

Village Sermons on the Baptismal Service  
by John Keble

### SERMON XIII.

October 7, 1849.

DEUTERONOMY xxxiii. 27.

“The Eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are the everlasting Arms.”

WE saw last Sunday, that after the first prayers the Church in the Baptismal Service begins to set forth the terms of the covenant which God vouchsafes to make with us in Baptism; and that God’s part of course is declared first; that is, the free gift which He bestows upon the child, and how plainly and mercifully He has promised it. This is contained in the Gospel, i. e. in the account of our Lord’s receiving the little children, declaring that “of such is the Kingdom of Heaven,” taking them up in His Arms and blessing them. After those words have been read, the Priest, as you know, makes a short discourse upon the words of the Gospel, saying, “Beloved, ye hear in this Gospel the words of our Saviour Christ, how He commanded the children to be brought to Him,” i. e. when He said, “Suffer the little children to come unto Me;” “how He blamed those that would have kept them from Him,” i. e. when He said, “Forbid them not;” how He exhorteth all men to follow their innocency, i. e. when He said, “Of such is the Kingdom of Heaven,” and verily I say unto you, “whosoever shall not receive the Kingdom of God as a little child, he shall in no wise enter therein.” Having thus put you in mind of our Lord’s words, the Holy Church next goes on to put us in mind of His doings at the same time; “Ye perceive how by His outward gesture and deed He declared His good will towards them; for He embraced them in His Arms, He laid His Hands upon them, and blessed them.” Then we are encouraged to apply what He said and did to the little child who is even now to be baptized; “Doubt ye not therefore, but earnestly believe, that He will likewise favourably receive this present infant, that He will embrace him with the Arms of His mercy, that He will give unto him the blessing of Eternal Life, and make him partaker of His everlasting Kingdom.” These surely are great, unspeakable things; far greater than if one should say, Doubt ye not, but earnestly believe that this child will be a rich and fortunate man never out of health, never failing in what he undertakes. If a person made you such a promise, as he stood by your child’s cradle, you would with reason doubt it; you would not believe it at all. Why are you then not to doubt at all, but earnestly to believe, these promises, infinitely greater, and more precious? Because these are Christ’s own promises, and He is the unchangeable God, “the Same yesterday, to-day, and for ever;”<sup>1</sup> and, being God, all things are at all times present to Him. When He did and said the things, which have been just read out of the Gospel, He did, in His mind and purpose, do and say them to this child, and to all who should at any time be brought to Him for Holy Baptism. For every one of them was in His mind; He knew and thought of every one. In encouraging those mothers to bring their children, He encouraged you Christian mothers, coming here from time to time with your children to the Holy Font. In blaming His disciples for wanting to keep them back, He was blaming all who in any

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<sup>1</sup> Hebrews 13:8

time should carelessly or mistakenly keep a child back from Baptism. In taking them up in His Arms, He was taking up you and me, and all who have had the unspeakable privilege of being baptised as Infants in His Holy Church. When He laid His Hands upon them and blessed them, Virtue went out of those Divine Hands to bless us all, even every child who is brought to Him to be christened.

For indeed this is the manner in which we are taught by the true Faith to look upon what passes when a child is baptized. As I am often telling you, what we see then, is nothing in comparison of what is there present unseen. The Priest is but a shadow and token of our Lord Jesus Christ, as the water is but a shadow and token of the cleansing and sanctifying Spirit. It is Christ Who baptizes; only He does it by His servant's hand; for so we have been taught by St. John Baptist, "This is He that baptizeth with the Holy Ghost."<sup>2</sup> There may have been hundreds of thousands of Priests and Deacons, since the Church began, but all along there has been only one real Baptizer, viz. our Lord Jesus Christ. When therefore you see the nurse or godmother, coming to the Font with the child, and lifting it to the Priest, try and imagine that you see one of those women in the Gospel, bringing an Infant to our Saviour. When the Priest takes the child in his arms, think you see Jesus Christ doing so; think of the words, "Jesus beholding him loved him;"<sup>3</sup> and remember also those other words, "The Eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are the everlasting Arms."<sup>4</sup> For all these things really are so. Jesus Christ is really then and there especially present, taking the child up in His Arms, which are the everlasting Arms; only let us have faith to see it.

Now supposing our eyes and ears for once opened, so that we were able to see and hear what we can now only believe, what would our thoughts be of it all? how should we feel? Surely our hearts would be very full of exceeding deep and earnest thoughts, both concerning the little child, and concerning ourselves.

First, as concerning the child, we should, as the Church teaches us, not doubt but earnestly believe that it was receiving all these blessings. Far too great a thing were it for us to believe upon any reasoning of our own, any thing which we saw or made out for ourselves. But now the Word of God, as declared by His Church, is so plain, that we are not to doubt it at all, but simply to believe it. Fathers and mothers, are you in care for your children? Do you love them very much? are you always, night and day, longing, wishing, labouring for their good? O then consider it well, and bring it home to your hearts, that, when they received Holy Baptism, Christ, the Friend of little children took them up in His Arms, and that He is the Eternal God, His are the Everlasting Arms, so that if they have not changed, you may be sure He has not. "His gifts and calling are without repentance:" He is "the Lord and changes not." If they are still young children, too young for actual sin, He is still bearing them up; the world is very bad and dangerous, there are thousands of evil spirits abroad, but *your* little ones, so far, are safe: and if He should take them as they are, they are safe for ever. O fathers and mothers, and all who care for these little ones, what a comfort is this for you to carry about with you through all the changes and chances of this mortal life! Come what will, you may say to yourselves over and over, "my child, if it please God to keep him as he is, is safe." "The

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<sup>2</sup> John 1:33

<sup>3</sup> Mark 10:21

<sup>4</sup> Deuteronomy 33:27

Eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are the Everlasting Arms.”<sup>5</sup> Jesus Christ hath taken him up and blessed him, and none can take him out of his Saviour’s Hand. I say, as long as your children are very young, before they are of age to commit known and actual sin, so long you have this unspeakable comfort, whenever you think of them; and especially if it please God to visit them, as He does so often in those tender years, with pain, sickness and death. It is said, I believe, by those who are skilful in reckoning the chances of life, that more persons die before they are two years old, than in the whole remaining years of man’s life. What a mass, what a quantity is here of deep distress and sorrow! but then what a consolation too! “not to doubt, but earnestly to believe” that each one of these tender Babes, cut off, as to us it may seem, so untimely, is but removed to a brighter room in God’s House, from earth to Paradise, from its cradle to Abraham’s Bosom, from its nurse’s songs to the chanting of the Holy Angels. What a wonder of love to think on such a tender Babe getting the victory over all the spirits of darkness, and especially over the Evil one, the Prince of them all; passing unhurt through the midst of them, in the Name and through the power of Jesus Christ! Well may we thank our Father in Heaven for His good will towards this Infant, declared by His Son Jesus Christ, and for His favour to us also, in looking graciously on what we do, and counting it a charitable work, when we bring the child to His Holy Baptism.

But besides these thoughts, relating to the child to be christened, a serious person, when present at a christening must needs have many thoughts concerning himself; he will say in his heart, “not long since, I too was a little infant, I too was brought to the Font, a child of wrath; and by God’s mercy went from it a child of grace; that great and marvellous work was wrought in me, which we are now beseeching God to work in this Infant. Surely I ought to be very thankful for myself as well as for this child. Surely, when I see him taken up in his Saviour’s Arms, I feel how good it is for him to be there; I cannot but remember that I too, not so very long since, was embraced in like manner by the Arms of the same Mercy, and made partaker of the same blessings. Surely if I do not feel very thankful, at least I may be ashamed of being cold, heartless and unthankful; and I may beseech Him Whom I know to be especially present to receive those little ones, that He would make Himself present to me, to kindle in my dull, lukewarm soul one little spark of that earnest adoring love, wherewith the Saints in all times have been ever used to think of their Baptism.” If we have but one grain of faith, something like this must be our wish and prayer, as often as we are by when a child is baptized; and it is the very wish and prayer which our Mother the Church puts into our mouth. She says, “Let us faithfully and devoutly give thanks unto Him, and say, Almighty, everlasting God, heavenly Father, we give Thee humble thanks, for that Thou hast vouchsafed to call us to the knowledge of Thy grace and faith in Thee.” In these words every fresh christening is made an occasion of thanking God for all the christenings which have gone before; for each person to call to mind the blessings of his own Baptism—the Election and calling out of the world, whereof, as I have shewn you before, a small portion only have been even outwardly called: the knowledge of the grace of God, while so many lie in darkness; the faith in Him, while so many disbelieve. The sight of an infant brought to the Font is to remind us of these favours; and if we have them really in our mind, we cannot but be very thankful; for we must needs feel that these mercies are everything to us, and that without them our life would do us no good, and it were better for us that we had never

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<sup>5</sup> Deuteronomy 33:27

been born.

But along with this deep thankfulness, must go also another feeling, more or less, of deep anxiety and fear. The more thankful we ought to be for the great grace bestowed on us in Baptism, the more keenly, alas! may many of us fear, whether we have not sinned it all away; and he who has least to reproach himself with, may yet be humbled in the dust to think, how very much more he might have made of it than he has. Therefore to the words of thanksgiving are presently added words of prayer, "We give Thee hearty thanks for that Thou hast vouchsafed to call us to the knowledge of Thy grace and Faith in Thee; increase this knowledge and confirm this Faith in us evermore." We began in our own Baptism to know this Thy regenerating grace; increase, we beseech Thee, that knowledge; help us to grow more and more in it; order our hearts and our lives so, that we may daily and hourly set a higher value upon the good thing given us in our Baptism, and shrink from all that might rob us of it. Confirm also our faith, to which Thou didst at the same time call us; grant that we may go on until the very hour of death, believing more thoroughly, and minding more steadily the great things out of sight, and most especially Christ on His Cross. This is the prayer for ourselves, which the Church puts into the mouth of every one of us and teaches us to mingle it with our thanksgivings, when we assist at the Baptism of a child; "Increase this knowledge, and confirm this faith in us evermore." I beseech you, my brethren, if we have but a little remnant, but one faint spark of care for our own souls, let us try to say at least this one prayer in earnest. Let us try to know more of God's grace to have our weak faith strengthened; not to be left to grow quite like the beasts that perish, with hard hearts and unbelieving minds. Who knows but his earnestly endeavouring to join in such a prayer as this, may by God's mercy do great things for him? It may be the turning-point, the salvation of his soul. It may win for him that precious and powerful look of Christ, such as when the Lord turned and looked upon Peter and Peter remembered the word of the Lord. Therefore, whatever we do, let us strive to be quite in earnest, when we say, "Increase our knowledge, and confirm our faith."

And if in that Petition we are ever so little in earnest, we shall of course be earnest also in the other petition which follows and concludes the Collect; wherein we leave off praying for ourselves, and present the child to God, interceding for it, that it may be baptized with water and the Holy Ghost. "Give Thy Holy Spirit to this infant, that it may be born again, and made an heir of everlasting salvation through Jesus Christ." Then we lay down the tender babe in a manner at the foot of God's throne, beseeching Him to receive it, and deal with it as He has dealt with us, and with so many who, since the Day of Pentecost, have been made Partakers of His grace. And then in a manner we leave it, until the other part of the Covenant, its own part, has been transacted for it; to which the Priest immediately goes on, in what he proceeds to say to the godfathers and godmothers.

To this we shall go on by God's Blessing another time. For the present how can we do better, than endeavour to go away with *this* consideration deep in our hearts, That what prayers and thanksgivings we say, or have had said over us, here in our baptismal Services, have by no means passed entirely away? They are set down in God's Book; they sound continually in God's Ear; they will be remembered to our honour or to our confusion at the Day of Judgment. We have prayed that God would increase in us the knowledge of His grace. How, if on that Day it be read out of the Book concerning us, "This man wilfully neglected prayer; he never came to Holy Communion; he cared not to

know more of God's grace."

Again we have prayed to have Christ's faith confirmed in us. How, if we be found to have gone on, from week's end to week's end, without ever saying the Creed, or thinking on the great truths contained in it? If we have sense to think of ordinary matters, I do not well see what we can say for such neglect of the greatest of all. Lastly we have prayed for the child, that it may be born again, and made an heir of everlasting Salvation. What, if any one of us by our bad example shall be found to have led or encouraged that child, directly or indirectly, in the way of sin and ruin? What if we have made void our prayers by going on in our sinful ways: perhaps as soon as ever we come out of Church? How should such prayers as those do any one good, himself or his children? God grant us for Christ's sake, and for the sake of Christ's little ones, to be in earnest when we call on Him!