not responsible for other people's words or actions. I am responsible for my own. I am responsible-I am response-able! As a hospital chaplain and a parish pastor, I often encounter people facing horrific choices where the options are "bad" and "worse." They are caught off guard and find themselves frozen in fear. "I'm damned if I do and damned if I don't, pastor!" We know that feeling. I can't solve their problem, but as a pastor and a chaplain, I can, with their permission, share their journey. I want them to know they are not alone facing their seemingly impossible decisions. I hope what my presence says to them is "God has not brought you this far to let you fall flat, to face an uncertain future alone." Time and again the scriptures speak of God's presence with us - especially in difficult times. "I will not leave you orphaned" 8 ... "I will not leave you or forsake you" 9 ... "I am with you always!" 10

If we knock, the door will be opened. That doesn't mean we won't ever fail. Thomas Edison once quipped after many unsuccessful attempts to create a storage battery, "I have not failed; I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work!" No, it is not failure that we deplore; it is abandonment. We do not want to be alone, without support. In our lodges and our churches, we have sold our birthright when our focus becomes flawless ritual or liturgy at the expense of brotherhood, companionship, and camaraderie. When we can assure our brothers of our unflinching loyalty to them, we will have caught a glimpse of the Divine. We can abide with one another because the Great Architect of the Universe abides with us. If we knock at the door, he will answer. If we fail to knock, even out of fear that no one may be home, we may indeed rob ourselves of the connection that gives ultimate meaning to our person, our journey, and our lives.

My hope is that this article will reveal that there is a progression in our faith and experience that may go unnoticed or taken for granted. Thinking and believing "outside the box" can transform lodges and churches and lives. We cannot wait for solutions to

land in our laps, like deus ex machina in some medieval morality play. We must pursue our dreams with an activism and a belief that needs can be met, mundane lives can be fulfilled, the sick can be healed, and victims be made victors.

I was once told that there were true and trusted friends who would not only guide and instruct me but even clothe me in the pilgrim's garb I was unaccustomed to wearing. I was told I would proceed on an important journey. When I was hoodwinked and in the dark, a friend whom I later found to be a brother took my arm and led me. When I did not have the wherewithal of the pass, a friend and brother had it for me. When I was called to prayer, I felt a hand upon my shoulder and a voice spoke the prayer I could not speak. When I was unaware of the glories about me, a brother led me up a winding stairway of discovery. And when my integrity was questioned and I suffered the wounds my heart feared, a brother raised me from my loss to the victory that comes as the mystery of our faith and art. But it would not have happened if I did not take the initiative to ask 'of my own free will and accord.' It would not have happened if I didn't follow my guide and fear no danger. It would not have happened if my hand was not guided to give three distinct knocks on the door before me.

It is in the Gospel, it is in the lodge, it is in the church, because it is all in you and me. Someone guided us along the way. Now it's our turn. We dare not assume; there is no future in that choice. We are called to model the mysteries we have encountered, the mysteries we have mastered, and the mysteries that still lay before men of character and faith. "For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened."

End Notes

1 Romans 12:2

2 2 Corinthians 5:1

3 Ascribed to Karl Marx upon reading Hegel's 1844 Philosophy of Right.

4 Christianity and Apartheid: An Introductory Bibliography by Irving Hexham; first published in The Reformed Journal, April, 1980.

5 James 2:18

6 Luther rejected the Epistle of St. James theologically but of necessity retained it in the German Bible, even if as a kind of appendix. The ending of Luther's Preface to his edition of the German Bible, which was omitted in later editions, reads in the German of his time: "Summa, Sanct Johannis Evangel, und seine erste Epistel, Sanct Paulus Epistel, sonderlich die zu den Romern, Galatern, Ephesern, und Sanct Peters erste Epistel. Das sind die Bucher, die der Christum zeigen, und alles lehren, das dir zu wissen noth und selig ist ob du schon kein ander Buch noch Lehre nummer sehest and horist. Darumb ist Sanct Jakobs Epistel ein recht strohern Epistel, gegen sie, denn sie doch kein evangelisch Art an ihr hat" - "for that reason St. James' Epistle is a thoroughly straw epistle, for it has indeed no evangelical merit to it."

7 James 4:3

8 John 14:18

9 Joshua 1:5

10 Matthew 28:20

11 Response to the idea that he had failed after 10,000 experiments to develop a storage battery, as quoted in The World Book Encyclopedia (1993) Vol. E, p. 78; there are many variants on this quote, with the numbers mentioned ranging from 97 to 10,000.

12 (in ancient Greek and Roman drama) a god introduced into a play to resolve the entanglements of the plot.

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