

Chapter 4: Leadership – Freemasonry's Link with Plato

In every home in every country and continent of our small planet, we can all recall watching our television screens as two United Airlines planes made a very conscious, direct, collision-course into the North and South Towers of the World Trade Centre. Throughout the world, we watched in total disbelief.

This occurred on one very memorable morning in September 2001.

Looking back to that day, as those towers collapsed they seemed to symbolise a transition in human history. The event seemed to draw a line in the sand between events in human history which had occurred *before* that day and events in human history occurring *after* that day. In the few short years that have passed since that tragic day, this understanding has been captured in our everyday language. We refer to events by the expression that is wholly an Americanism – namely - “pre” or “post-9/11”.

So in this post 9/11 era, we are arguably more committed than at any other time in human history to want to see true leadership properly demonstrated. Pollution, war, genocide, terrorism, global warming - as well as nuclear and arms proliferation have affected us all.

They have made us feel less than comfortable about our medium to long term survival as a human race without the benefit of the correct exercise of disciplined leadership.

Ours is essentially a tragic age, so we refuse to take it tragically. The cataclysm has happened; we are among the ruins; we start to build up new little habitats, to have new little hopes.

With these words, D.H. Lawrence described the gloomy realisation that not only the way of life (but the way of *thinking* that had existed for so long) had disappeared amongst the ruins of the Great War.

These words are equally apt for us today.

So now, we are more demanding of those who lead us at both local as well as global levels. We want to see our politicians, our religious leaders, our CEO's - demonstrate *ethics* in the way they conduct their lives and illustrate *humanity* in the way that they handle the ever-growing complexities of human life. Boiling all this down to one principle - we expect our leaders to *perform*; to exhibit a calibre of thinking and behaviour that supports their right to *stewardship*. Stewardship is an old-fashioned word that is rapidly gaining ground once again as a term describing the *attitude* that a strong leader demonstrates in his or her life when their chief motivating principle in life is to be *of service to others*.

On this point, Plato was exceptionally clear. On this one point he was emphatic. When the compass of a leader's mind points to stewardship... to being of service to others, it is at this moment that we see the distinction between a true leader and a *pretend* leader. Here is what Plato wrote on the matter:

No one will ever make a commendable master without having been a servant first; one should be proud not so much of ruling well but of serving well.

And again:

To be the servant of God is the proper measure of servitude; excess consists in being the servant of men.

You and I understand that the real problem is that deficiencies in leadership are not always easy to spot immediately. Deficiencies can masquerade behind winning words and platitudes. Though

The Influence of Plato's Republic on Freemasonry and Masonic Ritual.

these leadership deficiencies are usually uncovered and addressed over time, sometimes these deficiencies can have catastrophic – even fatal effects – if not identified in time.

Plato understood this. If there was ever a moment in his life which he could mark as the moment when it became the one abiding passion in his life to address, it was just as the sun rose over Athens one morning in 399 BCE. At that time his friend and mentor Socrates was executed by command of the laws of Athens.

The Last Day of Socrates

A prison official had brought to him a cup filled with poisonous hemlock. Once Socrates had drunk the hemlock, he laid down.

The penultimate gesture of his 70 year-long life, was to cover his face with his cloak.

At this signal the prison official began to pinch his feet, asking if he could feel any sensation. When Socrates replied that he could not, the guard continued pinching Socrates' legs and moving up his body. The objective of this strange exercise was (as Plato described it), to check the advance of the hemlock which Plato explained – was characterised by the sensation of numbness coursing through his system. When the numbness reached his waist, Socrates drew the cloak away from his face and spoke his last words

Crito, we owe a cock to Asclepius; make this offering to him and do not forget.

Socrates last instruction to his friend Crito was to offer a *thanksgiving sacrifice* to Asclepius, the god of medicine for releasing him from this mortal life to an everlasting one.

While Socrates' last day (as depicted by Plato) was filled with a dramatic, philosophic and noble tenderness, it also left a lasting impression on Plato's life. Plato was unable to reconcile Socrates' death with a just system of government – specifically - with a just system of *leadership*. From that day until the end of his life, Plato thought about, argued about, and tried to put into practice, a method of training a man *or a woman* to become a true leader so that the circumstances leading to the guilty verdict against Socrates would never, ever again be repeated.

One of the most important things that happened as a result of all this was the writing of a book that is known to us as Plato's *Republic*.

Before we investigate *Republic*, we will have a brief look at Plato's life so we can understand why he thought and felt the way he did. Understanding this, we will have a strong basis to appreciate how his words and sentiments resonate throughout our Ritual.