

Percival and Modern Masonic Knighthood

What does it mean to be a Masonic Knight in the Twenty-first Century?

By

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According to the Thirteenth Century story, Percival was one of King Arthur's legendary Knights of the Round Table. After the death in battle of his father, a heroic warrior, Percival's mother took her infant son to the forest where she raised him, ignorant to the ways of men, in order to protect him from the same fate as his father. Her plan was foiled when a group of knights passed by, and Percival was struck by their heroic bearing. Wanting to be a knight himself, the boy left his mother to travel to King Arthur's court. After proving his worthiness as a warrior, he was knighted and invited to join the Knights of the Round Table.

Percival also appeared in stories involving the quest for the Holy Grail. First written about in an earlier twelfth century story, Joseph of Arimathea is said to have received the vessels associated with the Last Supper and crucifixion from an apparition of Jesus. Joseph is said to have sent the first communion cup, called the Holy Grail, and other items associated with the Last Supper and crucifixion with his followers to Great Britain. Percival's quest in these stories was to find that Grail so that a wounded king might drink from it and

be restored to health and power.

In Richard Wagner's retelling of this story in his opera *Parsifal*, the injured king was the ruler of the Grail kingdom which was given the items sent by Joseph of Arimathea for safekeeping. The knights still had the Holy Grail, but the king had lost to a nearby sorcerer the Holy Spear which pierced the side of Jesus. In the process of losing the Holy Spear, the king was injured by it and would not be healed until the spear was recovered. The pure and innocent Percival then happened by. His destiny was to recover the spear, but the knights did not know this and sent the boy away because he did not understand the importance of the Grail. The sorcerer then sent a woman to seduce Percival in order to enlist him in their battle to get the Grail also. However, when the woman kissed Percival, he immediately felt the pain of the king's injury and realized the importance of the Grail and the recovery of the spear. The sorcerer then tried to kill Percival with the spear which Percival caught in midair instead. Percival then set out to take the spear back to the injured king but not before the scorned woman placed a curse on him to wander forever without again finding the injured king or the Holy Grail. Percival did wander aimlessly because of

the curse which was broken only when he had compassion for the woman who cursed him. He then returned to the king and healed him with a touch of the spear to the king's wounds.

This story contains a profound message on what it means to be a Masonic Knight in the Twenty-first Century. Percival does not understand his destiny until evil attempts to seduce him, and ironically he cannot fulfill his destiny until he shows compassion for the evildoer! A parallel can be drawn from the Gospels. Did Jesus understand his destiny at the time of his baptism by John when the dove came down from heaven and God said that this was his Son with whom he was well pleased? Did Jesus first understand his destiny when he was thereafter tempted three times by the evil one while wandering for the next forty days in the wilderness? Of course, Jesus fulfilled his destiny by loving everyone, even those who would put him to death.

Knighthood today is not about play acting. It is in part about preserving a standard of chivalry that was part of the medieval knightly code. But, it is also

about doing good, and the story of Percival hints at how we should do that. We first must realize the good to be done and then do it by our compassion for those who are not so inclined, because it is only by extending compassion and love that we can hope for others to return it. If our creed is "love one another," we can only hope for love when we can unconditionally offer it first, even to those whom others might find undeserving of it.

The quest of Freemasonry is symbolized by geometry, the most powerful symbol we have as Masons. It metaphorically describes the harmony in the universe that is the Supreme Being. As Masons, we are challenged to help preserve that harmony by how we deal with others. As Masonic and Christian Knights, we create harmony by our compassion, by loving one another, even the undeserving, even the evil doer. Love is the key.

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