PASSIONS

January 9, 2006

My Brothers,

It being the first Stated Meeting in the new year, I thought I'd talk for just a moment about New Year's Resolutions. There is probably one amongst us who has resolved to throw off his appetite for smoking. He may have become angry about the habit or feared its consequences. Right now he may lack the confidence in himself to make quitting stick. He may envy another Brother who has quit and even though he expresses his joy and friendly feelings toward that brother's quitting, he may secretly hate himself for weakening and he may long to emulate that other Brother. Finally, he may pity himself for having to go through it all in the first place. Well. This education session is not about smoking or quitting or even New Year's Resolutions. It is about "passions", and ancient Greeks, and Masonic pursuits.

First, the Greeks. One of those good old wily veterans of Greek's Golden Age, Aristotle, lived from 384 to 322 BC and, even though his years run backwards, he is revered as a thinker of great thoughts and a philosopher for the ages. (He must have been real good at thinking and philosophizing; I am sure that all of us would agree that anyone today living his years backwards would be considered a madman or a fool.) Anyhow, in 350 BC, Aristotle wrote the Nicomachean Ethics. In Book II, Chapter 5, 1105b, lines 21-23, Aristotle answered a question that has bugged me as a Mason for some time. If I am here to learn to subdue my passions and improve myself in Masonry, just what are the “passions"?

Now, I don’t know about you, but when I hear the word, "passions", I immediately think of something between 'PG' and 'R' with lots of heavy breathing and intense sexuality. Then, when I start to think rather than react, I can hear many versions of the phrase, "I have a passion for…", something, you fill in the blanks. Maybe you have a passion for creampuffs, or bird watching, or pro football, or participating in the mysteries of Masonic ritual. The point is, that "passions" are operative emotions expressed toward something.

Aristotle, having considered all this - well, he might not have considered pro football, but he did have to contend with the passions stirred up by the Olympic Games, didn't he? - defined "passions" generically, and then went on to identify eleven specific "passions" that apparently plagued the Greeks. When we look at those, as we will see, it seems that we are plagued by them, too. Aristotle's "passions" may well be the Masonic "passions" which we are learning to subdue; remember, our current ritual was written during the Greek Revival of the early 1700s. Even if his thoughts are not the basic watchwords in our Masonic "passions", his eleven specific passions are a good place for us to start. So, here are Aristotle's eleven "passions":

     Appetite … Anger … Fear … Confidence … Envy … Joy …

     Friendly Feelings … Hatred … Longing … Emulation …Pity

Any surprises there? I confess that I was a bit surprised to see Confidence, Joy, Friendly Feelings, and Emulation.

You'd think that being confident about something was ok, wouldn't you? But, maybe confidence is too close to pride, which goeth before the fall. Can there be too much Joy in this world? I guess so - joy expressed to the exclusion of work and provisioning for the future may not be a good idea - Aesop, another wily old Greek guy, told us the fable of the Grasshopper and the Ant. The Grasshopper was joyous all right. What's wrong with Friendly Feelings? Is caution and reserve a better approach towards others? Aren't Friendly Feelings the same as Brotherly Love? (That answer is NO! , as we will discover in another session.) And finally, aren’t we supposed to emulate the worthy Brothers amongst us, aren't we exhorted to emulate the Grand Master Hiram Abif? Well, yes - and no. In emulation of others, we can mirror, or we can model ourselves and actions. To mirror, suggests that we lack free will in our actions. To model suggests the ability to adapt within a structure; we emulate what we find to be the good things and actions in Masonry. So emulation is not all bad.

Now, back to the opening story of the New Year's Resolution. Listen again for a speculative approach to subduing our passions … "There is probably one amongst us who has resolved to throw off his appetite for smoking. He may have become angry about the habit or feared its consequences. Right now he may lack the confidence in himself to make quitting stick. He may envy another Brother who has quit and even though he expresses his joy and friendly feelings toward that brother's quitting, he may secretly hate himself for weakening and he may long to emulate that other Brother. Finally, he may pity himself for having to go through it all in the first place."

Maybe we should emulate that wily old Aristotle? As the Ancient Greeks said, “Oops!"

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