

Village Sermons on the Baptismal Service
by John Keble

SERMON XI.
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ST. MATT. vii. 11.

“If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask Him.”

AS the first collect in the Baptismal Service pleads with God by His mercies to His ancient Church, so this second Collect puts Him in mind of His gracious ways at all times, and especially of His Son’s promises, whereby He encourages the Church to pray. We do not now mention the Ark and the Passage of the Red Sea, and the Baptism of our Lord, but we call Him “the aid of all that need, the helper of all that flee to Him for succour, the life of them that believe, and the resurrection of the dead.” And we put Him in mind of Christ’s sayings in His sermon on the mount, “Ask, and ye shall have; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you. For every one that asketh receiveth, and he that seeketh findeth, and to him that knocketh it shall be opened.”¹ All these mercies and promises are drawn down, as it were, by Holy Church in this prayer upon the head of the little child just coming to Holy Baptism.

She seems to plead with her great Maker and say, “Thou art the aid of all that need, and behold this child is in grievous need; ‘born in sin and the child of wrath,’ stripped of the Robe of original Righteousness, and lying half-dead by the wayside, like him who had fallen among those cruel thieves. Be Thou to him a good Samaritan, and bind up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine. Take him up in Thine Everlasting Arms, bring him to Thy Holy Church, and there have him taken care of, till Thou comest again.”

Again, the Church says, “Thou art the helper of all that flee to Thee for succour” against the enemies of his soul. For, though he cannot yet come of himself, nor feel, nor understand why he should wish to come, yet his very sobs and cries are a plain token what he would do, if he could know. Did you ever observe this, my brethren? Did it ever strike you, how children crying as they do is a token from Almighty God, how much they need a Saviour? Think, when you hear the little voice in such distress at the Font—think, what is indeed the truth, that you hear the poor helpless one crying out to Christ for succour: and lift up your hearts to discern and acknowledge, that he does not cry in vain. The Almighty and Immortal God, the Helper of all that flee to Him for succour, He has promised to be there: and there, you may be sure, He is. As surely as ever you hear the child cry, so surely, depend on it, is Jesus Christ at hand to answer that cry: to take the babe up in His Arms and quiet him with more gentle nursing than ever did mother or nurse on earth. What pity, that our sad transgressions should ever make such care void!

Again, we call upon God by His title, “Father of them that believe;” because Christ is our Life, and the Holy Ghost, since He joins us to Christ, is called in the Creed “the Lord and Giver of Life.” As in God, our Creator and Preserver, all men, whether

¹ Matthew 7:7-8, Luke 11:9-10

Christians or no, live, move, and have their being—their being and life in this world; and not only men, but the lower creatures also; so in God Incarnate, that is, God the Son, the Second Person in the Blessed Trinity made Man for us, Christians live by a special life; a heavenly and spiritual life; a life which they have, as members of Him. God is the Life of all: but Jesus Christ, God made Man, is especially the Life of them that believe. Observe that last word, my brethren. In order to keep the life which He has given us, we must in good earnest believe. The little child indeed, who is brought to be christened, cannot actually at the time believe—at least it seems as if he could not: and therefore our Lord mercifully accepts the faith of the Church presenting him, as if it were his own faith, and gives him life in Himself accordingly. But as soon as he is old enough, he must believe with a faith of his own; else the heavenly life that is in him will wither and die away. Now you know what we mean, when we talk of *believing*, and Faith. We mean persons looking always to the great things out of sight, which are to last for ever. And by unbelief and unbelievers, we mean people caring only for the things in sight, the things of this world. Such persons, although our Lord did actually give Himself to be their Life in Baptism, yet must not expect to live by Him, any more than they may expect to be warmed by a fire which they have wilfully allowed to go out. The fire was really lighted within them; they could not do it for themselves, it was kindly done for them; but whether they would feed it and keep it up or no, *this* did depend on themselves. I pray God, we may all look well to the fire which God Almighty graciously lit up in our hearts, when He made us members of Christ. Deadly indeed is the chill which will come upon us, if we once suffer that fire to go out; if, as St. Paul says, we “quench the Spirit.”² And it will go out, if we are not careful to feed it with Holy Communion, and to fan its flame, if I may say so, with prayer and good works.

Once again, we plead with God for the child which is going to be Christened, how that He is “the Resurrection of the dead.” Because the young child, being naturally Adam’s flesh and blood, is dead in sin, and cannot of itself do works pleasing to God, any more than a dead body can do the acts of a living one, therefore we put God in mind, that He has promised to be the Resurrection of the dead; as our Lord said over the grave of Lazarus, “I am the Resurrection and the Life.” And as Lazarus, presently after, arose from the grave at our Lord’s call, though he had been buried four days, so we trust and pray, that He will presently put forth His quickening power to raise this child from the state of spiritual death and helplessness in which it was born, and in which it is brought to the Font: that it may live with Him, and by His Spirit do works well-pleasing to Him. This is part of what we mean when we call upon God first before a Baptism, as being the Life of them that believe, and the Resurrection of the Dead.

And what is it we are going to ask of God, that we so earnestly and solemnly remind Him of all these His glorious attributes? Our Prayer is, this time, not at all for ourselves, but wholly for the little helpless child whom we are bringing to the Font. “We call upon Thee for this Infant that he, coming to Thy Holy Baptism, may receive remission of sins by spiritual Regeneration.” Remission of sins, we know, is given in Baptism. For St. Peter invited the Jews to “repent and be baptized every one of them in the Name of Jesus Christ, for the remission of sins,”³ and Ananias invited St. Paul to

² 1 Thessalonians 5:19

³ Acts 2:38

“arise and be baptised, and wash away his sins,”⁴ and the Church teaches us all in the Creed to acknowledge “one Baptism for the Remission of sins.” But what sin has this Babe to be forgiven, which is only perhaps a few hours old? You know, my Brethren, it has the stain and guilt of Adam’s sin born in itself, which is sure, like a plague-spot, to spread over soul and body, and ruin both, except it be forgiven and cleansed. How can we be thankful enough—any of us who care either for our own souls or for the souls of these little ones—to Him Who has provided so sure and merciful a way out of that sad condition, which is the beginning of all sin and misery. You know, if there were any frightful infectious disease in the place, and some one came, provided with a sure and easy way of guarding all your children against it, so that it should never take hold of them to hurt them, how earnestly you would seek that man, and thank him when he had made your children partakers of the benefit. Something like this you will do, if you are wise, next Friday. For the very fatal disease, though not yet in the place, is, we know, not far off; and we trust that, next Friday, One will be here, Who has both the power and will to cure or keep it off. Our Lord Jesus Christ will be here, to see what use we are making, in Church and out of Church, of the call which He has favoured us with by His servant the Bishop, to humble ourselves before Him in earnest. O let Him not find us cold, careless, indifferent, little caring for them and for our own souls! That would be a very likely way to provoke Him to let the pestilence loose upon us, which He has so long kept off. At any rate, were it actually here, I am sure you could not be careless about it; you would hasten to the bodily Physician at least. Why then are any of you cold, unthankful, indifferent about Baptismal grace, which Jesus Christ has Himself brought hither from Heaven for your children to be a sure safeguard, if you and they will so take it, against the far deadlier infection of sin? And then observe how this remission comes. Not simply by passing over the sin but by overcoming, and as it were overwhelming, it by an unspeakable free gift of goodness. For thus saith the Church: “That he, coming to Thy Holy Baptism, may receive remission of his sins by spiritual regeneration.” Not only are his sins forgiven, but he has the root of holiness put into him. Not only is the Evil One driven out, but the good Spirit has come to dwell in his place. Not only is he put in a better outward condition, as one of God’s kingdom and family, but he is inwardly and spiritually regenerated newborn unto righteousness and made a new creature. Henceforth One abides in this child, greater than he that is in the world. A spark of holy fire is lit up in him, which, if it be duly attended to, will consume all that is gross and earthly, and purify him altogether in the likeness of Jesus Christ. What a great thing is this to ask! And yet we dare ask it; for, besides all that is gone before, we have the great and precious promise of which the Collect next speaks.

“Receive him, O Lord, as Thou hast promised.” Here we bring our Saviour’s Words before God as our warrant, to receive without fail the blessing we ask for, great as it is; much in the same way as a person might present a ticket of admission to a hospital, or an order to receive a little bread or money or clothing, and, if signed by the proper person, it would ensure him the gift. Our Lord’s promise, in like manner, is our pledge and warrant which we bring before God in prayer, with a sure and certain hope to be graciously received. See what a full, what a bountiful promise it is: three times repeated, that we might have no doubt at all about it. “Ask and ye shall have; for every one that

asketh receiveth.” We are to ask, because, even as the world goes and according to the ways of men, there is no good thing to be had but for asking. And if these earthly matters, which last but for a day, are yet counted worth the trouble of earnestly begging for them, well may it be expected of us that we should ask for heavenly things. Again, “seek and ye shall find; for he that seeketh findeth.” Do you not see when people have lost any thing, let it be ever such an ordinary thing, how they presently begin to search after it, and, if they will not take that trouble, nobody expects them to find it? We and our children have lost no ordinary thing. In Adam we lost the happy innocency, the Image of God, in which our God at first created us. But Almighty God tells us where we may find it again,—in His Church, at His Font: only we must seek it with the eye of persevering faith.

Again, Christ has said, “knock, and it shall be opened; for to him that knocketh, it shall be opened.”⁵ He only that knocks in earnest at a door has any right to expect, that the Porter within will hear and attend to him, and open the door as he wishes. If he only waits loitering about the door, now and then looking towards it but never knocking, never seeking an entrance, who can believe that he really desires to get in, or who will take the trouble of opening to him? So with Baptism, which is the Door into the Kingdom of Heaven. Almighty God loves that those who are seeking an entrance there, should knock at the door with all humble earnestness: that they should pray to Him again and again with all their hearts for the fulness of the blessing: as it is written, “The Kingdom of Heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force:”⁶ i. e. there is a kind of holy violence, an earnestness in devotion which God greatly loves, and by which men shall make their way, in spite of the worst difficulties and fiercest opposition, into His Kingdom with all its Blessings. As therefore you see, that we could not be too earnest in asking and seeking baptismal grace for ourselves, if we were not yet Christians, so you see that our wishes and prayers should be *very* fervent, when any one belonging to us has to come to Christ in Holy Baptism. Devout persons have always been used, even before a child is born, to make it matter of special prayer that it may be spared to receive that Holy Sacrament of Regeneration; so that this prayer of the Church at the Font is only the summing up, as it were, and the last solemn rehearsal of the petitions which have been continually made by parents, kinsfolk and friends at home. And indeed this may be one chief meaning of the petition, put up in the Litany for young children. When those words are said, we may well think in our hearts of the little ones who are yet unbaptized, especially of any that we know of, and charitably help them with a kind wish and prayer that they may not be unbaptized long.

It is a prayer meet for all good Christians, but for good parents more especially: for our Lord, in this promise, is speaking especially to Parents. For He goes on and says, “If a son shall ask bread of any of you that is a father, will he give him a stone?”⁷ As parents, He here teaches us to pray. Parents have a key to His full meaning, which others, perhaps, in some measure want. Therefore He adds again, “If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children: how much more shall *your* heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask Him?”⁸ Christian fathers and mothers, to you the word is spoken: as parents, you were encouraged by our Lord to pray for your children:

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⁶ Matthew 11:12

⁷ Matthew 7:9, Luke 11:11

⁸ Matthew 7:11, Luke 11:13

and He encourages you, moreover, to pray to Him as to a better and more real parent than yourselves. He is that Father of us all, from Whom Alone our fathers and our mothers too learnt all their love for us. They may think it came of itself, or, as the saying is, by nature; but, in deed and in truth, it comes direct from God. Pray then, fathers and mothers; pray for your children more earnestly: be sure that He Who fills you with love to them, will not reject your prayers for them. And He is that Father, Who has not only what you can give them, bread and fish and the like, to keep their bodies awhile from starving, but His Holy Spirit to make them partakers of His Son. Pray for that: which is indeed worth praying for. And pray that it may never pass away: “that they may receive the *everlasting* Benediction and come to the Eternal Kingdom;” and, when you rise up from your prayers, do not forget those words. Go home, full of the thought, that these children’s souls will last for ever, and that you are entrusted with them. So may you save, by God’s mercy, both *yourselves* and *them*.