

The 5 Minute Mason – St. Johns' Days

The real explanation of Freemasonry's connection with the Holy Saints John is not to be found in the history of our Craft, but in the history of religions. For the festival days of the two Saints John are as old as the ancient systems of worship of fire and sun. Travel backwards in time with your imagination to an unknown date when the world of mankind was very 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 had to have looked at everything in nature as a true wonder. They certainly didn't understand why the wind blew, what made the rain, from whence came thunder and lightning, or cold and warmth; why the sun climbed the heavens in the morning and disappeared at night, or what the stars might be.

All primitive people tried to explain 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 thunder and lightning was actually the anger of the Unknown who held their lives and well-being in His hands? What could be more natural than to think the wind, rain, and the cold, were manifestations of an angered Unseen Presence?

The greatest manifestation of nature known to our ancient ancestors was the sun. It was always present during the day, and its nearest kin, fire, warmed and comforted them at night. Under its gentle rays crops grew and rivers swelled. The sun kept away the wild beasts by its light. The sun made their lives possible. Sun worship and fire worship were natural for men just struggling to survive in a rugged and hostile world.

So it was when Christianity came to the world. Old feasts and festival days were not lightly to be given up, even by those who put their faith upon a Cross. Hence clever men in the early days of Christianity turned the pagan festivals to Christian usage, and the old celebrations of summer and winter solstice became the Sts. Johns' Days of the middle ages. 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 his cavemen ancestors.

It was a common custom in the middle Ages for craftsmen to place themselves under the protection of some saint of the church. All the London trades appear to have arranged themselves under the banner of some saint and if possible they chose one who bore even a fancied tie to their trades. 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, thought 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. Eleven or more of the guilds had John the Baptist as their principal protector. To say with certainty why Freemasons adopted the two Sts. John, and continue to celebrate days as principal feasts which were once of a far different significance, is not in my power to even suggest. But the fitness of these two is obvious in our system if we consider the spiritual suggestion of their lives.

St. John the Baptist was a stern and just man; intolerant of sham, pretense, or weakness; a man of strength and fire, uncompromising with evil, and yet was courageous, humble, sincere, magnanimous.

Of St. John the Evangelist, the disciple whom Jesus loved, a thousand books have been written, and many a student has vied with minister, teacher, or historian, to find words fit to describe the character of this gentle writer of the Fourth Gospel.

I make no attempt at rivalry here; 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-stricken, of courage to the weak, of help to the helpless, of strength to the falling. Freemasonry is very wise when she takes unto herself both the saint who foretold the coming and the saint who taught the law of the Man who walked by Galilee.

The question "Whence came you?" and the answer "From a Lodge of the Holy Sts. John at Jerusalem", has puzzled many. None have phrased a simple explanation of the inner meaning of this with more beauty and clarity than Brother Joseph Fort Newton:

‘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, and they have remained so in Christian lands. Lodges are dedicated to them, instead of to King Solomon, as in former times...So, naturally, there came the idea, 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.’

We don't know just when, or how, Freemasonry adopted the Sts. John as our own. Their days are the Christian adaptation of pagan festivals from a time when man, not knowing better, worshipped the sun as the supreme God. So when we celebrate our festival days on June 24 and December 27, we walk step by step with ancient ancestors, worshipping as they worshipped, giving thanks as they did; they to the only god they knew for the glory of summer, and Masons to the Supreme Architect of the Universe.



... The 5 Minute Mason: #83 in a series of nuggets from the Quarry of Freemasonry.SM

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