

A Contrast And Lessons From Our Patron Saints

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As Masons here in Virginia we hold John the Baptist and John the Evangelist as our patron saints. We open lodges with “in the name of God and the Holy Saints John ...” In the opening of an Entered Apprentice lodge a question is answered by mentioning a lodge of the Holy Saint’s John at Jerusalem. Even before a candidate enters a lodge to be initiated and even before he is asked if it is of his own free will, he hears that what he is seeking is dedicated to the Holy Saints John. In June and December we remember them with festive table lodges and by attending local churches. So what, as Masons, should we learn from these two Johns?

I want to start with a section from the Entered Apprentice’s lecture where we state that Masons professing Christianity, dedicate their Lodges to St. John the Baptist and Saint John the Evangelist, who were two eminent Christian patrons in Masonry, and since their time there is represented in every regular and well governed lodge, a certain point within a Circle, bordered by two perfect parallel Lines, representing St. John the Baptist and St. John the Evangelist, and on the top rests the Book of Constitutions. In going round this circle we necessarily touch upon those two Parallel Lines as well as the Book of Constitutions, and while a Mason keeps himself circumscribed within their precepts, it is impossible he can materially err.

But what does this really mean to us?

First a short introduction to the two Saints

John the Baptist was born to Zacharias and Elizabeth who had John in their later years and viewed him as a Gift of God which is a meaning of the name John. Zacharias was a priest of the Jewish temple and exposed John to the teachings

and practices of the Temple from birth. John was as the prophet who would prepare the way for the coming light of the Messiah. His method of preparation was through an immersion in water as a physical sign of repentant baptism. From the bible John the Baptist is described by his inflexible integrity, which induced him to forego every minor consideration in discharging his obligations; the unselfish firmness with which he met Martyrdom rather than betray his duty; his steady disapproval of vice and his continued preaching of repentance and virtue make him a fit patron for our Masonic Institution. In each of the first four books of the New Testament, John the Baptist is described in the same way: As a Cousin of Christ, Some references place him a mere six months older than Jesus. The Gospels portray him as a voice crying in the wilderness whose purpose was to prepare the way of the lord and to make his path straight. He preached a single-minded righteous purpose to life; that one must live in a holy manner and that deviation from that manner was simply not acceptable. With such inflexible fidelity, John the Baptist is portrayed as a difficult person who preached a simple austere discipline. He was clear in purpose and clear in his beliefs. This refusal to change his beliefs put him on a path of conflict that resulted in his imprisonment and eventual beheading by order of King Herod at the request of his stepdaughter Salome.

Of John the Evangelist, we learn of his teachings to cultivate Brotherly love. The mystic nature of his Apocalyptic visions, is somewhat similar to the mystic communications of Freemasonry and are reasons for his veneration among Masons. Saint John the Evangelist is also credited with the most mystic book of the Bible being that of Revelations which speaks in allegory and dreams similar to the obtuse style found in some of our

Masonic writings. A summation of his teachings is that “God is love.”

Contrasting the two Saints

So when we consider these two patron saints we see different approaches in their practice of their faith: One was strict and inflexible in his application, the other taught tolerance and love. These differences in approach are particularly interesting in that by most accounts John the Evangelist together with Peter and Andrew were followers of John the Baptist, and later became disciples of Jesus (John 1:35-42). Even with this common grounding albeit teacher to student, their approaches appear to be fundamentally different.

Other contrasts between these two patron saints include their life spans. As mentioned earlier John the Baptist was beheaded by Herod in 33 AD. He had attained 38 years of age. He was born in Judea, lived in the wilderness of Judea and died in the fortress at Machaerus in what is now Jordan just on the other side of the Dead Sea not far from his homeland.

John the Evangelist lived into his late nineties and died from natural causes. He outlived all of the other Apostles, all of which had died as Martyrs. Saint Irenæus speaks of the very many places throughout Asia Minor visited by the Apostle John and his eventual residence in Ephesus where he died in 101 AD and where he supposedly wrote the fourth Gospel.

Although his father was a priest, John the Baptist lead an austere and primitive existence, we all have heard the stories of him living in the wilderness eating locusts and honey to survive. John the Baptist taught a basic rigid and strict adherence to faith. John the Evangelist was a learned and educated man who brought knowledge and understanding into his ministry.

Their feast dates also represent a contrast with the feast for John the Baptist being during the hot

summer months of June near the extreme of the summer solstice and John the Evangelist being celebrated in December near the winter solstice.

John the Baptist is often represented with the symbol of water and a lamb whereas John the Evangelist is symbolized by fire and the Eagle. Both symbols that we use in Masonry.

Their approaches, lives and deaths were extremely different. We can continue with the contrasts between these two patron saints but I want to leave you with hopefully a useful thought.

Recall back to that section of the EA lecture with the parallel lines and circle. With the lines representing the two Saints, between them we see a dualism in their practices that shows us a balance important not only in our individual way of practicing our religion but also in our daily lives by balancing the zeal and enthusiasm that can push us to intolerance and inflexibility with the understanding and knowledge to love and forgive. This keeps us on a balanced path towards attaining a well spent life. As we leave here today, take a moment to visit in the great hall, and view the painting of our forefathers celebrating a Saint John Service and reflect on how the balance and lessons from our patron saints that can help us live a better balanced and fulfilling life.

I close with a reference back to our closing and a remembrance of the teaching of John the Evangelist who in his last days of his long life, was carried in front of the congregation of the Church at Ephesus. His sole exhortation was, "Little children, love one another." When asked for other lessons, he remarked that if they practiced this simple commandment that was enough.

So today when we close this Master Mason's lodge remember our Patron Saint John the Evangelist and his lessons when you hear “May Brotherly prevail and every moral and social virtue unite and cement us.”

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