

Village Sermons on the Baptismal Service
by John Keble

SERMON X.
September 18, 1849.

1 COR. vi. 11.

“But ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified, in the Name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God.”

WHEN the Priest in the first collect has put God in remembrance of His great deliverances, wrought for His people in old time by water, and of the mysterious Baptism of Jesus Christ, he goes on and beseeches Him to apply the same mercy to the particular infant who is now brought to the Font; “We beseech thee, for Thine infinite mercies, that Thou wilt mercifully look upon this child.” The goodness and bounty, which is offered to all the world, is here attracted as it were to the soul and body of that one little boy or girl; as when the lightning, which is mysteriously and invisibly floating all above us in the whole Heaven, is attracted to a particular point, and strikes upon it. The prayer of the Church does as it were attract it. The little child in its nurse’s arms by the Font is, as it were, one called out of all the millions of people that are on earth, to receive an especial favour of God: as if some great king, having before him all the people of his kingdom, should call out one of them singly and apart, and, in the presence of all the rest, shew himself ready to grant him some great favour. In such a case we may well imagine, how attentively all the Court and the king’s whole army—all the people, rich and poor, would watch and listen, to know what special favour was going to be conferred on that person. So, no doubt the Saints and Angels from Heaven are round the Font, though we see them not, and watch when a child is christened; and so do all good Christian people who are present; they try to join, with all their heart, in the petitions which the Church puts up, remembering at the same time with a thankful heart, that they have, by the same mercy, been made partakers of the same blessing, and, with a penitent heart, how they have trifled with it, or abused it.

Now, what the Church prays for is this; “wash him and sanctify him with the Holy Ghost.” Grant that, when his body is washed with water, his soul may be washed by the power of God’s Spirit in the Blood of Jesus Christ, which cleanseth from all sin. So St. Paul told the Corinthians, that they, even those among them who had sinned most grievously while they were heathens, were nevertheless washed, sanctified, justified, in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God. If they were washed from their grievous sins, much more are little children, who as yet have done no wilful sin, washed in Baptism from the guilt of their birth-sin, which they had from Adam. And we have no doubt that, by God’s mercy, they are so washed; so that, if they die before they commit actual sin, they are unquestionably saved for ever. For being washed, they are sanctified; i. e. they are made holy, made holy to the Lord, by the gift of the Holy Ghost, the good Spirit sent into their hearts. And God will not part with His own. What is once His, He means it to be His for ever. It cannot be lost, except it lose itself by sin. O what a happy condition is this, and what a fearful thing to deal carelessly with it, or to put ourselves wilfully out of it! But let us consider it more particularly; for so the Collect goes on to

describe it.

The fruit and effect of Baptism is this first; that the child or person is delivered from the wrath of God. It was born, as the Catechism says, a child of wrath, but now it is made a child of grace. It was born in original sin, and in the wrath of God; but as soon it shall be made partaker of the laver of Regeneration in Baptism, it will be received into the number of the children of God, and heirs of everlasting life. God is naturally so far angry with that child, as He discerns in it that taint of Adam's sin, which is against His holy will, and is sure to bear evil fruit. Therefore we pray, that the child, as the first good effect of Baptism, may be delivered from God's wrath.

Christian Fathers and Mothers, have you ever tried to think worthily of this? If you saw your child exposed to a roaring lion, hungry and furious, and seeking whom he might devour, and knew at the same time that you could do nothing of yourselves to take him out of the lion's reach, and that the only person who could help him was for some reason angry with him, would it not be enough to break your heart? and would you not look on him as the best of friends, who should reconcile that person to you and your child, and teach you how to obtain protection and favour, so that the little helpless creature might not be the prey of the cruel beast? Now, this is just what happens in Baptism. The devil is a roaring lion, seeking to devour your child. Your child, because of his sinfulness which he has from Adam, is out of God's favour; yet no one can help him but God: and Jesus Christ the Son of God has taught and invited you how to bring your child to God, and obtain that gracious help. Surely He is yours and your child's best friend; surely this is a favour never to be forgotten, never to be out of our minds all day long; surely you cannot do less in return, than serve Him truly as long as you live, and teach your children, whom He has saved so wonderfully, to do the same.

The Collect goes on, and prays that the child, being delivered from God's wrath, may be received into the Ark of Christ's Church. Now we are used to consider it as a matter of course for every child that is born among us to be baptized; so that it is hard, very hard for us to understand, how it should be a special favour; and thus, unhappily, too many of us take no pains to be thankful, when children are baptized, nor to remember our own Baptism with thankfulness. But let us carry back our thoughts again to the time which the Church here puts us in mind of. Let us remember Noah and his Ark. Had you been a father or mother when the flood came on, should you have thought it a small favour then, to be admitted into the Ark? Should you have counted it a matter of course? You would not, because you would have seen with your eyes, that only eight persons, Noah, with his three sons, and their four wives, were there admitted. O what a favour would you then have thought it, how would you have looked and longed for your children and yourself to be, if possible, among that happy number who were admitted into that vessel of God's own building, and whom the Lord shut in there with His servant Noah! And yet that flood of water could but drown the bodies of men; but the flood to which we look forward, the flood of fire, will in some mysterious way inwrap and torment both the souls and bodies of those who are so miserable as not to be caught away from it. All who shall not then be found in Christ's Church will perish; and Holy Baptism is the ordinary way into Christ's Church; and when we come to think it over, though we ourselves may know but few unbaptized, yet the whole number of the baptized, taking all the world over and all ages of it, is small, I fear, in comparison with those who are not so. Why, it was 4000 years before there was any Baptism, any Body of Christ on earth at all; and, for the

2000 years or near it which have since passed, few in comparison of the nations of the world have been Christians. At this present time it is believed that not more than two or three out of eight even call themselves such. The rest, being born among Turks or Heathens, continue without God in the world. So, you see, the Church goes on as it began, and as St. Paul says God's people always have gone on—not taking in the whole world but in the manner of a remnant, and by way of election—as a few out of many: and those who belong to it, or have their children belonging to it, ought to own it as a special favour; as it is written, “He predestinated us unto the adoption of children through Jesus Christ unto Himself.”¹ And if we fall away, so much the greater is our misery.

But the collect goes on to pray for those graces which still secure us against falling away: that the child may not only be received into the ark of Christ's Church, but also may be “stedfast in faith, joyful through hope, and rooted in charity.” What good and gracious and beautiful words are these, my brethren, to be spoken over young children in the first days of their tender life; spoken by God's ordinance, in His own special Presence, and to be sealed presently by Christ's Holy Sacrament of Baptism. How sad to think of their being slighted, as they too often are, at the time: and of the kind of lives afterwards led by too many of those, over whom that Prayer has been said. For consider what it is, to be stedfast in faith. It is, to look to the great things out of sight, not only now and then; but continually and regularly. It is, to remember every morning, you have an account to give and every evening, that you are so much nearer that account; and all day long, that your doings are being put down there. It is, to turn your heart to Jesus Christ, God and Man, crucified for you, and to refrain from sin for His sake; not merely to speak affectionately, and to be at times touched with the thought of Him. To be stedfast in faith is moreover, to believe our Lord when He says, that *we* must take up our cross, *we* must lead strict lives, we must be zealous and repent. It is, to part with our worldly wealth gladly for Christ's sake and the Gospel's, looking forward to the treasure in Heaven. It is, to turn away our eyes from improper sights, because we know that those eyes shall one day have to look upon Jesus Christ. It is, to believe that, in Holy Communion, we verily and indeed take and receive the true Body and Blood of Christ, which is the life of our souls, as bread and wine of our bodies; so we cannot do without it. And he who believes this, will of course be earnest to come often to it. All this and more the Church prays for, when it prays that the baptized may be “stedfast in faith.” But alas! how unlike is all this to the ordinary course of those, over whom the Prayer has been said. To be tolerably decent and respectable; to go to Church once on a Sunday, when it is not too much trouble; to be no worse than other people—this is the religion of many in this Christian land. But is this being stedfast in faith? is this walking by faith, and not by sight? is this setting our affection on things above, not on things on the earth? O my brethren, think better of it; and you, my younger brethren especially, remember that the Prayer made over you was, not only that you might believe, but that you might be “*stedfast* in the faith;” that, having begun well, you should not suffer yourselves to be hindered; having been confirmed, you should be Communicants; and, having communicated once, you should go on doing so regularly. If you let yourselves be moved from such good rules for fear of men's opinions or ridicule, or for love of the world's pleasures, where is the stedfastness of your faith? and how are you to continue in the ark of Christ's Church? Only think how sad it will be, if these loving prayers, which were made over you at your

¹ Ephesians 1:5

Baptism, should be remembered at the Last Day, only to add to your shame and reproach for having lived so unsuitably to them.

You know the next thing asked for you at the Font was, that you might be “joyful through Hope.” Hope naturally makes men joyful and glad of heart. One reason, I suppose, why young persons are commonly merrier and more cheerful than old ones is, that they live more upon hope; they look forward to many pleasant things. So now the Church, in praying that the new Christian may be joyful in hope, prays that he may continue all his life long in the freshness of early youth, with joy and comfort looking on to pleasant things. But in order to this, there is but one true way; he must abide in the innocence also of his early youth; he must keep the good thing, which God gave him at the Font, unpolluted by grievous sin. Or, he must so truly repent that he may, according to Scripture, hope that God remembers his sin no more. Either way there must be a reasonable trust in God’s Pardon. Otherwise any joy which you feel, any notion of things going well, is a mere dream, not the joyfulness of Christian Hope. But if prayer, the Church or the Sacraments, be wilfully neglected, there can be no reasonable nor Scriptural trust in God’s Pardon. Let those look to it, who think it enough to say an earnest prayer or go to Church now and then; to have communicated once or twice in their whole lives. I do not imagine they would themselves say, that they thought they had such faith and hope as was asked for them at their Baptism.

But perhaps they may think they have charity, since they do not bear malice. I hope few or none do so, and are glad in some sort to help a neighbour in distress. Reflect, however, for one moment, what the charity is, which the Collect speaks of, when it says, “rooted in charity.” It means the true love of God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost; such a love, as our Saviour meant, when He said; “If ye love Me, keep My commandments. And this, not to come and go, as one might chance to be minded at the time, but regularly, as a matter of course; much in the same way as dutiful children love their parents, and do as they bid them. This is being “rooted” in the love of God, when we have hold of it, and do not waver about; as plants that are rooted have constant hold of the ground. And this is so necessary, that, as you well know, the word steadiness is very often used, as if it meant all manner of goodness in a young person. “Such an one is very steady,” is accounted one of the highest characters that can be given. And indeed what can be higher, provided it be truly spoken of any one, not by men only, but by the inhabitants of Heaven also? What higher praise than to say, he is steady, he is rooted in charity, he has fast hold of the true love both of God and of his neighbours, it is what he lives upon; in charity he has struck deep root; his leaves and fruit, his words and actions, are ordinarily such as Charity only can bring forth.

There is no higher praise than this to be given to the sons of men; nor is there any other way to their final blessing. Hear the end of our Collect. It prays that, “being stedfast in faith, joyful through hope, and rooted in charity, he may so pass the waves of this troublesome world, that finally he may come to the land of everlasting life, there to reign with Thee, world without end, through Jesus Christ our Lord.” Our life, my brethren, is a voyage. We are all embarked on it, whether we will or no. So far we have no choice. But Christ, that we may voyage safely, has put us in His ark, the Church. The rest is all at our own choice; whether we will abide in that Ark, by practising faith, hope, and charity, or whether we will wander from it, and be shipwrecked for ever. This is our choice; we sealed it once for all at our Baptism; we are called upon to renew it every day and hour.

Happy, through God's grace, if our daily and hourly choices do not contradict our first and most solemn choice.