The Illustrious Order of the Red Cross

We often search for meaning among the better known degrees of our beloved Craft, yet sometimes the greatest treasure lies in a place we least expect. The Illustrious Order of the Red Cross is often seen as a curiosity, a mildly interesting piece of whimsy which we put on before the ‘important’ degrees of Malta and Temple. This quaint little play in three Acts about a man being sent to the court of a king, crossing a bridge only to be arrested, and then restored to his former estate seems to teach us little. And the strange debate within the degree, about Wine, Kings and Women seems almost out of place in a Masonic ceremony.

Yet this little degree is one of the oldest of all Masonic degrees, and so venerated that it occurs in the Allied Masonic Degrees in England under the title of “Red Cross of Babylon”, is strongly alluded to in the Royal Order of Scotland, and even features in the Order of Knight Masons, the Ultimate of Irish Freemasonry. Further afield, in continental Masonry it is the 16th Degree of many Scottish Rite systems, and is the only degree surviving intact from the mysterious rite of the Elect Cohens of the Universe of Martinez de Pasqually.

The Degree is usually split into three Acts. In Act I the Jewish Sanhedrin lament the fact that their efforts to rebuild the City and Temple at Jerusalem are constantly thwarted, either by aggressive enemies or by indifferent edicts. They elect to send an ambassador to the Court of Darius to plead their case: Zerubbabel offers to go, as he is known to the King at Babylon. In Act II, Zerubbabel attempts to cross a river by means of a bridge, but is arrested by guards and imprisoned. In Act III he is brought before the King, and his commitment to Truth and to his vows result in his being released and exalted, and, following the famous debate, he is allowed to return to his native land bearing gifts, with the promise of a free pass for him and his fellows.

Although the journey is sandwiched between what appear to be two more impressive sections, do not let this distract you. The journey is in fact the most important part of all! The river over which the bridge spans, has often been used as a symbol for the veil of forgetfulness or death, and its waters wash both cares and remembrances from the transitioning soul. The two lands represent the conscious and subconscious worlds.

Zerubbabel (Truth) crosses the bridge between the earthly world and the celestial plane, there to be detected as an intruder, yet he was chosen for this task because he was formerly well-known to the King, (and) now offers his services to undertake the hazardous enterprise of traversing the Persian dominions, and seeking admission to the presence of our Sovereign.” However, on receiving an audience with the mysterious ‘King’ he is recognized and a final test is put to him. This test is one of determining that he understands the importance of silence or secrecy. Truth demonstrates his understanding of the importance of keeping silent on secret matters, and the ‘King’ now welcomes him as a friend.

Now we come to the most perplexing part of the story – the Immemorial Discussion, in which three arbiters argue the supremacy of wine, the power of the king, women, and truth. The topic, not surprisingly, is about strength. Can the goals of Zerubbabel be achieved through physical, material or temporal objects, such as wine, women or kingly power (and remember that Christ himself was tempted with bread and kingly power)? Even though Zerubbabel is given the task of arguing the strength of women, he comes to realize that only Truth can set him free. That is to say, that the strength which he seeks to build his personal Temple lies within himself. Well pleased with this result, the ‘King’ asks him what he needs, and he replies the ability to return as needed, in order to learn more. This is granted (in the symbolism of passports). And this is no casual gift, for Truth now has the ability to pass between the two planes of existence without further let or hindrance.

The unanimous adoption of the revised Ritual of the Illustrious Order of the Red Cross by the Grand Encampment, in Denver, on August 10, 1892, explains and settles the misconceptions forever, and yet a few words may not be out of place at this time.

“The Illustrious Order of the Red Cross is not a pagan rite, nor is it a mere social observance. It is an Order founded upon Truth, recognizing the GOD OF TRUTH as the only one true and living God. As such it is a proper preparation for the solemnities of the Order of the Temple.

Darius believed in the same one that Israel did when he registered a vow with that God to rebuild His Temple in the destroyed city of Jerusalem. No doubt he registered that vow under the promptings of his Jewish friend, Prince Zerubbabel, who was the recognized Chosen of God. Darius kept that vow, demonstrating his love of Truth and his reverence for Judah's Jehovah.

The most exalted Truth was present implicitly, in Judaism, and the Law of Judaism was the schoolmaster that brought us to Christianity. The most exalted Truth is now explicit in Christianity. In Judaism it was the seed, then the blade, and then Christianity ripened it in the ear. So is the Truth of all truths implicitly in the Order of the Red Cross, and the candidate finds that same truth, but explicitly, in the Order of the Temple.

As Judaism was a preparation for Christianity, so let, the Illustrious Order of the Red Cross be a preparation for the Christian Order of the Temple.”

Events

Jan 31 Work & Tactics Oklahoma City Lodge #36 9 am
Grand Commandery Officers Quarterly Meeting immediately after

Feb 7 Central Oklahoma Chapter Festival @ OKC Lodge #36 9am
More information @ www.okcyorkrite.org or email: info@okcyorkrite.org

Feb 28 NE Regional Council/Commandery Festival @ East Gate Masonic Center
5925 E 9th Street in Tulsa 9:30 am (includes Royal Master, Select Master, Illustrious Order of the Red Cross and Order of Malta

Oklahoma Supplement