

Athelstan – his relevance to Master Masons of the Court today.

Athelstan Imperator, King of all England! Yet his reign was just a brief 12 years, like the sand in that hour glass yonder, it swiftly passed away. Nevertheless we as Court Master Masons, whether detractors or sympathisers, must work with evidence derived from discernible sources in an endeavour to formulate in our minds a balanced opinion of this controversial figure.

Athelstan the Protector of all English Masons was fearless. He was an illustrious, as well as a courageous warrior. Feared by his enemies and revered by his allies, he was loyal to no one but the Great Architect. Possessing such noble integrity and piety, that men preferred to envy him from a distance.

He had hitherto experienced an unsettled childhood. During his education as a nobleman it was mandatory to be trained to become a warrior. Following much conflict, in 927 he successfully united into one kingdom, all of the Angles, Saxons and Danes, proclaiming to be 'King of all the English'. A distinct privilege plus an opportunity reminiscent of King Solomon's reign over the 12 united tribes of Israel during their short-lived days of glory.

A compelling image of a fledgling society bound together by law, coupled with loyalty emerges. Athelstan the now peacemaker, as King, he established Law and order to England. The law played an important role in his affairs. It was to assume the greatest significance in his legacy to us today.

Social harmony was his ultimate goal, by introducing the right and fair regulation of society by recognition of mutual obligations between the different tribes of his land. Applying it equally to rich and poor, buyer and seller, citizen and foreigner, lord and liegeman, all were enforced by Athelstan's law.

Values we Masons prize today; the strong sense for the rule of law, tempered with mercy. Once again paralleling Solomon, who asked not for the Great Architect to do his work for him, but to be empowered to do it himself. As we too, at our initiation, faced that journey into darkness and ignorance until brought to light and understanding as Master Masons. Indeed, brethren, we were all asked where we were first made a mason. - In our hearts I hear you answer.

The best preparation is a hearing heart, a heart that is sensitive and obedient to the Great Architect and being both responsive to the rights and needs of others.

We started to learn a new beginning in thought, word and deed. Athelstan, by enforcement of his expanded legal code, strengthened control over his large kingdom. He also instituted programs to eliminate inflation via currency control. Guidelines were established for the measurement of silver, currency was regulated to control silver's weight and to penalise fraudsters Athelstan, was allegorically entering the Second degree, viewing that journey up the stairs into the middle chamber of the Temple, his laws suggest that no individual should be forced or coerced to ascend, but should do so after discerning (literally, to hear) what is right and just. There Athelstan received his spiritual wages from the middle chamber by introducing the foundations, ideal for good kingship and sound government in general. The culture of learning both in the arts and sciences had begun. He was on his own initiation to the path of enlightenment.

“As a man sowth, so shall he reap” Harsh punishments were decreed by the King for anyone in violation of his new laws, whereas our punishments are now purely symbolic. Athelstan, in order to encourage the growth of towns and cities, devised new construction projects in urban areas throughout the country. Buying and selling was largely confined to the burhs, encouraging town life. Areas of settlement in the Danish towns were consolidated into shires. By marrying off four of his half-sisters to various overseas rulers he built up relationships with foreign nations, placing England at the heart of European affairs. His years though few were full of triumph.

Likewise, Solomon, son of David, a name derived from the word “Shalom,” meaning “peace” he too built allied relationships with foreign nations. He fostered trade partnerships for the building of the temple in Jerusalem. Both Kings, as we do, were taking a critical self-examination of themselves. Developing responsibility for their destiny, they became reborn, undertaking their tasks in the presence and with the help of others who were like-minded. They both established assemblies, very much like our own Court here. Athelstan the peacekeeper had matured, laying the foundations of future good citizenship.

A trait we as masons strive to enhance, via our journey through the degrees. Indeed, we are entrusted with a word which is shown as an ear of corn by a stream of water, implying maturity, as corn if well watered will render grain, enlightening our darkness as well as our ignorance., Both men as we do, made the liberal arts and sciences their future studies.

As Solomon with his wisdom and understanding, quickly became known worldwide. He wrote thousands of proverbs, composed many songs, such as the book of Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon. He accumulated knowledge of trees, animals, birds, fish and much more. Men came from all nations to hear the Wisdom of Solomon, as did Azeb Queen of Sheba, Azeb meaning ‘Strong Stone’, her name matching the stature of Athelstan’s own of ‘Noble stone’.

Athelstan passionately studied Geometry, as a consequence he sent heralds into many lands for men expert in the science. He was a great collector of works of art and religious relics, which he used as inducements to his followers and churches in order to gain their support. He gave them a charter to hold an annual assembly. As King he instigated this General Assembly of all Masons to be held at York, giving them a deep charge for observation of all such articles as belonged to Masonry, in addition he issued a Royal Charter to them. This story is contained in the ‘Regius Manuscript’ today it is now known as “The York Legend”.

Both men remained destined for special work—both as warriors and peacemakers. Together both Kings were used by the Great Architect to build a temple. Solomon began building his temple according to the blueprints that the Most High had revealed to David. It was constructed in Jerusalem on Mount Moriah. Athelstan sought to express his piety in the building of substantial churches including the first Minster at York.

It is likely that King Athelstan brought migrant architects from Europe or that the Pope sent trained Masonic Monks to assist in building these new churches and Cathedrals. These monks would be of the Comacine order or their descendants. As every Roman legion included its own Collegia of Engineers & masons; who would have been trained to build & repair fortifications needed by the soldiers. They would have been the best of their profession. Since Roman occupation of Britain

lasted for 400 years, ending about 410 AD, many masons & retired soldiers were given land in Britain as a reward for their services. Therefore the origins of operative Stone Mason guilds of Britain may come from the Roman military Collegia. Their influence is well documented in the Gothic construction of the Cathedrals. They are believed to be the bridge during the 'Dark Ages' of knowledge between the classical Roman works and the Gothic Art & Architecture of the Middle Ages.

This bridge of knowledge draws a veil to reveal the allegorical entrance to the Holy of Holies revealing the Ark of the Covenant, to take us into that third degree, with all its emblems of mortality suggesting the natural process of life and finally our demise. But is that ultimately our Masonic destination?

I would like to suggest that it is representing a regeneration of one's self. To learn the lesson of the third degree is to recall the words "All Master Masons are raised from a figurative death to a reunion with the companions of their former toil". In our quest for perfection, we hopefully achieve that final reward of redefining our character. By examining our soul, and becoming raised from the dead level to the living perpendicular, we **can** reunite with our fellow masons who have journeyed with us and found enlightenment in their own hearts.

Both Solomon and Athelstan like us brethren were not perfect and made big mistakes on that journey. Each endured their half-brothers attempt to rob them of their thrones. Solomon slew Adonijah, whereas Athelstan cast his half-brother Edwin adrift in an open boat leaving him to his fate. They all fell afoul of one of the seven deadly sins; (Ira) Wrath

The Virtues and Vices became concepts that most people in the Middle Ages would have known about and understood from a very early age. Today we Masons still consider many of the virtues worthy of imitation whilst the vices worthy of avoidance.

William Ketell, a priest at Beverley, tells the story of how King Athelstan, in 937, on his way north to fight the Scots, left his army and came to visit the tomb of Bishop John to ask in his prayers for victory in the forthcoming battle. In thanksgiving for the subsequent triumph, Athelstan gave certain privileges and rights such as the right of Sanctuary. In addition he rendered it, the Collegiate Church of St. John the Evangelist. This was administered by Canons who were expected to go and preach to neighbouring communities. As a consequence the church became a Minster. That imposing edifice perhaps symbolises the inner temple we all are trying to perfect in our own hearts.

In order for Masons to be ripe for temple building, it first takes a cerebral Athelstan to 'bait out' the ogres of our minds and slay them; to drive out the enemy within ourselves and secure a safe boundary, the centre, 'that point from which no master mason can materially err'.

It's a bloody job—it stains the hands, it mars the mind and it requires great labour. Yet to succeed is to have your own sanctuary from the unruliness of everyday life. We will then have been truly called from labour to rest.

Neil Armstrong

Fourth Draft – 30th April 2014.

“Freemasonry is a personal spiritual journey which has a beginning but no end. How we travel that journey depends on ourselves and the amount of energy and dedication that we wish to expend on the journey. Your brothers will show you the path and help you along the way, but it is your journey and only you can make it successful.”