

Village Sermons on the Baptismal Service
by John Keble

SERMON XV.
October 21, 1849.

PSALM I. 5.

Gather My saints together unto Me, those that have made a covenant with Me
with sacrifice.

AFTER rehearsing God's part in the Covenant of Baptism, the Priest speaks thus to the Godfathers and Godmothers, setting forth what part the child has in the same Covenant. "After this promise made by Christ, this infant must also faithfully promise for his part, until he come of age to take it upon himself, that he will renounce the Devil and all his works, and constantly believe God's holy word and obediently keep His Commandments."

We hear this very often, as often as we are present at a child's christening. I wish we as often reflected on those serious and awful account which these words give us of our own condition. They tell us that we are every one under a Covenant with God, bound to Him by a promise and vow. You see in the Psalm, God accounts this as the very mark of His own people, His Saints. For the word Saints does not always mean really good and holy persons, but sometimes it only means those who especially belong to God. People are not seldom called Saints in Scripture, whether they be good or bad, if God have called them to be His own in any special way, apart from the rest of the world. So here, He makes proclamation, "Gather My saints together unto Me," and in the next words He explains whom He means to call saints, those namely who have made a Covenant with Him with sacrifice: not those only who have kept their covenant, but also those who have at all made it: bad Christians as well as good ones. For all Christians, good and bad, are alike in this, that they are under covenant with God; and also in having that covenant sealed by sacrifice. We make the covenant, the engagement, here at the Font; and having once made it, we never can at all unmake it: we never can be, as if it had not been made. We may go on sinning, until we wish it to be so: we may wish that we were not at all in covenant with God: but it is a wish which cannot be granted. As the prophet Ezekiel said to the Israelites (in the first lesson this very morning), "that which cometh into your minds shall not be at all, that ye will be like the heathen, the families of the countries, to serve wood and stone:" so it is with us. We are baptized, and do what we will, be as wicked as ever we may, we cannot unbaptize ourselves. We may turn our Baptism into a curse, but we cannot get rid of it altogether. We cannot be, as if we had never made any promise and vow to God. His mark is set upon our foreheads, and although, by wilful sin un-repent of, we wear out all its beauty and glory, all its saving grace and virtue, we cannot altogether wear out the Mark itself. It will be there, to be our worst condemnation, if it is not there to save us. Thus you see, that we are, once and for ever, in covenant with God, we cannot be like the heathen and unbaptized who never heard of Him: and consider also what the Psalmist tells us, that this covenant was made with sacrifice. It was signed and sealed with the Precious Blood of the Son of God, God and Man. In fulfilment of God's mysterious Will, He in due time offered Himself up a Sacrifice and Sin-offering

for us. He offers to His Father continually the same Sacrifice on our behalf; and we, on earth, offer and present the perpetual memory of it in Holy Communion. He sealed His gifts and promises with His Own Blood poured out on the Cross, and we seal our offerings and promises with the same Blood poured out and received in Holy Communion. Thus you see how our Covenant is with Sacrifice.

It will be all the plainer perhaps, if we recollect what we are told of God's covenant with His ancient people the Jews, which was so ordered as to be throughout a type and figure of this covenant of ours. The Israelites, we know, made a covenant with God, and He made a covenant with them in Mount Sinai. He agreed to be their God, and they agreed to keep all His commandments. And this covenant was made with sacrifice; for, when Moses had written it in a book, he took the blood of rams and goats which he had sacrificed to God and sprinkled it both on the book and on all the people, saying, "This is the blood of the covenant which God has enjoined you."¹ Thus the first covenant was made with sacrifice, and sealed with blood as the second Covenant is: only *that* was the blood of bulls and goats, *this* is the Precious Blood of Christ, Who, as a Lamb without spot or blemish, offered Himself without spot to God.

And thus we, as well as the Jews, indeed far more truly and really than they, may be said to have made a Covenant with God by Sacrifice.

Now here are two thoughts, two certain and undoubted truths, which we ought surely to have ever before our minds: the one, that we have made a Covenant with the Most High, the Almighty Everlasting God, the other that we made it with Sacrifice. It was sealed by the Blood of Christ Crucified.

We are all of us in covenant with God, you, I, every one of us. It is not as if He had made a general rule, and then left us to ourselves; for He has made His agreement with each of us, one by one. You know what kind of difference it makes in the Priest's way of speaking to you and telling you anything for your good, whether he only says it in Church to the whole congregation together, or takes an opportunity of mentioning it to each one of you privately at home. It may be God's Word just as much in the one case as in the other, but we naturally feel it as brought more home to us in particular, when it is addressed to us ourselves privately. It is so much the surer proof of God's kind and watchful care of us. Not exactly like this, but something like it, is the difference between our case as it is now, and as it would have been, had God made no Covenant with each one of us separately. Our duty and our Blessing is brought more home to ourselves, we are the more utterly without excuse, if we give ourselves up and forget God. For instance, take any person who is most poor and miserable, most forlorn and neglected among Christians. Suppose his friends all dead or departed, no one in the world, that he knows of, to take care of him; let him be all ragged and hungry, and without any certain prospect of maintenance even for a single day: yet if he knows and believes and will earnestly remember that he is in covenant with God and God with him, surely he will look up and lift up his head, and he may say to himself, "Jesus Christ Who is the Truth has taken me up once for all in His Arms, He has promised to be my God; I am sure He will not forget me, nor let me drop; for not even a sparrow which is worth but half a farthing, is ever permitted to fall on the ground without His and His Father's leave." And so it has been always; as saith the wise Son of Sirach, "Look at the generations of old, and see; did ever

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any trust in the Lord and was confounded? or did any abide in His fear and was forsaken? or whom did He ever despise that called upon Him?"² Therefore be of good cheer, O thou afflicted and poor Christian. If such were God's promises even before the Gospel, be sure that under the Gospel they are far more bountiful. Never for a moment allow yourself to think, that our Lord has ceased to be your Father, and to care for you, though the times be never so hard, and your pains of body and mind never so grievous. Complaining thoughts, I dare say, will come into your mind; but never do you let them stay there. Put them away by the remembrance of your Baptism, of the Holy Covenant then and there made. Say in your heart over and over, "My flesh and my heart faileth;"³ I have nothing at all of mine own, whether within or without, to lean upon: "but God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever." Do you think there is any forlorn beggar, any person incurably sick, any one outcast or forsaken of those who ought to be kindest to him, any sufferer at all among men who might not find comfort in such thoughts as these, if he really and steadily tried to have them in his heart, as often as ever the distress and anguish came on him? But the misfortune is, that we do not steadily and regularly try this: such thoughts, it may be, come sweet to us now and then, and seem to do us good for a little while; but we do not endeavour and pray to have them *always* at hand for our relief. We suffer our poor frail hearts to be carried away by earthly things far more entirely than they need be: we willingly forget God for a long time together: too often alas! we do things which we know will vex and grieve Him; and then, when the trouble is again strong upon us, and we try in some measure to go back to our Baptism for comfort, it seems as if the good thought would not come, or as if, though it came, it did us no good. This is most sad: but the remedy for it is plain, and by God's great Mercy it is in our own power. We must use ourselves to think of our Baptismal promises, not now and then, but regularly and always. We may pray and try for this: and if we go on doing so, and fighting in earnest against all known sin, the good thoughts will by degrees come oftener, and stay longer, and give us more help. It is much the same in our fighting against sin. As the covenant of our God, truly remembered, would be our greatest comfort in trouble, so would it be also our greatest help in temptation. Joseph, when the wicked woman would have led him astray, repulsed her with this plain and earnest saying, "How can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?" So may we fellow sinners and fellow Christians, as often as we are tempted. We may say to the lawless and unclean Spirit which would cause us to look where we ought not, or to take any other improper liberties, "How can I do this great wickedness and sin against God, Whose I am and Whom I serve? I am not my own; I am bought with a price; I am to glorify God both in my body and spirit." So to the devil that would tempt us to indulge anger we may say: "All my strength, courage, and spirit is made over in a manner to my God: I must not waste any of it upon those provoking persons and their ill behaviour. To Him I belong, and Him I am to serve: therefore for His sake I will keep my temper; I will not let others' ill behaviour hinder me from serving Him with a quiet mind." Thus you see how that, if we would constantly remember our being in covenant with God Almighty, it would furnish us with direct helps against two of the worst sins, anger and unchastity: and it is just the same with all other wicked ways. The covenant of Baptism, well and dutifully remembered, will sufficiently set us at liberty from them all.

² Sirach 2:10

³ Psalm 73:26

Particularly if we remember always that we are not only in covenant with God, but also that our covenant was made with Sacrifice. Christ laid down His life to purchase us. He bought us by His Own Blood that He might set us free. When we read or hear His Commandments, “Thou shalt not take My Name in vain, Thou shalt not kill, Thou shalt not commit adultery,” and the like, we may set ourselves earnestly to consider what we are bound to, and how awe-fully. These commandments are to us written, as it were, with the Blood of the Precious Lamb without spot: if we wilfully break them, we scorn and make void His Blood. Oh! then let us hesitate no more: let us shew to the tempter, when he next assaults us, the Commandments of God written on our hearts, written in the Blood of His Son our only Saviour: when the Evil one sees God’s Word so written in the hearts of His People, he will go away dismayed: and the words of the Psalm will be fulfilled in us: “God will arise, His Light will arise, and shine over us, and His enemies will be scattered and they also that hate Him will flee before Him.”⁴ O how happy is that Christian, who has so regularly used himself to obey the Voice of God’s Spirit reminding him of his Baptismal Covenant, that every new temptation is a new Victory: he is the better and the happier for every thing that the devil does to make him wicked and miserable. This blessedness shall be yours, my brethren; it is promised even to the simplest and meanest among us, if we will but look back, as we go on in life, on the Covenant of our first beginning: if we will rightly and dutifully call to mind, that we stand before God, bound by a promise which can never wear out, “To renounce the devil and all his works, constantly to believe God’s Holy Word, and obediently to keep His Commandments.” This is our three-fold Covenant, the triple cord of our Baptism, our Catechism our Confirmation: most of us know it well, so far as repeating it goes: most of us account themselves bound to pay to it some regard, more or less, but observe, I pray you, what kind of regard we promise, even in the very letter of what we say. We promise to “renounce the devil and *all* his works:” not *some*, not the *most*, not the *worst* of his works: but *all*. We are “constantly to believe His holy Word:” not at times only, as in sickness, in leisure or in devotion, but *always*; giving up our fancies at once when He teaches us better: our favourite fancies as well as any others. Lastly, we are *obediently* to keep His Commandments, i. e. as I suppose, in the *temper* and *spirit* of obedience, doing things with joy and delight because He bids them, this is our Covenant and vow, one and all of us. How are we keeping it? May God give us grace to ask ourselves this question seriously this night and every night before we lie down to rest: that we may not have to ask it of ourselves with seared hearts and bewildered minds when we shall be taken for death, and the time for keeping our vow will have passed by for ever.

⁴ Numbers 10:35