

Why Holy? Why Royal? Why Arch?

Some thirty years ago I was taught a surprisingly simple way to develop my studies of Freemasonry. From time to time, said my friend, just look carefully at the words we use in our ritual and ask yourself whether you understand what they mean, why those are the words we use and where on earth they came from. If you keep doing that not only will you be surprised at how much there is still to learn but you will also begin to enjoy the ritual more because you will now appreciate what it is that you are saying and doing. Just try it, he said. I did and that is why we have the talk for this evening.

It is so easy to rattle off the phrase “The Holy Royal Arch” and think that we know what we are saying. But do we? Why or how is it holy? Why is it specially royal? And why do we call it ‘Arch’ when you might think that it would better be called ‘Vault’? Interest mounts when you discover that in Scotland they refuse to use the term ‘Holy’ for this degree, and you ponder the fact that if this Order is merely the completion of the Craft 3rd Degree then why do we not call the Craft ‘Royal’ especially when we toast the Monarch at the table? In fact when you begin to think about the whole matter it gets more and more intriguing. That’s why, even when I have finished speaking to you this evening, I invite you to ask any further questions you may care to. I will hope to be able to answer those as well.

Let us get down to business, however, with the terms in our title and we begin with “Why Holy?”. First and most obviously this is because of the great reliance that is placed in this ceremony on the words and teaching of HOLY Scripture. Whilst it is true that there are odd references in the three Craft degrees to various Bible events — the pillars at the porchway or entrance of King Solomon’s temple, the story of Jacob lying down with his head on a stone and in a dream seeing a ladder rising towards heaven, Jephthah and the Ephraimites, the trade of Tubalcain — there is nothing like the passages of Scripture which are actually read in the course of the ceremony here. As our ritual says, man “would have remained in a state of darkness had it not pleased the Almighty to call him to light and immortality by the revelation of His Holy Will and Word”. This is underlined as the candidate is exalted and reads from the Book of Genesis, to which the M.E.Z. responds with “Such are the first words of that Sacred Volume which contains the record of God’s revealed will...” The whole narrative of our degree is founded and rooted in the Holy Words. No less Holy is the very place where the Sojourners arrive in order to carry out their search. This is the site of the Holy Temple first built by the workmen under the direction of Hiram Abiff. It may be in ruins but it is nonetheless a holy site and on the foundations that remain another, second Holy Temple is to be raised. It is so holy that only those who are duly qualified ‘children of Israel’ are permitted to be employed, even in removing the debris, and in the remnants of an 18th century form of the ceremony those taking part in the work wear their aprons in the form of a headcovering whilst so engaged. That of course reflects the custom to this day of wearing hats in the

course of Jewish worship. What we are engaged in here is Holy work on a Holy spot.

Whilst it may not yet have been the privilege of some present to begin the ascent through the 3 Chairs let me here remind or assure the Companions that in order to complete the degree, which we call the Holy Royal Arch, a brother has to be consecrated for the task. It is not something to be undertaken lightly or irreverently. The completion of our purpose here requires that a Mason shall be a 'Holy person', able to approach the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies, and shall thus be appropriately signed and sealed.

Anyone who has passed that way knows what I mean and they too will have been sharply reminded that the place whereon they stand is Holy Ground.

Yet the foremost reason why this is a Holy ceremony is because of the object of our whole endeavour. This is first intimated when we again see the new candidate restored to light. "Let us", says the M.E., "bless, praise and magnify His Holy Name for the knowledge vouchsafed to us, and walk worthily in the light which shines around". The candidate has more to experience but already the goal is revealed — he is to uncover the true HOLY NAME of the True and Living God Most High. This is the aim and end of all his searching and as the Principals convey to him in its threefold form the full truth of how God is named so the new Companion enters the final Holy of Holies where once only the consecrated High Priest could pronounce the same. It is no coincidence that in the 18th century, and still in some Derbyshire chapters, the Principals at the opening of a Chapter use the following words: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." I am sure by now that you can well appreciate why we call it 'The HOLY Royal Arch' and you may even have begun to leap ahead of me with ideas on why it is called 'ROYAL'. Why, even in the Craft degrees we speak of the Royal Solomon and as has already been said it is the foundations of his Temple that are the ground for searching and where his name and those of the other Grand Principals of his day are discovered. Yet Solomon is by no means the only royal personage associated with this ceremony. What of Cyrus, King of Persia, by whose good will and pleasure the Jews who were exiles in Babylon were permitted not only to return to their native land if they so desired but were even encouraged to rebuild their damaged temple and restore its worship? Without this royal permit the whole enterprise would have been unthinkable and it may interest you to know that further reflection on the ritual led me two years ago to sit down and write yet another lecture on "Why did Cyrus let them go?" Yet let them go he did and thus their return and rebuilding was by royal encouragement.

Yet there is more than just this. In the 18th century the ceremony was enhanced by two other preliminary degrees, which are still used in Ireland and Scotland. One called the 'Excellent Master' conveyed the Mark Master secrets to Past Masters of the Craft, and the other called the 'Super Excellent Master' (or 'The Veils') told the story of how Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt back to the Promised Land building a portable 'temple' or 'tabernacle' on the way. What we forget is that Moses is still with us in both the 'signs' of this degree and in the Catechism many use at table. But Moses was a Prince of the Royal household of Egypt and brought with him to the Jews all the secret knowledge and training

that only Egyptian Princes received. If you have ever wondered why Moses was so effective a leader it was because he was reared to be one. At the other end of the Catechism at table we also recall that the other leader of the Jews out of Babylon to Israel was also a Prince, Zerubbabel, who was chosen by Cyrus just because of his exalted rank. So when you recite the Catechism as a whole we have three Lodges and each of them presided over by Royal personages.

Moreover, when you and I come to be invested in this Holy Royal Arch it is not as mere artisans but as Princes. You will recall the words, “we hereby constitute you princes and rulers in the Order” having received the wands or tokens of such office to enable to join the ruling body of the Sanhedrim. We ought to be in no doubt that we do not just take our place in the Chapter — we sit in seats of authority. And in case you have ever asked yourself why we have wands at all may I remind you that until 1824 only those who had passed the Craft Chair were allowed to become Royal Arch Masons. Masters in the Craft chair first had wands but when Directors of Ceremonies began to appear the Masters handed their wands to these new officers to act in some matters on their behalf — just as the Wardens handed their wands to the Deacons.

There is, however, another reason still why this is a Royal degree. It is because it is supreme. Until the eagerness to extend Masonry with French and knightly ceremonies entered our lodges this was what was called the ‘ne plus ultra’. That means — you can’t go any further than this. In the kingdom the ‘ne plus ultra’ is still the King/Queen in Parliament. That is the summit and so the Order we share was also meant to be a Royal summit of Masonry. It only remains to explain the term ‘Arch’ and here perhaps the simplest introduction to the idea is to describe what you can actually see for yourselves. If you attend the Chapter of Cana at Colne, one of the oldest in our land, the substantial white arch that stands permanently over the pedestal that bears the sacred letters will immediately strike you. Unusual though this is in an English Chapter it is paralleled in every Scottish Chapter by an arch that stands on two pillars between the pedestal and the Principals. That this ceremony is then connected with an ‘Arch’ seems perfectly normal but in fact that ought to be our reaction anyway because of the importance attached to a keystone in the normal ceremony. Recall if you will the moment when the blindfolded candidate kneels before what he is told is a dark vaulted space and is commanded to ‘wrench forth the Keystone and prepare to receive the light of the Holy Word’. Normal logic would dictate that he has to open up an Arch to enable the light to reveal what is below and yet, he has just been encouraged to find something within the Vault. How do we reconcile these two things?

The answer lies in returning to our roots. You may recall that a few minutes ago I mentioned the ‘Excellent Master’ degree that preceded the Royal Arch in the 18th century. That degree conveyed the principal secrets of the Mark Master ceremony which involved finding a perfect keystone and placing it in the top of the arch that completed the First Temple by Solomon. When that ceremony was removed in England all the symbolism attached to the Keystone was lost and with it the importance of having completed the First Temple. When our present ceremony, which concentrates on a demolished First Temple, is for Master Masons who may not have gone through the Chair where completing the Temple

is referred to, then the use of the Arch also ended. Yet the removal of the keystone was still retained only this time it was linked, oddly, with a vault where certain final secrets lay. That is why in Scotland they wrench forth, not a keystone, but a plug stone with seven sides to fit the top of a vault. We don't, but leave our candidates mystified. Nevertheless you can now begin to see one reason why we call this degree an ARCH degree.

There is another. On the way to finding the hollow stone that led to the vault the Sojourners pass by "six other pairs (of pillars) of equal symmetry and beauty which, from their position, appeared to have supported the roof of a subterranean passage or gallery leading to where the Holy Place formerly stood." Such pillars held up ARCHES and the roof of the gallery would be rounded. Those arches are usually referred to as the Arches of Enoch and nowadays appear in the additional degrees. Their presence however only goes to underline the idea of the Order as connected with an Arch. Finally however we have to turn to a meaning that links with the last point that was made about 'Royal'. Again in the early days of the development of this degree there was a definite connection with what has developed today into the Ark Mariner Degree. The Rainbow sealed the great covenant or agreement between God and mankind after the Flood and in an early catechism we have the interesting exchange:

"What is represented by the Rainbow?

The Arch in its most perfect form."

Here is the Arch that signifies the ultimate of God's promises to his people and ensures that those who both know and obey Him have received the greatest and most complete of all his blessings. It is in this sense that what we have here "proves the Royal Arch to be the climax of Freemasonry". Such, my Companions, is the best explanation I can give of the reason why we use the terms, Holy Royal Arch, today. I hope that in time-honoured fashion it will lead us 'to the exercise of the purest and most devout piety; a reverence for the eternal Ruler of the Universe; and prove the very spring and summit of all its virtues'.