



LODGE VEGAS # 32

STS. JOHN' DAYS

Among the many fascinating angles of the Ancient Craft are the numerous facts yet to be discovered.

Masonic history discloses greater and greater gaps as we go back into the far past. The Ancient mine of Masonic symbolism stills yields the gold of truth to him who knows how to delve, but many and various are the Masonic customs, words, rituals and ideas for which we have as yet no complete explanation.

Among these is the dedication of the Lodges to the Holy Sts. John. No satisfactory explanation has yet been advanced to explain why operative masons adopted these two Christian saints, when St. Thomas, the very Patron of architecture and building, was available as patron of our Order.

Most Freemasons who give the matter thought are well agreed that the choice of our Ancient Brethren was wise. No two great teachers, preachers, wise men, saints, could have been found who better shadow forth from their lives and works the doctrine and teachings of Freemasonry. But to be happy that the Holy Sts. John, in character and attainments, are typical of all that is best in Freemasonry, is not to know how and why the Fraternity came to select them. Where the great students and researchers of the Masonic world have failed, he must be fool indeed who would rush in to explain. Yet there is an explanation somewhere, if we can but find it.

St. John the Evangelist apparently came into our Fraternal system somewhere towards the close of the sixteenth century, at least, we find the earliest authentic Lodge Minute reference to St. John the Evangelist in Edinborough in 1599, although earlier mentions are made in connection with what may be called relatives, if not ancestors, of our Craft. For instance, "The Fraternity of St. John" existed in Cologne in 1430.

"St. John's Masonry" is a distinctive term for Scotch Lodges, many of the older of which took the name of the Saint. Thus in its early records the Lodge of Scoon and Perth is often called the Lodge of St. John, and the Lodge possesses to this day a beautiful mural painting of the Saint on the east wall of the Lodge Room.

Other Lodges denominated "St. John's Lodges" were some of those unaffiliated with either the "Moderns" or the "Ancients" in the period between the schism of the Mother Grand Lodge (1751) and the reconciliation (1813).

In many old histories of the Craft is a quaint legend that St. John the evangelist became a "Grand Master" at the age of ninety. It seems to have its origin in a book printed in 1789, in which one Richard Linnecar of Wakefield write certain "strictures on Freemasonry," although his paper is really a Eulogy. Whether this Ancient Freemason really continued a tradition, or invented the tale that was seized upon by Oliver and kept alive as a legend, impossible though it is, no man may say as yet.

One Grand Lodge has ruled that Sts. John's Days are Landmarks! Of course any Grand Lodge may make its own laws, but it is beyond the power of any Grand Lodge either to make a Landmark by pronouncement, or to make a Landmark by denying it. Inasmuch as Landmarks, whatever else they may be, are universally admitted to be handed down to us from "time immemorial," and Sts. John's Days as Masonic festivals are neither extremely old nor universal among the Craft (England using Wednesday after St. George's Day, Scotland St. Andrew's Day and Ireland St. Patrick's Day), we must consider only this Grand Lodge's intent to honor our patron saints, and the validity of her results. Historians believe that only after 1717 when the Mother Grand Lodge was formed, did Freemasonry generally hold festival meetings on either or both, June 24th and December 27th.

Perhaps the real explanation of Freemasonry's connection with the Sts. John is not to be found in the history of the Craft but in the history of religions. For the festival days of the two Sts. John are far older than Christianity; as old as the ancient systems of worship of fire and sun.

It is here too, that we find the beauty and the glory of the reverent practice of dedicating Lodges, erected to God, to the Holy Sts. John. Travel backwards in imagination to an unknown date when the world of men was young; when knowledge did not exist and the primal urges of all humanity were divided between the satisfaction of bodily needs - hunger, thirst, warmth, light - and the instincts of self-preservation, mating, and the love of children. The men of that far off age found everything in nature a wonder. They understood not why the wind blew, what made the rain, from whence came lightning, thunder, cold and warmth; why the sun climbed the heavens in the morning and disappeared at night, or what the stars might be. As is natural for all primitive people, they tried to explain all mysteries in terms of their daily lives. When angry, their emotions resulted in loud shouts and a desire to kill. What more natural than to think that thunder and lightning the anger of the Unknown who held their lives and well being in His hands? Stronger than his enemy, ancient man bundled him out of his cave into the open, where he froze or starved or was eaten by the beasts. What more natural than to think the wind, the rain, the cold, a manifestation of an Unseen Presence which was angered at them?

The greatest manifestation of nature known to these ancient ancestors of ours was the sun. It never failed. It was always present during the day, and it near kin, fire, warmed and comforted them at night. Under its gentle rays crops grew and rivers rose. The sun kept away the wild beasts by his light. The sun made their lives possible. Sun worship and fire worship were as natural for men just struggling into understanding as the breath they drew to live.

Earliest among the facts recognized about the sun must have been its slow travel from north to south and back again as the seasons waxed and waned. And so Midsummer's day, the longest day, became a festival; it was the harbinger of harvest, the very birthday of new life. Its opposite was equally inevitable; the winter solstice was significant of the end of the slow decline of the sun, the beginning of a new time of warmth and crop and happiness.

Through the countless years, in a thousand religions, cults, mysteries, in a hundred climes and lands, priests and people celebrated the solstices. We know it not only from history and the records of ancient peoples, often cut upon stone but from myths and legends; the story of Ceres and her search for her daughter Proserpine, and the allegory of Isis, Osiris and Horus.

Ancient custom is taken from a people with difficulty.

In the height of our civilization today we retain thousands of customs the origin of which is lost to most of us. We speak glibly of Yuletide at Christmas, without thinking of an ancient Scandinavian God, Juul. The small boy avers truth "By Golly!" Not knowing that he offers his hand (gol) if he speaks not the truth. Those who think it "bad luck" to break a mirror but continue a savage belief that a stone thrown in water which mirrors the face of an enemy will break his heart even as the reflection is broken.

If such ideas persist to this day, imagine how strenuously a people would resist giving up a holiday celebration which their fathers' and their fathers' before them had kept for untold ages.

So it was when Christianity came to the world. Feasts and festival days of a hoary antiquity were not lightly to be given up, even by those who put their faith upon a cross. It was of no use for the early Church to ban a pagan festival. Old habit was too strong, old ideas too powerful. Hence clever and thoughtful men in the early days of Christianity turned the pagan festivals to Christian usage, and the olden celebrations of summer and winter solstices became the Sts. John's Days of the Middle Ages.

As the slow years past, those who celebrated thought less and less of what the days really commemorated, and became more and more convinced of their new character. Today, hardly a Freemason gives a thought to the origin of St. John's Day in Winter, or knows his celebration of St. John's Day in Midsummer preserves a touch with cave men ancestors.

Fairbank's "Greek Religion" indicates that this transfer of meaning of festival days from a pagan implication to a Christian significance was not confined to the Sts. John. He writes:

"That in Greece itself ancient rites should persist under the cover of the new religion, and that the ancient deities or heroes should reappear as Christian Saints, is hardly surprising to one who considers the summary method by which Christianity became the established religion. It was not so difficult to make the Parthenon a Christian Church when the virgin goddess of wisdom was supplanted by a St. Sophia (Wisdom), then by the Virgin Mary. Similarly, Apollo was more than once supplanted by St. George, Poseidon by St. Nicholas, the patron saint of sailors, Asculapius by St. Michael and St. Damian, and in Grottos where Nymphs had been worshipped, female saints received similar worship from the same people."

It was a common custom in the Middle Ages for craftsmen of all kinds to place themselves under the protection of some saint of the church. Our greatest historian, Gould, puts this in a paragraph, thus:

"None of the London trades appear to have formed fraternities without ranging themselves under the banner of some saint, and if possible they chose one who bore a fancied relation to their trade. Thus the fishmongers adopted St. Peter; the drapers chose the Virgin Mary, mother of the 'Holy Lamb' or 'Fleece' as an emblem of that trade. The goldsmiths' patron was St. Dunstan, represented to have been a brother artisan. The merchant tailors, another branch of the draping business, marked their connection with it by selecting St. John the Baptist, who was the harbinger of the 'Holy Lamb' so adopted by the drapers . . . Eleven or more of the guilds . . . had John the Baptist as their patron saint, and several of them, while keeping June 24th as their head day, also met in December 27th, the corresponding feast of the Evangelist."

To say with certainty why Freemasons adopted the two Sts. John, and continue to celebrate days as principal feast which were once of a far different significance than was given them by the early fathers of the church - Gregory, Thaumaturgus, St. Augustine, Gregory the Great - is not in the power of any historian or student as yet. Further light must be had. But the fitness of these two in our system is obvious if we consider the spiritual suggestion of their lives.

St. John the Baptist was a stern and just man; intolerant of sham, of pretense, of weakness; a man of strength and fire, uncompromising with evil or expediency, and yet withal courageous, humble, sincere, magnanimous. A character at once heroic and of nobility, of him the Greatest of Teachers said: "Among them that are born of woman, there hath not arisen a greater than John the Baptist."

Of St. John the Evangelist, the disciple whom Jesus loved, a thousand books have been written, and student has vied with minister, teacher with historian, to find words fitly to describe the character of the gentle writer of the Fourth Gospel. No attempt at rivalry will here be made; suffice it that St. John the Evangelist is recognized the world over as the apostle of love and light, the bringer of comfort to the grief-ridden, of courage to the weak, of help to the helpless and of strength to the falling.

It is not for us to evaluate the character of either saint in terms of the other; it is for us to agree only that Freemasonry is wise in a gentle wisdom which passeth that in books when she takes for her own both the saint who fore-told the coming of the saint who taught the law of the Son of Man who walked by Galilee.

Consider thus, from being an historical and fraternal puzzle, the Sts. John and their connection with Freemasonry becomes as plain as the light which was the central fact of the old religion which the solstitial days commemorated. And it at once makes plain that part of our ritual which so puzzles the initiate; the question "From Whence Come You?" and the answer "From the Lodge of the Holy Sts. John of Jerusalem."

Many have phrased the simple explanation of the inner meaning of this passage; none with more beauty and clarity than Brother Joseph Fort Newton, he of the golden pen and the voice of music:

"The allusion has nothing to do with the Order of St. John of Jerusalem. To our thought - which we give for what it is worth - its meaning is mystical, in somewhat the following manner: The legends of the Craft associate the two Saints John with its fellowship, as Masters, if not Grand Masters; the one a prophet of righteousness, the other an evangelist of love - the basic principles and purposes of Masonry.

"Of course, there is no historical evidence that either of the two Saints of the church were ever members of the Craft. But they were adopted as its patron Saints, after the manner of former times - a good manner it is, too - and they have remained so in Christian lands. Lodges are dedicated to them, instead of to King Solomon, as formerly.

"So, naturally, there came the idea, or ideal, of a sacred Lodge in the Holy City presided over by the Saints John. No such Lodge ever existed in fact, and yet it is not a fiction - it is an ideal, and without such ideals our life would be dim and drab. The thought back of the question and answer, then, is that we come from an ideal or Dream Lodge into this actual work-a-day world, where our ideals are to be tested.

"Our journey is ever towards the East, back towards the ideal, which seems lost in the hard, real world round about us. Still, we must plod on, following what we have seen, ever trying to find the ideal in the real, or to bring the ideal to the interruption of the real; which is the whole secret and quest of human life. He is wise, and must be accounted brave, who keeps his memory or vision of the Lodge on the Holy Sts. John at Jerusalem."

In a few words and short; we do not know just when, or just how, Freemasonry adopted the Sts. John. Their days are the Christian adaptation of pagan festivals of a time when man, knowing no better, worshipped the sun as the supreme God. So when we celebrate our festival days on June 24th and December 27th, we walk eye to eye and step by step with our ancient ancestors,

worshipping as they worshipped, giving thanks as they did; they to the only God they knew for the glory of summer, the beginning of the period when days lengthened - we to the G.A.O.T.U. that our gentle Craft took for its own the austere but loving characters of two among the greatest of the saintly men who have taught of the Father of all mankind.

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