

ORATION
by
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Before the Masonic Fraternities in New Orleans, on the day of St John the Baptist, June 24th 1891.

Most Worshipful Grand Master and Brothers of the Order of Free and Accepted Masons:

The life of St John the Baptist was short and crowded with wonderful developments. Born five years before the Christian era and perishing twenty eight years after its commencement, his whole life was a chapter of sublime poetry. The hills of Palestine are not more attractive than is this rugged character.

First came the supernatural announcement of his birth and the pledge of its fulfillment in the paralysis of his father's power of speech, then the fleeing of his mother Elizabeth, into the comparatively uninhabited portion of Judaea to enable him to escape the slaughter of the young children by Herod. And so "he was in the waste places till the day of his showing unto Israel." Then came his simple, abstemious manner of living, with his camel's hair raiment and his leathern girdle, and his meat of locust and wild honey. Then came his performance of his high mission, his complete surrender of himself to his fore-ordained work of preparing the way of the Lord- his voice in the wilderness, addressed not to the Jews alone, but to mankind universally- his impassioned utterance that God's justice was high at hand, exalting every valley and making every mountain and hill low, and assuring that though the grass withered and the flower faded, the promise of our God should stand forever. Then came his inspired recognition of our Divine Lord and Saviour, "the Lamb of God which taketh away the sins of the world." His character as the founder of "the kingdom in the hearts of men" was attested by no diadem, nor sceptre, nor overawing transfiguration, but by that type

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which foreshadowed the peace and love of his undecaying, unsucceeded, endless reign- the Spirit like a dove descending from the miraculously opened heaven and abiding upon him. Then came the cruel decapitation within the prison walls, and upon this exalted life, replete with an interest which subdues and fascinates, was set the awful and imperishable seal of martyrdom.

What a contrast is there- between this St John and the other - each having his peculiar, wonderous traits - each leaving his deathless influence upon the human race. This John was sturdy and stern and severe, unerring in his sympathies, fearless in his denunciations, uncompromising in his convictions, with a faith so immovably steadfast that it seems in history to be almost the same quality; the other John was so gentle and loving and spiritually refined and holy that he is remembered by that transcendent title handed down to us by himself, but undoubtedly conferred by the Saviour, "the beloved disciple." The one has the grandeur of nature, when the tempest shakes and force subjugates; the other has a winning, quickening influence, causing the world's most sacred feelings to germinate and grow, as does the noiseless falling of the sun's rays, the plants and the flowers. The one was a rough iconoclast; the other was the type and example of the harmony and unutterable loveableness of character capable of being developed and attained in the soul of mortal man.

St John the Baptist was distinctly a harbinger. His life seemed concentrated in his discerning prophetic cry. He came from the wilderness, delivered his utterance and passed away from among men. Of the felicities of home and the love of family and the delights of friends he had none, for in his affections, as well as in his

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purpose, he lived in the future. He touched the present only that, being a worker upon it - a preparer - he could accomplish his destiny only by contact with it through his labors and his voice.

How many noble men have we seen who, if we limit the word by what is highest and best in the round of our little lives, were harbingers? Who perchance called by Providence in youth to days and nights of self-denial and self-devotion for parents, and home, straightened by the narrow ways of poverty, and by and by emerging from this array of seeming, hedgings in and embarrassments, and just entering upon what seemed to be a large fruition of public and favor and personal enjoyment, and reaching out toward and trying to usher in among men what is high and good and pure in the unattained future - have been called to fold their hands and close their eyes and leave the theatre of, as it were, a just commencing existence. And we say this is hard. But is it hard? Who shall say that in the matter of ennobling enjoyment, he who, with his affinities for goodness unchecked has only reveled in the morning with its dew of freshness and gladness and has passed on, has not fared better than he who has enjoyed the burden, some glories of the noonday, or who has, no matter with what serene thoughts companioned, experienced the delights of the softly but surely gathering shadows of the evening?

Not only was there the voice in the wilderness, but there was a throng which went out into the wilderness to hear that voice. Not only was there this precursor of incarnate Divinity - this usher in of the Light - but there was also a receptivity in the hearts of the people, a willingness to hear the tidings and to see the Light.

The Romans held Judea. Under Tiberius they had taken Jerusalem and when Tacitus gives the description of the captive city, he says

the temple was destitute of any effigies, of any image deity. "For," says the heathen historian," the Jews believe that God is a spirit invisible and eternal." While, therefore, the Hebrews, through the administration of Moses, through the teachings of their long line of prophets, through their rites and ceremonies, had been educated up to a capacity to understand much of spiritual truth, they were yet ignorant of the immortality of the soul, and of that spiritual kingdom which should be established in the hearts of men whose supremacy was to be found in the charity and self immolation and the tenderness of beatitudes pronounced from the Mount of Olives.

Yet the same Hebrews, when the sympathetic soul of John the Baptist felt within itself the nearness of the God in Christ, and lifted up his voice of Apocalyptic warning and invitation, responded to this advance of thought and feeling, and in throngs received John's baptism of water, which was the symbol as well of inward regeneration as of the baptism of the Holy Ghost and of fire of Him that was to come.

This fervent and outspoken preaching to an untoward people, and their ready reception of it, illustrates two great facts or truths which underlie all human experience. The one is that there is in all men, no matter how circumstanced and impeded, no matter how dwarfed may be their conceptions by inaction, nor how hardened their sensibilities by indulged error and sin - that there is in all men a yearning for unexperienced good, a n outreaching toward what is high, and reverent, and holy. The other and correlative truth is, that if men will reach out toward the truth they will find it within their grasp. If they "feel after God they will haply find Him very near to them."

These two facts, which may be denominated the impulse of man toward and for unrealized good and the certainty of its attainment, are illustrated in every chapter of human history. They prompt the creation and appreciation of all art - be it music with its modulation of sound, or painting with its gradations of colors, or sculpture with its inwrought thought, or poetry with its combinations of the delights of music, with the infinite variety of pictures and statues and of life itself. For Rossini must have reached out into the world of ideals for his ravishing notes, and Michael Angelo for the startling effects found in his cartoons, and Homer for his new world of movement in his Iliad; and how surely they found their ideals and translated them, through even the dust and atoms of every day's materials, let mankind, still unwearied and wrapt in its delight in their productions, attest.

And there are John the Baptists not in the wilderness - harbingers, who announce and usher into our mental world the idea of goodness theretofore unconceived. There have been those who have crossed the path of all of us whose attainments in what may be termed character, reached possibly through the baptism of struggles and sorrows, have so unfolded to us the commanding qualities of bravery for the right, that the conception has sunk into our souls never to be dislodged; who have furnished us with an ideal of manhood, an idea of achievement which, like the cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night, has led us in our march of life, never wholly obscured from our vision, our encouragement when disheartened, our deliverance when tempted of evil, our restraint amid success, our inspiration at all times.

The great feature of John the Baptist's character was that he

cared for nothing save his won convictions. The power of rulers, the remoteness, the unpreparedness of the multitude, his solitariness in his faith, the personal dangers which beset him, all these weighed as nothing with him against the truth. When the logicians would test and verify the statement that this or that belief is, in and of itself, right, they attempt to establish that it is accepted universally by right minded, well informed, unprejudiced men, the major premise being that whatever is thus accepted has the sanction of that being who made all men's minds. Now we are so constituted that nothing more irresistably wins our respect, our more surely commands our admiration for man as man, than his adherence to deliberately adopted opinions. On the battle field, the general who unflinchingly trusts in the outcome of the concentration of his forces, though the smoke envelop and the mediums of death rain; in the senate the great leader in a great cause, who believes implicitly in the conclusion of his reasoning; in every department of life those who evince that consistency of effort which is the product of stability of thought; and, I had almost said, above all, they who have weighed in the balance the merits of friends who, in days of those friends' adversities, manifest a fidelity of attachment which is revered by the world because it is not born of profit; all these, in written and unwritten history, bear witness to the place to which he who is faithful, tenaciously, courageously faithful to his sincere opinions, is exalted and the manner in which he is crowned and remembered.

This the world in its heart of hearts enthrones. This it dignifies by the name of heroism. From the days of the twilight'd history, when the resolute strangling of the monster serpent exalted to the place of a demi-god, through the successive civilizations, past that unwavering daring, known as "Spartan valor,"

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and those Greeks who are immortalized by, or rather those self-immortalized Greeks, who are placed together like stars in a constellation, by Demosthenes in his oration on the crown, "who fell at Thermopylae, who perished in the sea fight off Salamis;" all through the multiplied and varied exhibitions of this quality, which is honored by the term, "Roman courage" past the period when a gifted and brave woman in the person of Joan of Arc fanned the expiring energies of a nation; all through the sad but glorious history of Poland; through the impossibilities wrought by English bravery on his hundred battle fields, down to the exhibitions of intrepidity and genius during our own colossal struggle, where the actors on either side - had they not been absorbed in their own deeds of wondrous valor - would have stood transfixed in admiration at the equally valorous deeds of their opponents; from all these scenes and personages comes the lesson that mankind, in proportion as they are lifted up in their standpoint of observation, venerate those who are willing to greatly risk for a great conviction.

True, the world in its judgment discriminates. It turns an admiring look upon the monster courage of a selfish Napoleon, a still more reverential gaze upon the patriotic, disinterested courage of Washington; but it dwells with tenderest sympathy and deepest veneration upon him who, though of the earth, was above it, and who most absolutely put aside self and laid down his life for spiritual truth.

And when the philosophical historians say that "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church," they do but declare and emphasize the complete, unparalleled illustriousness, in the heart and judgment of the world, of the martyrs for truth.

Ye who in the shades of academic halls, where youth nurtures

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its grand purposes, dream of distinction and renown, as well as ye who from the varied departments of labor so justly aspire to self-made greatness, know this, that when they who buily pyramids and led armies and bequeathed unmeasured estates are forgotten, this man who ate the plain food of the desert, but who with his whole soul greeted the truth and uttered it and died for it, will have, throughout the periods of human history, a name and a fame commensurate with the stability and expanse of truth itself.

This characterization of this illustrious disciple of the living Christ suggests the reasons why the society or order of free and accepted masons cherish and revere him. He was the forerunner of truth in the world, as all masons are the forerunners of their own individual progress toward truth in their own lives. Like him, though, in a figurative sense, they

"Climb on stepping-stones of their dead selves to higher things."

He was a worker in distinction from a dreamer, as is the aim to be of every mason. He wore the leather apron, which is one of the symbols of our craft. His independent spirit was a type of the freedom in our order. His great quality, which has endeared him to us, was his loyalty for the truth. There is a tie between all those who love the truth for the truth's sake, which, while it is subtle, is none the less strong and enduring. There is in truth a self-declaring quality which enables one to readily recognize it, and impels him to hasten to greet and perceive it; which led kings and prophets to wait for it, though they never found it; which is, like the inborn capacity to revel in the delights of music, universal by possibility, and in degree determined largely by the grace of the giver of all opportunities; which enabled

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St. John the Baptist, amid the cheerless surroundings of Judaism, with its husks of Pharisaism and its cold abstractions and its imperfectly, because partially, understood rites and symbols, to understand the pure spirituality of Christ as the revealed incarnate God. His discerning eye detected the rays of the rising orb of the world's spiritual light when, far below the horizon, it had just begun to illumine the plane of this habitable world, dispelling some of the hideousness and blackness and terrors of darkness, and revealing in advance something of the beauties and grace which were to be disclosed by the perfect day. The splendors of the uprisen sun, its beautification and fructification of the moral world which came with the life and teachings of the Saviour, with his resurrection and the descent of the Holy Spirit, which we have been permitted to behold, he saw only as did the watchman, described by Isaiah, who could only tell of the night and of the night's signs of promise. But he felt the conclusive power of Christianity even before unfolded by its divine Author. It is this sympathy with truth stirring in his being, like the blood in his veins, leading him to recognize it even afar off and value it and adore it, which amongst our order throughout all the world in all time has uplifted him, and without any laying on of hands has consecrated and canonized him.

As an order we claim connection with this great embodiment of human excellence only in that and so far as we strive to worship the Light which he adored, and to emulate the virtues which he so signally illustrated and commended. For freemasonry, in its sphere, is practical Christianity. It is an organized, systematized effort, extending all over the world and handed down from generation

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to generation, to give recognition and enforcement to the gentle charities and the sublime purposes infused into the heart and life of man by that Saviour of whom this our patron was the herald. Throughout and by means of a vast brotherhood it cares for the sick, the poor, the aged, the stranger, and the widow and the orphans, and endeavors to ameliorate the severity of life's rivalries, and animosities, and misfortunes, and sorrows and to render loyal and manly obedience to "the new commandment" which embraces within it so much of divine sanctity and blessing, and of human elevation and hope, "that ye love one another."

And so long as the "All-beholding sun" shall continue to traverse in its wide-spread orbit the solitude and grandeur of space, whenever year after year, he touches the solstice of summer, and there, for a brief period, in appearance; pauses and rests; as if weary of the majesty of his ceaseless going forth, so long may the brotherhood of free and accepted masons unforgettingly continue to assemble, and with all the means and formalities which declare spiritual ascendency honor the sincerity, the prophetic sympathy with goodness and truth, and the independence and daring of St John the Baptist, who was in all history the "phopet of the highest," the herald of "the day spring from on high," which was "to take hold of the ends of the earth," to give light to them that sat in darkness and in the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace, and to diffuse throughout all kindreds and peoples the pure and shining knowledge of God -

"That God which ever lives and loves,

One God, one law, one element,

And one far off divine event

Toward which the whole creation moves."