

Village Sermons on the Baptismal Service
by John Keble

SERMON XXVIII.

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St. MATT. x. 38.

“He that taketh not his Cross and followeth after Me, is not worthy of Me.”

WHEN the child has been christened, the Priest does not, as you know, immediately restore it to the nurse’s arms, but keeps it in his own arms until he have made the sign of the Cross upon its forehead, saying at the same time those noble words, known, as I trust to a great many, if not to the greater part of you. “We receive **this** Child into the congregation of Christ’s flock, and do sign *him* with the sign of the Cross, in token that hereafter *he* shall not be ashamed to confess the faith of Christ crucified, and manfully to fight under His banner, against sin, the world, and the devil; and to continue Christ’s faithful soldier and servant unto *his* life’s end.”

In order to have proper thoughts of this part of the service, we must consider, what is the use of signing and sealing things among men, how Holy Scripture teaches us to apply that use to the things of God, and what use we ourselves ought to make of our Lord’s own sign and seal, the sign of the Cross, which we thus received at the time of our Baptism. I say, at the time of our Baptism, not in our Baptism: because I would wish carefully to guard against the error which some, I know, fall into, of accounting the sign of the Cross part of the Sacrament itself of Baptism. The Sacrament is complete with only the water and the word; as it is given, when an infant, being seriously ill, is baptized at home. In such case you know there is no sign of the Cross. *That* is added afterwards when the infant is brought to Church; yet we are not to doubt that the infant is lawfully and sufficiently baptized.

What is the use then of the Holy Sign, if it is no part of Baptism? The Priest’s words, when he makes it, are sufficient to explain its use, if only we bear in mind what is men’s purpose in signing or sealing anything. Generally speaking, a sign or seal, put upon anything, is put for one or both of two uses. To keep the thing safe, and to make known whom it belongs to. Thus the chief Priests made our Lord’s Sepulchre sure, *sealing* the stone, as well as setting a watch: and thus Jezebel when she wrote that wicked letter about Naboth, not only wrote it in Ahab’s name, but sealed it also with Ahab’s seal, that there might be no doubt of the letter coming from Ahab.

And now we know what the uses of a seal are, we shall the better understand how the sign of the Cross is, as Christ’s Seal, put upon each of us, immediately after we have been made members of Christ in Baptism.

For first of all, the Priest with the infant in his arms says aloud in his own name, and in that of all the congregation and in the name of all Christian people, “We receive this child into the Congregation of Christ’s flock.” It may be asked, what need so to receive the child? since, his Baptism being complete, he is already a member of Christ, bone of His Bone and flesh of His Flesh, and therefore much more is he already one of Christ’s congregation and flock, and no doubt the inward blessing is already complete: the child cannot be more entirely baptized, more truly and really joined to Christ than he

is. But the Church has always thought it well, that what has been inwardly and spiritually done should be outwardly and visibly accepted and declared; that Christians should acknowledge each fresh Christian, coming or brought into their assembly, with such solemn words of welcome. “We receive this child or this person into the congregation of Christ’s flock,” into the Holy Catholic Church and the Communion of Saints, into the blessed brotherhood and family, named of our Lord in Heaven and earth:—and surely, as the’ words are said, they may well go deep into each one of our hearts, husbands and wives: and as those who truly and religiously love one another had thoughts which cannot be put into words, when they listened to the Church pronouncing that they were man and wife together, so, and even much more, ought the thoughts to be very deep and blessed, which come into a Christian man’s mind, when he hears infant after infant solemnly received into the flock, and considers that he has himself been so received. He may consider with himself that these words were, in deed and in truth, the voice of all Saints and Angels greeting him, as he enters within the Holy Household; they are the pledge and earnest of the yet more unspeakable greeting which the same Heavenly hosts have in store for him, against the time when, if it please God, he shall pass through the everlasting doors, and with open face behold the things in which now he only believes. But now mark how the Service goes. The Priest says not, “We receive this child into Christ’s congregation,” but, “into the congregation of Christ’s flock,” putting us in mind that all we are sheep, that the Church is our Fold, Jesus Christ our Shepherd, and the infant of course who has just been christened, can be no other than a lamb, a lamb of Christ’s fold, newly born, and of course an object of the good Shepherd’s very special care. Now we know what shepherds do, in order that their sheep and lambs may be kept safe. They put their master’s name, some letter of it, or some mark belonging to their master, upon each sheep or lamb separately, and so turn them out, when they have been washed and shorn. Even so is the Name and Mark of Christ put upon His lambs by His under-shepherds, when they mark them, newly baptized, with the sign of the Cross. That sign is the Name and Mark of our Lord Christ, put upon them, to tell whose they are, and to protect them from dangerous enemies: as sheep, when properly marked, wander at large in mountainous countries and are safe, because men see whom they belong to, and are afraid of the peril and trouble of stealing them. Let us consider a little how the signing of our foreheads in Baptism may be a protection to us in ways which we little dream of.

One might naturally say, how can this be, seeing that the sign itself is not really made in our forehead? It is not stamped or painted there, as it is on the sheep; but only the Priest’s fingers, for one very short moment, trace the figure in the air close to the child’s brow, leaving no trace when they are taken off. To all outward appearance the babe is the same as before. But, my brethren, there are others by, spectators and witnesses of the child’s Baptism, of whom we may well believe that they see the print of the Cross remaining, although we do not see it. These are the good Angels, especially that one to whom, according to the Church’s old opinion, the care and guardianship is committed of the child’s own soul particularly. The good Angels, I say, looking on a newly christened child, see that blessed and saving Sign in its clear baptismal brightness, not as yet dimmed nor sullied by actual sin; and, generally as they go about the world, we may well believe that they see who among mortals have Christ’s mark upon them, and that, for the love of Christ, they are always ready, always forward to do all they can for the help of those whom they perceive to belong to Christ? Just as any friend or faithful servant of a

man owning sheep upon the mountains would look after those sheep or lambs on which he saw his master's or his friend's mark. Thus the Baptismal Cross, though to our eyes it leave no mark remaining, may yet be traceable by the eyes of the good Spirits, and we may have by it the more of their care and help. And, on the other hand, the evil spirits also discerning it may be abashed and afraid; the Sign of the Cross may discomfit and drive them away, as it discomfited and drove away Amalek when fighting against Israel. Amalek, we read, gave way and was overcome by Moses lifting up his hands in the shape of a Cross: and so, if we steadily keep and cherish the Cross in our foreheads by prayer and holy obedience, we shall overcome our spiritual enemies, or they will fear to attack us so fiercely.

This use of the holy Sign to frighten away bad angels, and secure the help of good, appears to be referred to more than once in Holy Scripture. Not unlike it is what happened at the time of the First Passover. An Angel, a destroying Angel, an Angel of God's vengeance, was to pass through the guilty land at midnight, and enter into each house and slay the first-born only. Into those houses, on which he should see the token of Redeeming mercy, the sprinkling of the blood of the lamb, into those he was not to enter, but to pass them over. Now the sprinkling of the lamb's blood over the door was not unlike making the Sign of the Cross on the forehead; the one, as well as the other, might well serve for a token to our invisible friends and enemies, causing the one to draw back, the other to watch over us.

Again, we read in the Book of Joshua how that when Jericho was taken, one woman, Rahab the harlot, had her house and all that belonged to her spared: because she had dealt kindly with the men whom Joshua had sent to search the land. The men gave her a sign; they had her hang out a scarlet thread at her window, which when the armies of the Lord should see, they would know it was His sign, and would spare the house when they saw it. What was that scarlet thread but a type of and token of Christ's saving Blood? In other words it was a sign of the Cross.¹

Again, and yet more remarkably, God revealing Himself to the Prophet Ezekiel shewed him this vision: he seemed to himself to be in the Temple, and to see all manner of wicked idolatries carried on there, in the very sight of the glory of the Lord: and therefore he saw also, how that the Lord appointed six ministers of vengeance who were to pass through the city slaying all sorts, but before they set out on their errand, another, a merciful Priest, was commanded to go round and seal those who were penitent and better than the rest, to seal them in the forehead with a certain letter, which is believed to have been of the very shape of the Cross. *That* being done, the Angels of vengeance went forth and slew all the rest; but whomsoever they saw thus sealed, him they passed over. Not otherwise will those glorious beings deal with us sinners at the Last Day: they will sever the wicked from amongst the just, to be cast into the furnace of fire: but those, on whom they shall see our Lord's mark, they will pass over, leaving them to be admitted by our Lord Himself into Heaven.

And to make us sure that this kind of sealing has something like it in the Gospel and Church of Christ, you heard, out of the Book of Revelations, concerning the four Angels which were appointed to hurt the earth, and the sea and the trees, how that they were commanded to forego any such thing, until they should have sealed the servants of our God in their foreheads. With all this Scripture authority, no wonder that our first

¹ This interpretation of Joshua is a very early Patristic one, first used by Hippolytus, *Ad Diognetus* 1.37.

fathers in the faith, the Christians in the next generation after the Apostles, made very great use indeed of the sign of the Cross: insomuch that we find one of them saying, "In all our travels and movements, in all our coming in and going out, in putting on our shoes, at the hath, at the table, in lighting our candles, in lying down, in sitting down, whatever employment occupieth us, we mark our forehead with the sign of the Cross." The saving sign, which both we and they need continually, they kept repeating in act: we, who do not so, must be the more careful to repeat it very often in mind.

Thus you see in a general way, why Christ's sign or seal should be put upon the new-baptized. It is placed, to mark them for Christ's own, and to protect them from evil spirits. Now why that sign should be the Cross, rather than anything else, you all know very well. By using the Cross and no other figure, we declare our faith not simply in Christ, but in Christ Crucified, in God Incarnate, dying on the Cross to be the Sacrifice for our sins. We say the same in gesture, which St. Paul said in words, when he told the Corinthians, "I determined to know nothing among you, save Jesus Christ and Him Crucified." By that act we profess obedience to the many sayings of our Blessed Master, in which He bade us take up and bear the Cross: the first of which sayings, in point of time, is that which I read to you for our text to-day, "Whosoever taketh not up his cross and followeth after Me is not worthy of Me." Those words were addressed to the twelve Disciples by our Lord, when He first sent them out to preach in His Name; they are part of our Master's original instructions, in first forming His Divine Kingdom and Household. If you would be worthy of Me, take up your Cross. Well is it then, that on each one of us, on our entrance into that Holy Family, the very mark of the Cross was put, our Lord's own mark, uniting in one His Truth and our duty, Faith in Christ and denying ourselves for His Sake. Well is it for you and me, that, even as infants, the Cross was thus laid upon us, to mark us for Christ's own and to keep off the powers of darkness. Well is it for us so far; but it will be very ill for us if, being come to years, we decline the loving and blessed burden so graciously laid upon us. Observe our Lord's Word. He says, "Whoso *taketh* not his cross and followeth not Me is not worthy of Me." We must *take* it, i. e. willingly accept and receive it, when we are old enough to know what it is. We must *bear* it, i. e. carry it along with us on our journey through this evil world; we must not pretend or wish to part company with it. Now what do I mean, when I talk of parting company with the Cross? I mean, putting by our duty when we find that it becomes unpleasant; as for instance there are some here who, being come to the appointed age, are now preparing solemnly to take upon themselves the Cross which was laid upon them in their Baptism. They are preparing themselves to be confirmed: let them well understand what our Lord expects of them. He will not give them His confirming Spirit, unless they come to Him taking up their cross, i. e. with a mind set to do their duty, however unpleasant. Now it is plain *they* have not yet such a mind, it will be no blessing to *them* to be confirmed, if they have not yet the courage to do unpleasant duties; and I am sorry to say concerning some of them, that it is too plain, there is one duty at least, and that a very serious and sacred one, which they have not yet courage to do: I mean the duty of behaving well in Church. I take this opportunity, brethren, of giving as public notice as I can, that we shall not consider any person as fit to be presented to the Bishop for Confirmation, who shews by his behaviour that he is not trying to behave well and reverently at Church. However well he may answer all questions, he ought not to be confirmed and he will not be confirmed here, if he be noticed as commonly rude and

irreverent in God's House. Neither he nor his friends must complain, if he be disappointed in the end when he asks for the Bishop's Blessing. Better by far for him to be disappointed, than to draw near with an untrue heart, and affront his Saviour. But how very foolish, how very sad that any Christian youth or maiden should lack even the little courage and conscientiousness to behave with outward decency and reverence for the few hours in the week, which we spend here in Church. Surely in vain, so far, has the sign of the Cross been put upon such an one, since the fear of being laughed at, or dislike of the little trouble of keeping himself in order, is of more avail with him than the fear of God and the feeling of Christ's Presence. I hope there are not many such. But some I too greatly fear there undoubtedly are. At any rate I have given them plain warning, not however plainer than the word of God has given, concerning all those who, by evil doing, shall be found at last to have worn out of their foreheads the mark of Christ, made there in their Baptism. He will profess unto them, "I know you not: depart from me, ye that work iniquity."² O God, grant that those words may not be spoken to any of us.

² Luke 13:27