

**Grand Lodge
Free & Accepted Masons
Of California
Grand Oration 1861**

**Grand Orator
Addison C. Niles**

GRAND MASTER AND BRETHREN OF THE GRAND LODGE

I am mindful of your labors during the last few days, and shall detain you but a brief period in the performance of my allotted duty.

We know that the institution we represent is good. We, who have stood within the veil, have seen so often its unobtrusive charities, have felt so often its kindly, humanizing influences, that we need no statement of premises, no logical deductions, to convince us that Masonry, in its long life, thus far; has dispensed only blessings, and those with liberal hand. We believe that the institution is permanent. We believe this by our faith in the permanency of good, by our faith that the structure that has withstood storms so long—so well—will not fall when the sky is clear and the storms have passed away.

But I cannot find in this individual experience, nor even in the long worthy past of Masonry, nor in any of its qualities most apparent and most frequently adduced, a logical foundation for the faith we have in its abiding permanency. Its antiquity increases the esteem we have for it. Its life commenced at an era unknown—hardly guessed at. Its precepts, emblems, and ceremonies have come down to us from that old time, unchanged and unrecorded, by most miraculous tradition. It teaches brotherly love, relief, and truth today, as it taught, how many hundred years ago we know not—bearing through ages of violence and wrong, the hardy virtues of an age of iron. It is no sham, no work of a modern hand, buried in the earth to gather mould, and labeled with the name of an old Master; but a veritable antique, bearing the undoubted, unquestionable impress of the centuries. For this, we venerate and love it. We "hold it dearer in our heart of hearts, because the good men of so many ages past have confided it to us to cherish and maintain. We look upon it, as the son of a long line of worthy fathers looks upon his ancestral tower, hallowed by legends and memories of men in whose veins his own blood flowed.

But many times in the world's history, great falsehoods have held the faith of earnest men for ages, bearing the banner of Heaven in the front rank of progress, waited upon by civilization as by a handmaid, accompanied by a visible escort 'of angels, anointed by the blood of martyrs, dispensing blessings, and cheered by the prayers of the good. Sometimes the tree of error flourishes long, and many generations find refreshment and repose beneath its shade, before it ripens its " Dead Sea fruit of ashes."

We cannot say that Masonry will live forever, because it has lived so long. Nor do we find in the mere excellence of its precepts any sufficient warrant for our belief in its perpetuity. We know that its morality is pure, unquestionable. Without this, the moral sense of the world would have scouted and put down the imposture long ago. But in this regard there is nothing essentially peculiar in Masonry. Good, wise men, bards and sages, wrote and taught precepts identically the same, before the cornerstone of the Temple was laid. The apostles and prophets of many a creed that has had its day in the world for good or evil, and passed into history, have taught doctrines as pure, a charity as grand and beneficent. We claim no monopoly, no patent, for the virtues we inculcate. We know, that without this excellence, the institution were nothing; and we do not rely upon it as proof conclusive of its endurance.

In the negative qualities of Masonry, rather, than in any of its positive, apparent attributes, may be found the assurance we require. The founders of other systems of morality have not been content to regulate the conduct of their followers; they must control their faith. Not content to shape and guide for the best this life, of which we may know much, they have sought with keener or duller insight, to penetrate the unfathomable mystery of the life beyond, and have linked the intellectual faith they have devised, indissolubly, to the code of morals they have inculcated. Masonry has no creed. It demands nothing from the intellect of its votaries. It appeals only to the universal heart of man. It demands belief in God as a prerequisite to initiation into its mysteries,

as it requires free birth and lawful age, because there can be no perfect manhood worthy of the brotherly love we offer, without belief in a controlling intellect superior to our weak and erring humanity. Beyond this, faith is absolutely free. No brother wears the mantle of his creed across" the portals of the Lodge. It drops from his shoulders when he assumes the lambskin. No matter by what name he may call upon. God elsewhere, no matter through what forms or ceremonies lie may worship Him—in church or synagogue—in mosque or pagoda kneeling, humbly, before a shrine niched in cathedral aisles, or erect and proud beneath the dome of the grander temple not made with hands—within the sacred precincts of the Lodge are neither Jews nor Christians, worshippers of Brahma, nor followers of Mahomet;—only freemen, brethren, standing in the acknowledged presence of the All-Father.

It deals only with this present, mortal existence; never ignoring a future, grander one, inculcating not one precept inconsistent with its fullest development, but leaving its followers free to shape, each by his individual conscience, the hopes and fears that ' wait upon it. More than any other institution of which we know, it recognizes the worth of man, merely as mortal man—the high duties, the privileges, the sorrows of manhood. It is human in its origin and aims. It bears no commission from Heaven for the work it has to do. Good men and true, men uninspired save by the spirit of genuine philanthropy, contrived the scheme for the use and benefit of man.

Their scheme was simple, befitting the simple age in which it had its origin, yet evincing not only a broad benevolence but also a keen perception of the wants and capacity of humanity. They saw man .as he was, with all the inconsistent elements of his nature, " the suffering, the weak, the erring, the wicked, but still the friendly, the loving child of God, our Father." They saw how difficult it was for him to walk alone in the path of honor and rectitude, amidst the many temptations that surrounded him; and devised a plan of brotherhood and mutual aid. They saw how frequently his better impulses were overcome by his worse passions, and taught him to circumscribe his desires, and keep his passions within due bounds. They saw him exposed to manifold dangers continually, from the malice of enemies and from the evil of his own heart, and imposed upon his brethren as a solemn duty, to reach forth a hand and prevent him from falling, to whisper words of counsel in his ear, and -warn him of all approaching danger. They saw how inevitably sorrow, and sickness, and death came to him, and so arranged it that his sorrows should be tightened by sympathy and aid, his passage to the grave smoothed and cheered, his body laid reverently within it. More than this; they saw in every free man born into the world a fit candidate for the. rights and benefits of their broad benevolence, esteeming no man for his worldly wealth or honors, but teaching, in an age of despotism, that perfect equality of which sages only dared to dream.

" Through all disguise, form, place, or name—
Beneath the flaunting robe of sin—
Through poverty and squalid shame,
They looked upon the man within—
On man, as man—retaining yet,—
Howe'er debased, and soiled, and dim—
The crown upon his forehead set—
The immortal gift of God to him."

And these modest virtues, this grand charity, they taught by precepts so simple, by symbols so appropriate, that the humblest intellect could not misapprehend them.

Masonry has lost nothing in the lapse of ages of the severe simplicity that marked its origin. Seated in the hearts of its followers, it leaves the 'intellect untrammelled, to search through nature as it will, to resolve as it may all questions of greater import than our well being here, to mould and fashion at its own pleasure its faith and hope of the hereafter. It ignores logic. It will have nothing to do with ultimate causes. It is always monitorial, never argumentative. It looks the facts of existence full in the face, and deals with them as actual facts, without any impertinent whys or wherefores. Sin and selfishness exist—grim, ungainly, inexorable facts—no matter how or why they came into the world. Tell the truth, act upon the square, admonish, reprove, forgive, and the poison will be neutralized, and the trail of the serpent will be covered. Sorrow, poverty, disease, came to man—his inalienable birthright. No matter what may be the hidden design of Providence in these afflictions, love, relieve, console, and a blessing will follow the recipient and the giver. It leaves other systems to arrange as they please the harmonies of the universe; its ear is, turned

eastward, listening only to the still, sad music of humanity." It never requires its followers to believe any thing, only to do something. It leaves others to find whatever pearls of price maybe hidden in the dust and debris of the dead past; and is content to distribute among men, with a free hand, its own homely treasures, its corn, wine, and oil. Its doctrines were not contrived in cave or cloister—compiled from faded manuscripts, the records of worn-out-thought—but were read and transcribed from the plain printed book of nature, in the free sun-light and air of heaven, by men claiming no higher inspiration than love and good will to man.

These qualities of Masonry that I have endeavored to depict—its genuine philanthropy, its zealous care for the good of man in this present life, and its Constant avoidance of distracting speculations concerning the mysteries of another—determine its proper place among the various systems of benevolence. We do not claim for it the highest rank. A system that claims to adjust the relations of man to his Creator, that puts forth a scheme so comprehensive as to embrace not only life, but immortality, must outrank a system that only concerns itself for the welfare of man in this short present existence. It is a loftier flight—the effort to solve the great problems of creation and birth, the solemn mystery of death, and the world beyond the grave. We bow with reverence before the intellect that has dared to grapple with these mighty themes; and from the small standpoint of this brief life, looking before and after, has set in order the wonderful chaos of mystery that surrounds it. We recognize the utility and beauty of all creeds that teach man to use his fragment of existence here with a view to a complete life hereafter. We freely accord to religion a higher place than Masonry, among the agencies of good to man. We claim for it a lower, broader range, one broad as humanity. We claim for it the highest place among those systems of benevolence devised by man, unaided by a higher power, for the benefit of mortal life alone. It is a pure, simple, efficient plan of good, if not administering to man's loftiest desires, never pandering to his baser passions. It is the table land;—stretching broad and fair beneath the eye of Heaven; glistening with harvests, dotted with roofs; the smoke from countless peaceful fire sides floating over its broad rivers bearing its abundance to the sea; the living, toiling, rejoicing, and sorrowing, upon its surface; the dead, resting quietly within its bosom.

Far below are the marshes and fens, luxuriant with rank and noisome vegetation, the abode of loathsome reptiles, breeding fevers and death; far above, are the glittering mountain peaks,—magnificent, cold, cheerless—the awful Sinai tops, whither the prophets go up to commune with God and receive his law. The inundation that ravages the low lands, spares its harvests; the storm that sweeps the mountain, and loosens the avalanche; passes it over, unharmed.

In the essential humanity of Masonry, in its careful separation from all forms of religious faith, lies the secret of its universality, the logical proof of its perpetuity. These qualities have preserved it for us—will preserve it for those who are to come after us. Creeds die, man lives. Creeds appeal to the intellect of man. Whatever belongs to the intellect must be affected by its inevitable law of growth. The man of the nineteenth century can not receive with absolute, unquestioning faith the belief of one or two thousand years ago. You cannot clothe a giant with the garment of a pigmy. They are but steps in

" The great world's altar stairs

That slope, through darkness, up to God;"

standing fast, while the race mounts over and past them in its onward march. All along the path over which man has traveled since the birth of time, are scattered the ruins of forsaken creeds, dead watch fires, serving now only to mark the spots where the army of civilization once camped for a night.

No fear that brotherly love, relief, and truth, will lose their virtue by the lapse of lime. No hope that the conditions of mortal life will ever be so changed that poverty, sorrow, sickness, death, will not call for sympathy and aid; that passion and prejudice will not need the friendly check, tile kind reproof; that error and sin will not require that generous charity, that " suffereth long and is kind." The intellect can never reach a height so cold and cheerless that the warmth of social fellowship will be unfelt, uncared for; that it will not be a heartfelt pleasure to detect a brother by the subtle instinct of the Craft, where the eye sees only a stranger.

We hope that Masonry will live, because we know its aims are good, and pure, and generous. We know that it will live, because it has never invoked the dangerous aid of intellect, the waxen wings of Icarus, that have borne many a worthy institution to a loftier, only to sink it to

a lower, than its humble place; and because it deals only with those elements of man's nature that can not forsake him while he retains his humanity—that are of the very woof and warp of manhood. Through the long ages that are coming, as in the centuries through which it has come down to us, we see our beloved institution pursuing the even tenor of its humble life—its pure precepts passing from lip to lip of good men and true—its symbols, mute, yet eloquent, teaching their accustomed lessons of charity and good will to man—its worthy deeds unwitnessed—its peaceful triumphs unsung—dropping its manifold blessings, noiselessly, unheralded, as Heaven drops its dew. And who knows, but when He shall make up his record of those works of human hands that have served Him best in time, He will give a higher place than we have claimed for it to an institution that has never sought to part and peer behind the vail which He has seen fit to throw about His providence—that has cared, not so much for the glory of Him, the Creator, as for the good of His humble creature—and Masonry be accepted, not only of man, the brother, but of God, the beneficent Father.