

Village Sermons on the Baptismal Service
by John Keble

SERMON XXIV.

June 23, 1850.

ZECHARIAH xiii. 1.

“In that day there shall be a fountain opened to the house of David and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem for sin and for uncleanness.”

THE Prayer at the Consecration of the water, before administering the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, is, like most Collects and prayers, made up partly of acknowledgement of God’s past favours, partly of petitions for mercies to come. The past favours we acknowledge are,

- 1) The opening of His Side, and the pouring out of Water and Blood on the Cross;
- 2) The regular Institution of Baptism, when He bade His Disciples go, teach and baptize all nations.

The mercies to come, for which we then beseech Him, are three:

- 1) That He would sanctify the water then in the Font to the mystical washing away of sin:

- 2) That the child now to be baptized therein may receive the fulness of His grace:
- 3) That it may ever remain in the number of His faithful and elect children.

The address or thanksgiving part we considered last Sunday. Now we go on to the petitions. The first, as I said, is for the Sanctification of the water. “Sanctify this water to the mystical washing away of sin;” Sanctify, i. e. hallow and bless it: set it apart, or separate it, from the common uses of water, to this most sacred and heavenly use, “the mystical washing away of sin:” so that it shall be a profane thing to apply it to any other purpose; as it would be profane to take the vessels of the Altar and use them for mere ordinary refreshment.

And not only so: the prayer goes beyond that, it asks for more than such Sanctification as every thing has, which is devoted to God’s service and honour. For it uses words which in one of the former Collects had been used concerning our Lord’s own Baptism by St. John. It prays that the water may be, not simply sanctified, but “sanctified to the mystical washing away of sin.” Now in the other Collect just mentioned, acknowledgment was made, that by the Baptism of His Well-Beloved Son Jesus Christ in the river Jordan Almighty God sanctified water to that same purpose, “the mystical washing away of sin.” The prayer therefore here is, that He would grant to this water especially that blessing which by our Lord’s Baptism He granted to all the waters of the earth, viz: that being duly applied, they might be effectual to the washing away of sin. We are taken back in thought to the Baptism of Jesus Christ: we seem to stand by the banks of Jordan, and to see the Holy Baptist, in fear and religious wonder, pouring the water on our Saviour, and over Him the heavens opening and the Holy Ghost descending in a bodily shape, like a dove: and in spirit we hear the gracious Voice, “Thou art My Beloved Son, in Thee I am well pleased.” All this, if we have any faith, is brought before our minds’ eye, although with our bodily eye we only discern the stone Font and the Minister standing by it with his surplice, and the child waiting near with its attendants.

And we understand that, as Christ our Lord by then descending into the waters of Jordan, set apart not only that river, but all the waters of this lower world to be used Sacramentally, when needed, for our regeneration, so in this prayer, He renews the same blessing especially to that particular water over which the prayer is said. It is a part of the general course of God's unspeakable mercy to us sinners, to heal us by the Touch of our Incarnate God. When He was here on earth, His Hand was from time to time laid on persons to heal them, and on things to make them healing. "Come and lay Thine Hand upon her and she shall live," was the kind of prayer with which He was constantly approached by those who had belonging to them any sick and distressed. And to shew that it is His Will to confer blessing not always simply by His Own Touch, but through the persons or things which He had touched, He healed the blind man in St. John, not by simply putting His hand upon his eyes, but by spitting on the ground and making clay of the spittle, and so anointing the eyes of the blind man with the clay. And to certain handkerchiefs and aprons long after, He gave power to be of use in healing diseases, and in driving away evil spirits, as being brought to the sick from the body of St. Paul. He Who did all these things, in an extraordinary way, at the first beginning of His Gospel, now in an ordinary way is so present in our Baptisms to sanctify the waters in our Font by the prayer of His Church, that we may be quite sure of the sanctifying power of those waters. When we see the Priest leaning over them, and offering up that devout supplication according to the purpose of our Mother the Church, we are to make no manner of question but that the Power of the Lord is present to heal the souls that shall duly be baptized therein. The gift obtained by our Lord at His Own Baptism is applied to that particular water, as the Holy Spirit Which came down on all at Pentecost, is applied to each one of us severally and particularly, by our own Baptism and Confirmation.

And this whole process, you see, is called "mystical:" i. e. secret and invisible. We see not, nor feel, nor at all reason it out; but it is not the less sure and certain. We may not doubt God's part: He will surely give His creature of water the Power which He has long ago promised to give it in behalf of His sinful creature, man. Doubt not His Presence nor His Mercy. Bow yourselves humbly down, and make sure of it. But see that with all your heart you go on and join the Priest in the petitions which yet remain, and which are two,—two very deep and grave prayers, in their meaning and virtue reaching the whole way from the moment of the child's Baptism to the last Day, and onward through his Eternal state.

The first of these petitions relates to the child's improvement in this world. "Grant that this child now to be baptized therein may receive the fulness of Thy grace." What is the fulness of God's grace? More and more of it; full measure, according to all that the redeemed soul can need, either in this world or in the world to come: as it is written, "of His fulness have all we received, and grace for grace;" i. e. each one who is made a member of Christ by Baptism has his portion in Christ's wonderful Incarnation; for in Him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily; and we in our turn and in our measure are mysteriously made partakers of the Blessing, partakers of the Divine nature. God giveth it not scantily nor by measure. It is poured out richly according to every man's power of receiving it. And so we ask for each child that is christened, that it may receive the fulness of God's grace: that no unworthiness of ours who make the prayer, no craft or assault of the Devil, may either diminish the blessing now, or tend hereafter to the forfeiting and making it void; that as the child will now by his Lord's lovingkindness

receive the full blessing of Regenerating grace, so, as soon as ever he is capable, he may be helped with more grace to turn to God more and more, giving up every thought to the obedience of his Saviour, and that all his life long from time to time he may so turn himself, till his conversion be quite perfect: and more especially may we understand that the Church, in asking for us, the fulness of God's grace, meant especially to ask that our *Confirmation* might be very blessed: that we, coming worthily and kneeling before the Bishop, and feeling his fatherly hand over us, might be strengthened by the Holy Ghost to keep all our Baptismal vow. And is there not another time besides Confirmation, to which that prayer did especially look on? Yes, surely, my brethren, it looked on very especially to the holy times of Communion in the Blessed Sacrament, to which, more than to anything else, belongeth the fulness of God's grace in this present world. O think of these things; think, as your time of Confirmation draws on, that it was in the mind of those who prayed for you at the very moment of your Baptism; The Holy Spirit, Who will have all men to be saved, Who then came to regenerate you by His free grace, was even then preparing for you this additional grace of Confirmation, and the still greater gift of the Lord's Body and Blood. Will you make His good purpose void? Will you not put on the wedding garment and come? Will you coldly and unthankfully say to your Saviour, "Thou hast indeed been good to me in giving me Baptism, without any thought or trouble of mine, but this other grace which Thou offerest me I care not to accept, because it will cost me pains and trouble: I shall have to deny mine own will, and keep myself in order, and that, as yet, I have no mind to do." Will you deal thus with your God and Saviour, even while the Blood and Water, the Life-giving grace of His Sacraments, is flowing abundantly from His pierced Side for you? Alas! what grief to the Holy Angels, who waited so lovingly round you at your new birth; what grief especially to your own Heavenly guardian, who then took charge of you, that you reject the fulness of God's grace, and think scorn of His overflowing mercy! Nay more, it is grief to the Heavenly Comforter Himself: for we read, "grieve not the Holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed until the Day of Redemption."¹ The Holy Spirit has put His Own Seal, the Name of the Trinity, upon you, to save your souls alive in the great day: and, of His condescending Love, He calls it a grief to Him, if we slight this exceeding favour. Grieve Him not by careless dealing with Baptismal grace. And we do deal carelessly with Baptismal grace, if we trifle with those other graces which naturally come after Baptism. You are young perhaps and unthinking, or you are trusted with the care of some who are so, and it seems to you but a natural kind of weakness, a pardonable thing, to trifle about preparing for Confirmation and First Communion. O think again; think more seriously: think what it must be to grieve our God. Remember Christ's rule is, "He that hath not, from him shall be taken even that which he seemeth to have:"² i. e. If you seek not to grow in grace, the Lord will take away what He has already vouchsafed to you.

For lastly, there is yet one special and crowning gift, over and above those gifts which are properly called Sacramental: a gift, without which all the rest will only increase our condemnation; and that is the gift of Perseverance. We had prayed before that all *who are here baptised* might be endued with heavenly virtues and everlastingly rewarded, that is, for the fullness of God's grace, and for the gift of perseverance: and now the same prayer in substance is offered *for the infant just about to be baptised*, that

¹ Ephesians 4:30

² Luke 8:18

he may receive the fulness of His grace; and that he may ever remain in the number of God's faithful and elect children. You see, the Prayer Book makes no doubt that our infants are all by baptism made God's faithful and elect children: what it earnestly asks for the little one to be christened is, that it may ever remain in that number: as our Lord said to His disciples, "Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you: abide in Me."³

This then is the point which the Church would have all Christians well to consider, when they are coming to the end of their devotions just before an infant is christened, that by its christening it is made one of God's faithful and elect children, and that, in order to continue such, it will need very special grace and prayer. And if the child, at whose Baptism you are assisting, will be made faithful and elect, so, be sure, through God's mercy, were you made at your own baptism. Consider this well, and never forget it. I speak to you all, one and all, to men, women, boys, girls, and little children: to every one who is but just old enough to understand what I say, consider well and never forget it, that in your Baptism you became a child of God, faithful and elect; faithful, not then by any faith of your own, for of course you were too young for that, but by the faith of your Holy mother, the Church, who by your Parents' or nurses' hands, or by the sponsors whom she herself appointed, offered you to be baptized in the faith of Jesus Christ. By the faith of the Church you became faithful, in the happy moment of your Baptism. And in the same moment God Almighty declared you one of His elect; one of those whom He has chosen out of the world to be members of Christ, children of God, and inheritors of the kingdom of Heaven. This may seem to some of us no such great and peculiar favour, because it is what we are used to in the case of all children born among us. But it is a favour, shewn in comparison to very few of the children of Adam. It was shewn to none of those who died before God the Son was made man. Not even Abraham Isaac and Jacob were in their life-time made members of Christ. And even now it is believed that not nearly one half the inhabitants of the world are Christians. See then what a favour it was on God's Part to you and me and each one of us, that we should be born in a Christian country: see how truly we may be called His chosen and elect, even as the Jews were of old His Own elect people, set apart from among all the other nations of the earth.

And think, my brethren, how it is with you, if at any time you are chosen out, without any virtue or merit of your own, to receive any special favour. Do you not feel that it binds you to be very thankful, that the person behaving so kindly will have a great deal to say against you, if you prove ungrateful afterwards, and undutiful to him? Suppose a class of children at school, and that some great and wealthy king were to come in and choose out so many of the children, and say he would adopt them to be his own, and so take them home to his palace, and bring them up as young princes and princesses, should you not say it was doubly shameful, doubly inexcusable in those children, if they turned out ill and ungrateful? So it is, and much more, between you and God Almighty. Here are you, elected and set apart from all the heathen and Jewish children, to be brought to Christ in your infancy and put into His Arms, to be adopted children of God and made partakers of the Divine nature. So many, by far the greater part as yet, of the children of Adam, lie in darkness and the shadow of death: but you, from no desert of your own, have light in your dwellings.

What ought you to do, what can you do, but shew yourselves in every way

³ John 15:3

thankful to Him Who hath so favoured you? He hath chosen you; what can you do less than choose Him? You have found special favour with God: remember her, who of all mankind, nay of all the creatures of the Most High, was most blessed and highly favoured. Remember the Blessed Virgin Mary, whom He chose to be His own Mother, as He hath chosen you to be His brethren; and let your return be like hers. She, the pattern of God's elect, instead of at all lifting herself up, said in all lowliness of heart, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word." Do you, in like manner, give yourself up to Him, and reject all that would turn you from that good mind. Do so, day after day, as often as ever you are solicited to anything that you know to be wrong. Pray, and strive in earnest to do so: and you will be helped; you will not fall from grace given: and He Who chose you in the beginning to be a Christian, will choose you again in the end to be a Saint in Heaven. It is all His Gift, but you may make sure of it, if you will.