

Village Sermons on the Baptismal Service
by John Keble

SERMON XXXIII.

September 15, 1850.

Ps. lxxxiv. 7.

“They will go from strength to strength, and unto the God of gods appeareth every one of them in Sion.”

IF you look back to the commencement of the Holy Baptismal Service, you will find that it began with setting forth to us our natural condition; “All men are conceived and born in sin;” and this is declared to be the reason why the child is brought to be baptized. Our Saviour Christ saith, “None can enter into the Kingdom of God, except he be regenerate and born anew of water and of the Holy Ghost.” “I beseech you, therefore, to call upon God the Father through our Lord Jesus Christ, that this child may be baptized with water and the Holy Ghost, and received into Christ’s Holy Catholic Church, and be made a lively member of the same.” Thereupon the prayers are offered, the covenant made, the child baptized and signed with the sign of the Cross, and thanks given to Almighty God. Is the child then left to itself, to work out its own salvation without any special help from above? Far from it. Baptism, great as it is, is but the beginning of an endless stream of mercy. The Good Shepherd is not contented to have found the lost sheep, but He layeth it also on His Shoulders rejoicing, and beareth it all the way home. And thus, as the Holy Service begins with declaring what we are by nature, and how we may, by God’s mercy, be put into a better condition, so it ends with declaring what we are made by grace in Baptism, and how we may go on to improve the gift unto the end. For that is the meaning of the last words of the exhortation to the Godmothers and Godfathers, to which we are now come. “It is your parts and duties to see that this child be virtuously brought up, to lead a godly and a Christian life? remembering always that Baptism doth represent unto us our profession.” Thus, before we go away from the Font, we are reminded once more of the great work which has been wrought there, and by it of all our future duty. We are put in mind, how in those few minutes a great change has been wrought, a great miracle; how very different the child’s condition is now from what it was when he was brought into Church, although to the outward eye there is no difference. As saith the Scripture, “The world knoweth us not, because it knew Him not;”¹ the world, which could not see the difference between God Incarnate and a mere man, neither can it see the difference between a child of wrath and a child of God. But Faith has eyes to see the difference; Faith acknowledges in the little child, given back from the Font to the Church’s arms, an instance of God’s miraculous mercy in raising a soul from death to life: Faith sees in Holy Baptism a lively image of the Death and Burial of Christ, and of His rising again from the dead. To him that believeth, Holy Baptism, especially if it be done by immersion, represents our profession; when he sees it, he sees with his mind’s eye both the Creed and the Life of a Christian. Just consider this for a moment. First, when you see a child christened, you see things done, which are indeed most simple in themselves, yet,

¹ 1 John 3:1

taken altogether, they contain in them very many of the chief truths which we are bound to believe. The three Immersions, or Pourings, with the Threefold Holy Name, represents to us the mystery of the Trinity in Unity: the plunging of the child in the water is like the Death and Burial of Jesus Christ: his rising up again is like Christ's Resurrection: the water represents the sanctifying Power of God's Spirit: the ministering Priest represents Jesus Christ, God and Man, pouring that Good Spirit upon us, or, as St. John Baptist said, baptizing us with the Holy Ghost. Thus does Holy Baptism represent our profession, in respect of what we are to believe of God's saving mercy; and no less does it represent our profession, in respect of what we are to do, that we may not forfeit that mercy. It is an outward and visible sign, both of our blessing and of our duty. It is a sure pledge, whenever we think of it, that we are dead unto sin and risen again unto righteousness: and no less is it a lesson which cannot be mistaken, how we are to lead the rest of our short lives here on earth. It represents unto us, how that we have promised and vowed to follow the example of our Saviour Christ, and, by God's mercy, to be made like unto Him: "that as He died and rose again for us, so should we, who are baptized, die from sin and rise again unto righteousness." We should "die to sin," i. e. we should account it as much out of the question, for us who are baptized to commit and indulge wilful sin, as for a dead body to do the works of a living one. "He that is dead," says the Apostle "is freed from sin," i. e. a dead man can no more commit murder, nor steal, nor swear, nor add to his account by any sin here committed: so ought a Christian to try and behave himself, as if he were, (as indeed he is if he will be,) freed from all necessity of wilfully sinning, free to serve God in holy obedience continually. This deliverance, this inward death and resurrection, the outward act of Baptism both represents and seals and conveys to all receiving it as infants, or receiving it worthily after they are grown up. But it represents also the life which God expects us to lead: as is explained in the latter part of this exhortation to the sponsors. Baptism, so far as it is like death, is like that which a Christian should be always practising, i. e. our daily dying unto sin; and so far as it is like Resurrection, it no less resembles our daily rising again unto righteousness. At the Font we died with Christ; let this remind us that we are daily to mortify all our evil and corrupt affections. At the same Font we rose again with Him: let this equally remind us that we are daily to proceed in all virtue and godliness of living. Holy Baptism then, by what is done in it, not only teaches us some of the chief points of the Creed, but also what we ourselves are to do: it sets before our very eyes both God's part in the mystery of our Salvation, and also (if without offence I may so call it) our own part. Whenever we see a child christened, whenever we remember our own Christening, it is something to put us in mind of our present duty. We should say, when temptations are troublesome, "I was dead and buried in Baptism, how can I let my sins be so awake and alive in me, as that I should do this wrong thing?" And when we are inclined to be slothful and lukewarm and to omit any part of our duty, we should say, "I am risen again in Baptism, I am made partaker of the new life in Christ, how can I lie still like a dead body, and suffer the hour and the day to pass, without doing any thing to show that I live, or rather that Christ liveth in me?"

In this way, says the Church to the Godfathers, "you are to take care, that the child be brought up;" and with a view to this, you must even now be put in mind of his Confirmation, which is to obtain him health of spirit, and strength to do all that he has promised. "Ye are to take care that this child be brought to the Bishop to be confirmed by

him, so soon as he can say the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the ten Commandments, in the vulgar tongue, and be further instructed in the Church-Catechism set forth for that purpose." Why are the Sponsors to take care that the child shall be brought to be confirmed? Because Confirmation, if not exactly a Sacrament, is nevertheless so great a help to Christian people in the way of grace; for in it they receive the Holy Spirit, to encourage and strengthen them in that hard work, the keeping of the Commandments of God. And as the Sponsors' office is chiefly useful to young children, before their own mind can be made up, it seems very natural that it should be made especially useful in bringing them worthily to Confirmation: at which time they are supposed capable of full consideration and of choosing their own way of life: and so the Sponsors' office does in a manner cease. And what so natural, as that they should take leave of them by presenting them to God's minister to be confirmed? so leaving them, as it were in *His Arms*, Who Alone can guide them safe through the world. Accordingly the Church directs, that each person at his confirmation should have a sponsor to witness it: and I wish this to be taken notice of.

Finally, the Godfathers and Godmothers are told what the young Christian is to be taught, in order to be a worthy candidate for Confirmation. He must be able to say, word for word, the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the ten Commandments, and he must be so far further instructed in the Catechism, as to be able to answer, if not in exact words yet in their meaning, the questions contained in it. That is the least which the Church will accept as the groundwork of Christian Knowledge. But that being once learned and the person otherwise well-disposed, in ordinary cases the Confirmation should not be put off. The Prayer-Book says, "They shall be brought to the Bishop *as soon* as they can say the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the Ten Commandments, in the vulgar tongue, and be further instructed in the Church-Catechism set forth for that purpose." Bishops indeed ordinarily direct us, not to bring our young persons till they are about fifteen years old. But if there be any young person who is really well informed and well-disposed, the Bishops generally allow us to bring such an one for Christ's blessing, though he be a year or two under the age which they have marked out.

And so, the Baptismal Service being all over, we return to our places in the Church, and go on with the regular Service, the Holy Angels rejoicing with us, that another soul is taken out of Satan's kingdom, another son or daughter born into God's Family.

The Angels, my brethren, rejoice greatly; we may not doubt it. But what, in general, are the thoughts of us mortals, who are most nearly concerned with the blessings and mysteries of Baptism? Alas! too often we think very little of it; a child is christened; very well, we say to ourselves: that is no such extraordinary thing. Nay we are very little careful to remember our own Christening, and, when we are put in mind of it, we do not make much of the thought. And yet a King's Son, a great Prince, one born to a royal inheritance, as he would find plenty to put him in mind of it, so he would commonly think much of it himself. We are sons of the great King, ourselves made Kings and Priests unto Him. Can we so entirely forget our own dignity and the treasures freely given and carefully guarded for us, as to go on, as if nothing had happened? Alas! too often it is even so. People live and die and go away to be judged, almost without ever thinking of their Baptism. We may be sure it is so, when they take no pains to improve. If a man really and truly believed, that, he having been baptized and born again in Christ, Jesus

Christ was in him by His Spirit, if he really believed this and kept it in his thoughts, would he not strive and pray to be better than he is? It must come across his mind, how very very little he is doing, in comparison with what he might and ought to do. When a man is entrusted with a great treasure, to lay out to the best advantage, and knows in his heart that he is not at all laying it out well, nor deeply considering how to do so, would it not greatly alarm him if he heard a Voice from Heaven, "The owner of this treasure will soon be here; he will demand a strict account; he will expect to find you making a profit, laying out his stores to the best advantage? What if you, hearing those warnings, were conscious to yourself that your stock had been allowed to lie dead, and you had nothing to shew for all that you had the care of? Would you not be ready to sink into the earth? to "say to the mountains, fall on us, and to the hills, cover us,"² and hide us from the wrath of Him Who so trusted us, and to Whom we have proved so unfaithful? Oh my brethren! consider with me for a few moments what we might have been, every one of us, had we, according to the Church's injunction, continually mortified all our evil and corrupt affections, and proceeded daily in all virtue and godliness of living. We might, for instance, have come greatly to delight in our prayers; the sound of the Church-bell might have come to us with a real charm; we might have been able to say with the Holy Psalmist, "How amiable are Thy Tabernacles, O Lord of Hosts:"³ it might have been a true joy to us, both Sundays and weekdays, when they said, "let us go into the House of the Lord." This might have been our lot, had we improved our baptismal grace. But now I fear there are few hearts which are able to feel in this way. Again, had we attended to the Church's good advice, and believing that "Christ was in us of a truth, had we continually mortified our evil and corrupt affections, mastering and keeping down our flesh, that it might not rebel against the gracious presence of Him, the very God of Purity, how far better and happier we should have been by this time than now we are; how much more inclined to fasting and self-denial and to strict and religious ways of ordering those pleasures even, which would still be lawful and right for us. What different things would the daily meals and festive entertainments of Christians be, how differently would husbands and wives live one with another, if we were careful, as we might have been, to honour one another and the Presence of God within us, partakers as we all are of a Divine Nature by our membership with Christ! How far deeper and more perfect would our penitence be, whenever unhappily we fall into wilful sin, if we well considered what a thing it must be to sin at all knowingly after Baptism, after receiving the Holy Spirit in our hearts and bodies to join us to Christ and to change us into His likeness.

In these respects, and in our whole Christian life, what we are, we see and feel; what we might have been, we may partly understand by the word of God and the good example of His Saints: and if we had no more to think of, miserable indeed would our condition be. But thanks be to His infinite and miraculous mercy, we are permitted further to think and to hope, what we may yet be, if we will diligently and humbly make use of the little time which yet remains. We may, by His Grace, be true Penitents, bewailing and lamenting our sinful and imperfect lives, and seeking to bring forth worthy fruits of Repentance: only let us try immediately, perseveringly, and in earnest. O that it would please him to pour out upon us even now, His good and loving Spirit, upon *us*, I say, who are here present, that we might from this very hour begin, one and all of us, to

² Hosea 10:8, Luke 23:30, Revelation 6:16

³ Psalm 84:1

shew forth our Baptism in our lives, far more truly, far more courageously, far more lovingly, than we have yet done! And one fruit of that good Spirit will assuredly be that Parents and Teachers, Godfathers and Godmothers, will go on making more and more of their precious and tender charge, the little ones of Christ. If we make much of our own souls and of theirs, they will learn themselves to make much of them also. If we make light of them, fearful indeed is the end we must expect, both to them and to us.