

Good evening brethren and a warm welcome to you all to this annual assembly. As you may be aware in the past we have sent invitations to this meeting via lodge scribes. However this year we have sent invitations out to members directly which I am so pleased to say, appears to have led to a significant increase in the numbers attending this meeting and dining. Thank you for responding so positively

I continue to rely on the help and support of the Provincial Executive and I express my grateful thanks to them. Events such as this evening do not 'just' arrange themselves; they require considerable organisation and this is on top of the normal day to day running of the Provincial Office. I will always be appreciative of the amount of their own time, without any reimbursement, the secretariat give up. In addition I would like to thank W. Bro Les Francis and his team for their assistance in escorting me, my Deputy and my Assistant.

I am sure you will join me in congratulating the two brethren who deservedly received the Royal Ark Mariner Grand Lodge honours in December, namely W. Bros Stuart Cairns and Greg Smith. You may recall in previous years I have been able to nominate three brethren for Grand rank. Unfortunately due to a reduction in our numbers I am now only permitted to nominate two which makes a difficult choice even harder. However these two brethren richly deserve the honour and W. Bro Greg has already represented me at a number of installations. Of course as W. Bro Stuart is Assistant Provincial Grand Master he attends them in his own right.

To the brethren I have just appointed, make the most of this year and of course attend as many of the Provincial visits as you can. There are only four of them and as I have previously stated your support is greatly appreciated by the lodges you visit. The honour is not given but earned with the expectation that you will continue to work for the benefit of your lodge as well as the province.

There is no denying brethren that we live in troubled times masonically speaking. You cannot fail to have noticed the number of Craft lodges which have closed. This naturally has a knock on effect to our Mark and Mariner lodges as the members of these Craft lodges are the feedstock for our order. Unfortunately the reduction in Lodges brings an increase in amount each brother has to pay to support their building. I therefore

charge each and every one of you to go back to your lodges and think seriously about your lodge and whether, if you are suffering from a lack of candidates and your attendance is dropping, you can make any changes to the way your lodge operates for example by holding your meeting at a time or on a day which is more suitable to your members.

As part of a recruitment drive W. Bro Cairns has agreed to hold a number of open evenings to which Craft masons will be invited. These evenings will be held in four locations across the province. I would encourage you to attend these open evenings to show to the prospective members what a wonderful order we are members of. And encourage you to 'bring a craft brother' with you.

To go along with these open evenings I have put together a leaflet which will be given to prospective members and circulated to lodges to be given out to potential and actual candidates.

Additionally I have decided to introduce a scheme to encourage brethren to join additional lodges. With immediate effect, if a brother from within this province joins another Mark or Mariner lodge within this province, Provincial Grand Lodge will pay the joining fee and two years Grand and Provincial Grand Lodge dues. The caveats to this are that the lodge they join must have eighteen or fewer members, they must remain a member of their mother lodge and the lodge they join for a minimum of four years and they will be expected, if possible, to take office. I must stress that this is purely optional. If a brother wishes to visit another lodge without joining he will of course be perfectly free to do so.

During the past year Hexham Royal Ark Mainer lodge celebrated their golden anniversary having been consecrated in 1964. Unfortunately the numbers attending were fewer than I, or I am sure the members of Hexham Royal Ark Mariners, anticipated. None the less it was an extremely enjoyable evening with a candidate being elevated who is with us this evening. I understand Hexham hold the travelling sceptre, please go and support them and consider joining; after all it has never been cheaper!

One point I would stress however is that although we are renowned for our perhaps slightly more relaxed style there is still a need for earnestness in our ceremonies particularly when a candidate is being

elevated. It is important that participants feel relaxed but also we should ensure the ceremony is conducted with the seriousness the brethren being elevated deserve. We have ample opportunity for relaxing and sharing a joke during our festive boards.

As I have frequently stated in the past, in my opinion ritual should not be read. However I believe there are circumstances where reading the ritual is preferable to someone being constantly prompted which does nothing to make the ceremony flow. These circumstances include ill health of the person delivering the ritual. I would rather someone read ritual rather than felt that they could not go "on the ladder". This being said it is important that it is read with the correct inflection and it should have been rehearsed beforehand.

Finally I would like to thank the members of Triangle Lodge for allowing us to hijack their meeting and the management of the Whitley Bay building for their assistance and cooperation. May the Supreme Commander of the Universe have you in His holy keeping now and forever more.