ARE WE OUR BROTHERS' (AND SISTERS') KEEPERS?


Corrections to be made.

hour                       honour
ay                          aye
travelers                 travellers  (Cdn spelling)
easty                      easy
form                       from
populate                 populace

From the title of this paper it is obvious that it is paraphrasing a well known passage contained in the Volume of the sacred Law, Book of Genesis, Chapter 4, Verse 9, in which the Lord calls Cain to account for his brother Abel's whereabouts. The answer, as we know, is one of defiance.

In the words of the King James version of the Holy Bible it is the familiar response: "I know not: Am I my brother's keeper?" The more modern Living Bible puts it into these words: "How should I know? ... Am I supposed to keep track of him wherever he goes?"

Certainly, if we were to take our Bible literally and without bothering to search out its deeper, esoteric meanings, we would ascribe the cited passage to that particular event east of Eden, and possibly as a teaching not to commit fratricide or, if we are really enlightened, to a challenge to support our blood brothers, but not all that much more. That, of course, is not the subject of this paper, nor may it suffice to assume that, since we are a fraternity, our concern for the fellow member of our organization which we call the Ancient Free and Accepted Masons is all we have to bear in mind in order to hour the great and solemn obligations we had once voluntarily taken upon ourselves. Then what is this all about?

In response to this question it must be made clear, at the outset, that it is not the intention of the writer to impose on his audience his own, preconceived notions of what "ought to be", but rather to ask questions which, he hopes, will be answered with candor and thoughtfulness. Thus the contributions of the audience should far outweigh the value and importance of the paper itself. It must also be emphasized that it is not intended to enlarge on the virtue of charity, or love, practised by the Freemason if only with his fellow Mason in mind. There is, of course, merit in that approach also, as evidenced by a short paper recently prepared by V. W. Bro. John Wild of Alberta, using the title "Am I my Brother's Keeper", in which he clearly stated that he wanted to limit himself to the application of the principle of brotherly concern to the Fraternity and recognizing that Albert Schweitzer's quotation, "You don't live in a world all alone, your brothers are here too" was undoubtedly referring to mankind as a whole. ay, there's the rub! It is in concord with Schweitzer's admonition that the words "and sisters" have been inserted into the title, thereby making it clear that we are here talking about the concerns the Freemasons may or may not have for all mankind!
Following this introduction indicating the approach used and the content to be investigated, we can move into the body of the paper. No order of importance is implied by the sequencing of the following questions and statements but, as we have to start somewhere, why not with the question "Is the welfare of the human race of concern to Freemasons?"

You know what Rhett Butler would have replied, namely, "Frankly, I don't give a damn!". Do we, likewise, as a manifestation of our lives' philosophies agree that charity begins at home and that we should let the chips fall as they may? Be honest in your responses; that is, if you feel that members of the Masonic Order are powerless to go beyond aiding, and caring for, their own members' welfare, then say so and, please (!) state why. Again, remember that the term "welfare", like the term "charity", is not to be understood in its narrow, modern day sense of financial support.

Endeavour, instead, to analyze the term in a manner which keeps "communicating happiness to others" foremost in mind.

Can we think of any evidence of an absence of happiness anywhere around us, whether that be among the population of our country, a neighbouring country, or anywhere else in the world? It is not too hard to think of something, don't you agree? Quite the contrary, because we daily read in our newspapers and hear in the newscasts the unhappy events by which this world is plagued. When we were young we may have read some romantic books about pirates and treasure islands. This was not the real world but something out of the distant past to tickle your fancy. Today we read about air piracy, and there is nothing romantic about that. The perpetrators of these crimes have their own treasure islands alright, that is the serving of their own selfish needs by whatever means are available to them, and totally disregard in the right to "life, liberty and happiness", as our friends in the United States would put it. When we were young we did not even know the term "international terrorism"; now everybody does. What caused all this?

What is the deep down reason for events like the hijacking of an airplane full of innocent travelers turned into hostages? Oh, yes, it may be easy to say that the Lebanese incident of less than two months ago could only have happened in an Islamic country and that a jumbo jet flying from Canada with the destination of India could only have been blown out of the sky because of some East Indian religious fervor alien to us. After all, these people do not benefit from the teachings of Freemasonry . . . or do they?

Of course, none of this could occur in a country deeply rooted in Christian culture and religion. Therefore, let us not mention Ireland. let us not mention certain devoutly Christian countries in Central or South America.

The fact is that neither creed nor race have all that much influence on the actions of a determined few - if "few" is the correct word to use in this context. The fact is also that, not unlike an earth tremor, such incidents send tidal waves across the surface of the globe, causing further destruction in far off places.

True, isn't it, but how does it concern Rhett Butler or me as a Mason?

We did not take any "great and solemn obligation" to counteract international terrorism. That is something far outside our jurisdiction.

Right or wrong? Try and answer this one. If we agree that we are impotent in preventing the actual acts of terrorism, such as air piracy
or the blowing up of a police station in Northern Ireland, can we not at least think and do something about the legitimate grievances these people have, and how to alleviate them? If we, as Masons, consider ourselves to be peacemakers who build the future, what are we in effect doing to prevent the troublemakers from tearing that future apart?

We need not even go as far as the international scene, although that too, in an ever shrinking world is moving closer and closer to home, but we can, and if you should agree, must carry our teachings of Freemasonry into the community in which we live. That is, of course, only if we place any value in our credibility as a force for good . . .

Within our nation, within our community, we have numerous other ills with which, we are constantly confronted. It would take a long time to fill books to list them all and, maybe, not everyone agrees that they are evils to be combated. Therefore, let us ask ourselves whether or not we should concern ourselves with such manifestations of our society as prostitution (the oldest profession and therefore entitled to persist forever), homosexuality (even among some of those in whom we otherwise place our trust), child abuse and wife beating, dishonesty in business dealings, the spreading of falsehoods and hatred by such as Keegstra and Zundel right here in Canada, and scores of others that any one of us could add to the list.

It is not even the magnitude of the offence that makes it deplorable: run an amber light at an intersection and you have broken the law in the sight of God and man! When it comes to right and wrong there just are no shades of grey. We all know that, but what are we doing about it?

Some of the same sentiments were expressed by Ted Byefield in his letter form the publisher, the Alberta Report, of October 15, 1984. Following is an excerpted quotation:-

"Day by day . . . we hear demands for new laws aimed at keeping people honest and good because the laws we have already passed aren't doing it. Hence we hear demands for laws against pornography and 'hate literature' because public repugnance is no longer sufficient to prevent its circulation. We hear demands for restriction on the powers of parents because of the ever widening abuse of its purpose. We hear demands for tougher controls on 'sexual harassment' because what would once be considered 'intolerable' conduct is now apparently tolerable, and we raise taxes higher and higher because government must provide what was once provided by voluntary charity. . . . In all this we are doing exactly what the (ancient) Greeks did. That is, we are attempting to produce with rules and laws standards of popular conduct that would be far more effectively accomplished by the force of moral suasion. And as all the new laws are enacted, further and more complex legislation is required because they don't work . . . Moreover, as the law attempts to supplant old-fashioned morality, breaking the law becomes less and less reprehensible and more and more a game . . . Thousands of people are telling us what should be made illegal; hardly anyone is ever telling us what should be considered wrong . . . The reason we would rather talk about laws than about right and wrong is, no doubt, the fact that we live in a scientific age. Science has done marvelous things for us, making us able to move faster and farther, to escape pain, to live longer, and to better grasp the facts of our physical existence. But the problem is that science can tell us nothing about right and wrong. There is no way of 'proving' scientifically that I should love my neighbor as myself . . . By cataloging moral codes and
teaching them to children as 'alternative lifestyles' . . . we have induced in children the notion that right conduct is entirely a matter of personal taste. Anything that feels right is right for you ... Need we wonder therefore why so few people find themselves coerced by their consciences?

Again, what are we doing about this and what can we do? Is "nothing" the answer? At the 42nd Annual Inter-Provincial Conference, in 1982, M.W.Bro. Burnie Kyle, then Senior Grand Warden of the Grand Lodge of British Columbia, in his paper "Our Mission - from example and through leadership" affirmed that . . . "The Craft is not a secret society but a closely knit group of brethren of leadership . . . We have the desire to lead our families, our associates and our friends toward a better way of life. We have the responsibility of communicating by our actions these Masonic teachings to our fellow man." How true, but in the ensuing discussion it was overlooked that "our fellow man" is not necessarily just a member of the family, an associate or a friend, but may well be a person whom we never met, and who may even be ranked among our enemies. Let us try and look at this from a global point of view.

Two years earlier, in the same setting, M. W. Bro. Douglas Philips, also of British Columbia, in his paper, "A Mandate of Freemasonry" asserted, "I believe, my brethren that we have a message to display to the world . . . . Certainly it is incumbent upon each and every Freemason to spread the truth, improve the morals, and to bring happiness to the community . . . . The following several pages in the proceedings, recording the ensuing discussion make fascinating reading because, in spite of repeated and valiant attempts by the moderator to focus on what we as members of our Fraternity have as a mandate to take into the world, and what that mandate is, everything was covered from what ought to go on inside the Lodge to beverages in lodge and the wearing of lapel pins. As happens so often, the far-afield-goers had their far-afield-day. Hopefully, we will do better today.

Since the formation of Speculative Freemasonry, which we traditionally associate with the year 1717, and its spreading throughout the nations of the world, lodges and individuals had always had the choice between keeping their Masonry to themselves in the sense of making good men better as long as they were their own members, and taking their Masonic convictions into society for the betterment of everyone. Human nature being what it is, the latter approach backfired at times, and led to such unpleasant repercussions as the papal bull "In Eminenti" of Clement XII in 1738, followed by several other bulls and edicts, discrediting our Order in the eyes of the Roman Catholic,. In this regard it must be said that things looked up under the pontificate of the late Pope John XXIII but, those who inform themselves by reading up on the latest developments in Italy and Central Europe will know that we are back to Square One. The French Revolution has been attributed to machinations by Freemasons and Bernard Fay's book, "Revolution and Freemasonry 1680-1800" credits us with many more. There are, however, also entries in the positive side of the ledger, much as the number of the founding fathers of the United States, revolutionaries too, or democrats in a nation now to the concept of democracy; the Freemason and chancellor of the Weimar republic of Germany during the 1920's, Gustav Stresemann. The fact that he had been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize did not prevent him to be eventually succeeded by one Adolf Hitler who saw to it that the
influence of Masons and of Masonry would cease. Present day's chancellor of Austria is a Freemason, and so are a number of world leaders. The question then is, do you agree with having of Brethren in high places and with having them identified as members of the Order? If yes, why? If no, why not?

How about adverse publicity? Do we have to be afraid of being reminded of the activities of Italy's lodge "Propaganda Due", also known as "P-2"?

Aside from being accused of subversive actions against the Italian state, its Master, Lucio Gelli, together with the Mafia and certain high ranking clergy inside the Vatican have been implicated in having effected the alleged murder of Pope Paul, I, the former Albino Luciani, in September of 1978. Our initial reaction would of course, be that this cannot be true and that, in any event, the P-2 lodge was irregular. Well, not so. It has been removed from the list of lodges of the Grand Orient of Italy with whom we are in amity, but in those days we could still find the lodge listed into our annual publication of Lodges Masonic of the World.

So, there seems to be pros and cons to political involvement. Where do you stand on this subject? Are there merits in political clout of Freemasonry? Don't just shudder at the thought, and don't think of it in terms of partisan politics in your own city ward or provincial or federal constituency, but more in terms of providing leadership, guidance and statesmanship where it is sorely needed.

We all know of British and other royalty who were more than figureheads of the Order, of Canadian prime ministers and their equals in other countries, and of presidents of the United States who endeavoured, more or less successfully, to carry the lessons of Freemasonry into their spheres of influence. Generally, we hear little criticism of these personages, even in the case of one of them, a Most Worshipful Brother, who triggered the release of the first fateful atom bomb. The question then is, do we wash our hands of their actions or would we rather that more Masons enter the field of politics to improve conditions, at all times basing their decisions on what they learned and accepted within the tyled recesses of the Lodge?

To conclude, let us ask, does the fact that since World War I, supposedly the "war to end all wars", and World War II which forty years ago ended the also supposed triumph of good over evil, forty more wars have been fought in the world to this day, indicating to us that all hopes we may have as Masons to make this a better world, are in vain? Do we just have to accept as inevitable truth that we, individually and corporately, are just a bunch of toothless tigers, perpetuating an outdated system of morality, veiled in allegories which we ourselves do hardly understand, and illustrated by symbols which convey no uplifting meaning to the populate at large? Must we be content with dressing ourselves in impressive regalia, attending meetings at which little, if anything, transpires to aid humanity to free itself from the vices which dwell in the gutsers of this part of the universe we call the planet Earth?

Or is there a way that "lifts our eyes to the bright morning star whose rising gives peace and salvation to the faithful and obedient of the human race?"

The final question is:

What encouragement can we give our Brethren to venture into the outside world, armed with the Excalibur of Masonry, to do good for the benefit of all humanity, and thereby become their brothers' and sisters' keepers in
the true sense of the scriptures?

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