

Village Sermons on the Baptismal Service
by John Keble

SERMON XII.
September 30, 1849.

ST. MARK x. 14.

“Suffer the little children to come unto Me and forbid them not, for of such is the Kingdom of God.”

WE may consider the Introduction of the Baptismal Office, that which prefaces the way for the rest,—as coming to an end after the second Collect: and the Office itself as beginning, when the people stand up and the Priest gives out the Gospel. This, I say, may be regarded as properly beginning the Baptismal Office, inasmuch as in Holy Baptism there are two things to be considered: It is both a covenant or agreement between Almighty God and the person baptized; and also a mean, whereby God bestows on that person a very great and unspeakable gift. Now, in our Prayer-Book, as soon as the Collects are over, the covenant or agreement is set forth. It has of course two parts, as all covenants and agreements must have. For no person covenants and makes agreements with himself. To such a transaction, there must be two parties at least. And you plainly see, that in Holy Baptism the two parties are, on the one side Almighty God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost; on the other the little infant, who is now for the first time brought nigh unto God. Wonderful it is, that the great God should so condescend to treat with such a helpless little creature, made out of a little dust, and soon to return to dust again, and, what is more, polluted all over with the taint and infection of Adam’s sin. Wonderful, yet most assuredly true. But because it is so greatly beyond what a sinful mortal might have to expect, therefore in setting forth the covenant God’s part is rehearsed first, as is meet and natural; for, without such express invitation, how could anything so frail and unclean safely draw near or be brought to the God of all Purity? God’s part therefore of the Baptismal covenant is first set forth and rehearsed out of the Gospel of St. Mark, and afterwards the child’s part, when the promises are made in his name by the godfathers and godmothers.

And in both there is one thing very particularly to be observed; viz., That as Holy Baptism and its blessings are entirely matters of faith, not of sight, so in the Covenant, which seals those blessings, neither party is so present as to answer and speak openly for himself. Both are indeed present, yet for both the agreement is spoken and made by another person—or as it is sometimes called, by proxy. On the one hand, our Lord, we know, is especially present at the Font, not only because He is God and therefore is present every where, but also by virtue of His special promise, “where two or three are gathered together in My Name, there am I in the midst of them.” He is present, but we see Him not; He hides Himself, to try our Faith, and commissions His Priest to speak for Him; which the Priest does by reading the appointed words out of Christ’s gospel. Again, the other party to the covenant, the child, is indeed present, and we see him: but then he is so young, that he can neither speak, nor in any other way signify—that he agrees to the covenant, and will be bound by it. Therefore the Church speaks for him by the godfathers and godmothers whom she appoints: and it is his own covenant just the same, and he is

equally bound by it, exactly as if he had promised it with his own lips, and set his own hand and seal to it. However, in both respects it is, you see, more or less a trial of people's faith, of their putting their minds in good earnest to things out of sight, and making very much of them. It is an act of religious faith, to feel sure that our Lord is there speaking to you, though you see and hear only the clergyman and the Book. It is another act of religious faith, to believe that the young child does really, before God, make the promises, though to our eyes and ears it would seem to be only the godfathers and godmothers. I wish we thought more than we do of both; both of our Lord's Presence and of the promise being our own.

But let us now consider the words which contain our Lord's own part of the covenant: the words themselves, and the manner in which they were spoken. They were spoken very solemnly, in the hearing of the assembled Apostles, and they are carefully set down in three out of the four gospels, St. Matthew, St. Mark, and St. Luke. It seems that, when He was very busy, certain women brought to Him their infants, that He might lay His Hands on them, and bless them: and His Disciples, as many would have done in their place, rather checked them, thinking it was troublesome. But when Jesus saw it, He was much displeased and said, "Suffer the little children to come unto Me, and forbid them not; for of such is the kingdom of Heaven. Verily I say unto you, Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, shall in no wise enter therein. And He took them up in his arms, put His hands upon them, and blessed them."¹ Here we see, Providence so ordered things, as that the doubts and scruples of the disciples should help us to an end of all doubts and scruples in this matter. Their complaint it was, which drew from our Lord the remarkable saying, "of such is the Kingdom of Heaven;" by which we know that not these children only, but all infant sons and daughters of Adam, have a right to Holy Baptism, as soon as they can well be brought to it. For He said expressly, "Of such is the Kingdom of Heaven," i. e. the Church—the condition of baptized persons. The Church, which is Christ's Body, pertains to such as they are: they were made for it, and it for them: and what right they have to the Church, just the same, of course, they have to the way into the Church, i. e. to Holy Baptism. For if God calls them to come into His house, of course He calls them to go through the Door. If the Kingdom is theirs, so is the entrance into it. And so, as the Jews knew for certain that all their boys were to be circumcised, so Christians know for certain that all their children are to be baptized: not only that they *may* be, but that our Lord is very earnest, very desirous to have them all so brought to Him. See how many tokens He gave, at that very time, of this His desire and wish. First, He was much displeased with those who were for sending away the children. He took it very much amiss of them. He complained, as a man might do, who counted himself ill-used. Not above once or twice in His Ministry do we read of His expressing the like feelings: and each time it was in behalf of some one who had been ill-treated. That displeasure of His was one token of His special love for young children. Another was His express command, "Suffer them to come to Me." As if He should say, "There is something in them which will cause them, if let alone, to come to Me: do not you hinder them. They cannot do without Me, and I in a manner cannot do without them. They want Me for a Saviour, and I want them for members. "Who dare take on him to hinder us from coming together?" Thus our Lord's saying, "Suffer them to come," is a second and

¹ Luke 18

most clear token of His love. A third is, His adding, "Forbid them not." For when a master not only commands his servants to do a thing, but adds, Take care you leave it not undone, the servant understands that his master's heart is more than usually set upon that thing. But again our Master gives the reason, why He is so earnest upon having the little ones brought to Him: and this is another and an unspeakable token of His Love. For what is the reason? "Of such is the Kingdom of Heaven," i. e. the blessed condition which I came into the world to provide for men, belongs as it were by right to them: to them and to such as they are, children and those who are become like children, are the very persons for whom that Kingdom is provided. Instead of being unfit, they are the very measure and standard of fitness for it, so that by comparison with them shall be known, who are true children of the Kingdom. "Verily I say unto you, Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, he shall not enter therein." Instead of keeping them out, know that you must become like them, in order to enter in yourselves. And He confirmed His gracious words by three most merciful signs, actions of love which no one who beheld, certainly I suppose no mother, could well ever forget. He took the children up in His Arms—one by one, the babes which were brought to them—that was His preserving, nursing care—He took them in His Arms, and their mothers knew that they were safe in His care from all the powers of evil and spirits of darkness. But He did more. He laid His hands on them; He touched them, as a father his children, or a Pastor, when he would most earnestly desire to shew his anxious and tender love for them. He touched these children, as He was used to touch those who came to Him for healing, or who were vexed with unclean spirits: and no doubt virtue went out of Him, to do them unknown, unthought-of good: no doubt each one of those was the better for our Lord's touch, (unless he threw away the gift) as long as he lived.

But there is yet one thing more—"He laid His Hands on them, *and blessed them.*" To His gracious Touch He added words of Blessing: as His Bishops and Priests do in their solemn Benedictions; and as He doth Himself continually in His holy Sacraments. All these tokens of love are, as it were, gathered and bound together in that one minute of our Lord's life, in that one sentence of His gospel. So that we can no more doubt that, whoever else have Him for their Saviour, surely He is in a special way the Friend and Saviour of these little ones.

This then, as I said before, is our Lord's part of the covenant made at the Baptism of any child; the words being "Of such is the Kingdom of heaven;" the sign and seal, His taking those children up in His Arms, and so lovingly laying His Hands upon them, and blessing them. It is His part of the covenant: and, as such, it is taken up afterwards in the Priest's instruction to the sponsors—"Ye have heard that our Lord Jesus Christ hath promised in His gospel," i. e. in this place just read out of the gospel of St. Mark, "to grant all these things which ye have prayed for: which promise He for His part will most surely keep and perform." That is, those few short words, "Of such is the Kingdom of God," are a promise, that Christ will receive the Infant presented to Him for Holy Baptism—will release him of his sins, will sanctify him with the Holy Ghost, will give him the Kingdom of Heaven, *and everlasting life.* O great and glorious Promises! how can we ever think enough of them? We never can think enough: but we may, by God's mercy, be in a way to think rightly: and I will endeavour to shew you how.

When one who is a parent stands by and hears with his own ears Jesus Christ standing to His covenant; when he hears out of the gospel read over a little Babe, "Of

such is the Kingdom of God:” surely if he have a parent’s heart, it must overflow with love towards the Saviour of his child: surely he must wish and long to know what he can do, by way of shewing forth some small gratitude to Him. You may talk of loving your children; but how is it possible you can truly love them, if you are not very full of love towards Him Who so chooses out and blesses them, Him Who is even now taking them up in His Arms to save them from Hell. And if you love Him, you will try to please Him. You will not pass slightly over any of His Commands, especially His last dying Command, “Do this in remembrance of Me.” Your love to your child, if you really believe in Christ’s blessing given to that child in Baptism, will be enough, by God’s grace, to make you a good Christian.

Next, let us suppose a child or young person listening to the baptismal service, thoughtfully listening to the saying, “Of such is the Kingdom of Heaven.” Of course it will come into his mind, “not so very long ago I was received in this way, and God made His covenant with me to enter me in the Kingdom of Heaven: of which I have ever since been an Inheritor. He made it at that time *with me*: with me and with no other: I did, as it were, stand on the one side of the Font, and Jesus Christ stood on the other, and we pledged our troth either to other, as people do when they are married,—and He for His part will most surely keep His word—but what shall I do for my part? how will it prove, in the end, with me? Oh, it is a serious thought, a heavy burthen: but no need to sink under it: He is so good, that He has even promised to help me effectually to do my part: I have but to put myself in earnest to the work, and He will give me His Holy Spirit to perform it. Therefore I will not listen to the busy tempter, who is even now whispering to me, ‘It is too much—you cannot do these great things—neither you nor any man can keep the baptismal engagement.’ Nay, I will say, ‘get thee behind me, Satan.’ By the help of my God I can and I will keep my vows: Christ promised me as much at the Font, and I dare not doubt His Promise.”

But what if one has already fallen; fallen into grievous sin; into a course of neglect and forgetfulness towards God? what is he, then, to think of God’s part in the covenant sealed to him in Baptism? Alas, his thoughts must be very sorrowful, they cannot and they ought not to be otherwise; yet it may be a sorrow, mingled with joy and hope. Sad indeed it is to think of Christ’s most true and loving Promise, “Of such is the kingdom of Heaven”—dishonoured and met on one side by a broken vow and an untrue profession: sad to think, how very unlike one has become to the pure and guileless babe, over whom the gracious words were uttered. But never mind the sadness: encourage and welcome it: let it sink into your mind: only keep on all the while, beseeching God inwardly to turn it to your good: so by His infinite mercy it may prove the commencement of a true penitence. And, for your comfort, you may take this thought home with you, and may He cheer and establish your heart with it: that, although your sharing in your Lord’s baptismal promise, of course, makes your sins more intolerable, yet, on your *truly* repenting of these sins, part of that promise is to grant you a free pardon and cleanse you entirely. Only take care that you *truly* and sufficiently repent, and do not abuse yourself with a vain shadow of penitence. So when the last day comes, and the account begun at the Font will have to be finally closed, you with these who have kept their first vows, the Innocent and the Penitent together, will praise Him for His great and precious Promises, wondering to find them accomplished in yourselves.