

Village Sermons on the Baptismal Service
by John Keble

SERMON XXXI.

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1 THESS. v. 23, 24.

“The very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God, your whole spirit and soul and body may be preserved blameless until the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Faithful is He that calleth you, Who also will do it.”

WHEN our young children have been baptized, the Church their Holy Mother does not send them home without special prayer to God, that they may never lose the benefit received, special thanksgiving to Him for bestowing it, and special directions what they must be taught and how brought up, in order to walk worthy of it. The special prayer is first the Lord's Prayer. It had not been used in the Baptismal Service before, though in many services it forms the very beginning. This may be, because the Lord's Prayer is in an especial sense the Prayer of Christians; the Prayer of regenerated persons, the Prayer of the faithful. Therefore, until we are faithful, regenerate, Christian Persons,—in one word, until we be baptized, we have not, strictly speaking, any right to say this Prayer. We cannot so properly call God our Father, until we have been graciously made His adopted children; and the early Christians kept this rule, never permitting an unbaptized person to use it.

But now that this has been assuredly done;—now that this present infant has, without any manner of doubt, been made the child of God by faith in Christ Jesus: (for having been baptized into Christ he has put on Christ,) the Father sees him now, not as he is in himself, but as he is in Christ:—this being so, we all, in that child's behalf, kneel down and say the Prayer which the Lord Himself taught us.

And see, my brethren, consider, you all more especially, who have ever had children of your own christened,—what a deep and affectionate meaning the words of this prayer carry with them, as they are used on this particular occasion. Our Father, Thou Who hast now been pleased to adopt this child to be especially Thine Own, uniting him by Thy Holy Spirit to Thy True and Eternal Son Christ Jesus; Thou art now to this little one a Father in Heaven: and hast prepared for him a place in Heaven, if he lose it not by his own miserable falling away. How can those, who are his earthly parents, ever thank and praise Thee enough for this Thine unspeakable mercy to him? All the love they have to their child is but a drop poured into their hearts from Thee Who are the only Fountain, or rather the unexhausted Sea of Love. All they can ever do for him is nothing, less than nothing, and vanity, compared with what Thou hast done, in making him, by this Thy Baptism, a member of Thine Only Begotten Son, and so a partaker of Thine Own Divine Nature. We can but fall prostrate and praise Thee.

But since we are all as yet in a world of trial; since the child is as yet only entered into a state of salvation, not finally and entirely saved; we must add to our humble acknowledgements a no less humble prayer. For this child we pray; and our prayer is, “Hallowed be Thy Name.” May Thy glorious and dreadful Name, which has even now been called upon this child, be ever kept sacred by him and in him: may it never be

blasphemed through him or his doings. May he always remember, even in his most secret thoughts, that he bears about with him in very deed the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost: he is trusted with it: he has taken it on him: and if he be found at last to have taken it in vain, the Lord, we know, will not and cannot hold him guiltless. Our very first prayer, then, for this new-baptized infant, must be that he may always honour God's holy Name and His Word: that instead of being a reproach to it by any kind of sin, he may honour it always by all kinds of holy obedience, and may be a happy instrument, at least by good example, of bringing others to honour it also. And with all our hearts, kneeling round the Font, we say for the new-baptized infant, "Hallowed be Thy Name."

Next, since the infant has also just been made by Baptism an inheritor of God's Kingdom, we pray also that God's Kingdom may come to that child, not only as it cometh to children, but more and more, until every thought word and work is brought into the obedience of Christ, and that which is now a little babe, having but the seed of Holiness implanted in it, shall have become a full-grown man in Christ Jesus, a perfect King and Priest unto God and the Father.

We pray, thirdly, that this tender babe may be a blessed instrument in God's Hand to work His Will in all things: that, as long as he lives, he may be a Priest as well as a King, sacrificing himself and all that belongs to him to the great God, the Giver of all. This is what we ask, when we say on behalf of the newly christened child, "Thy will be done on earth, as it is in Heaven." And those moreover, to whom the child is especially near and dear, may well have such a thought as this following: "Now, by God's great mercy in Christ Jesus, the great point is for the present secure: if my child die as he is now, he will undoubtedly be saved through Christ for ever. In this faith I cheerfully trust him to the Saviour Who died for Him; being sure, that He Who loved him so dearly will deny him nothing that is really for his good. Thus may parents, in their deep anxieties, support themselves by the thought of their child's Baptism. He is safe in Christ's arms for the present: they have but to pray and strive, calmly and earnestly, that he may never lose his place there.

Therefore they go on to ask for the little one the daily blessings of support, pardon and grace: that He Who has given him life will not leave off to give Him bread: by His Almighty Spirit continuing and supporting the Heavenly life which He has just breathed into him. Give unto us all, and especially to this child, his daily bread, the continuation of his part and portion in Christ, without which he cannot live to God. Give him this precious gift this day and all the days of his life. This is our especial meaning when we say at the Font, "give us this day our daily bread." In old time, at least in many parts of the church, the words had also another very special meaning. They related to the Holy Eucharist, which was then given immediately after Baptism, even to infants. Now, this has ceased to be the general custom of the church: still there is no harm in thinking of Holy Communion, when at the Font we come to this part of the Lord's Prayer: there is no harm in thinking then of the child's first Communion, and praying in one's heart that he may live to be worthily confirmed, and worthily to receive his Saviour's Body and Blood.

Since also he has just been made partaker of the "One Baptism for the Remission of sins:" when we go on and say, "Forgive us our trespasses," we may well look forward to the time, when he will like others be exposed to sin and temptation, and we may understand ourselves as saying, "Forgive, O Lord, this child, whom Thou hast now taken into Thine Arms and blessed, all the sin that he shall hereafter fall into, through the

unhappy stain of his nature, the original sin which cometh from Adam, abiding in him even now after his Baptism. Preserve him by Thy grace from all deadly sin, and cause him speedily to recover from all sin of infirmity, and carefully to watch against it. Who can tell how much good it might do to those whom we love best, if we followed up the first gracious beginnings with such prayer as this, earnest and persevering, and above all things, recommended by repentance and seriousness of heart?

Again, when one thinks of that malicious one, how even in Paradise he went walking about, seeking whom he might devour: how, wherever the sons of God are, there he also is found among them, how natural does it seem, to say in one's heart, "Lead not this infant, just made Thine Own, lead him not, O Lord, into temptation: watch around him and keep him from the evil world. Leave him not to the devices of his own heart, and of all things deliver him from evil; from the Evil One, from the crafts and assaults of the devil." In former times, it was a part of the Baptismal service, to exorcise the child, i. e. to command the evil spirit to depart from him, since all children are by nature born in sin, and under the power of Satan. We, my brethren, may piously believe, that devoutly saying these last words of the Prayer of our Lord may help in like manner to keep him off from our children.

And having thus prayed as our Saviour taught us to pray, and said Amen with all our hearts, we in the Name of the whole Church may solemnly thank Him for what He has done for the child, adding him to the number of His elect, and putting him into a state of salvation. This we do in the words following. "We yield Thee hearty thanks, most Merciful Father, that it hath pleased Thee to regenerate this infant with Thy Holy Spirit, to receive him for Thine own child by adoption, and to incorporate him into Thy Holy Church." Here are three unspeakable blessings, for which we thank Almighty God on behalf of the new-baptized. The first, Regeneration, the second, Adoption; the third, Incorporation into the Church. Concerning each of the Three we are directed to speak quite positively. We are not to say, "we hope it hath pleased Thee," but, "it hath pleased Thee." What can this mean, but that we are not to doubt, but earnestly to believe, the Regeneration of each baptized child? As surely as ever we see him at the Font, the priest pouring the Water and saying the Words over him, so surely are we to believe that he is born again of water and of the Holy Ghost: that God for Christ's sake has adopted and accounts him His child: and that he is grafted as a real member into the Church which is the Body of Christ. He may hereafter (God forbid it, but he *may*) turn out an undutiful child, a rotten unfruitful branch, and then his new Birth will do him no good but harm. It will but serve, unless he repent, to his greater condemnation: still he will have been new-born: for what is done cannot be undone. But for the present, being as he is a simple child, who cannot do anything to frustrate the grace of God, his Baptism, we are sure, is a mere blessing, a cluster of all blessings to him. We are *sure* he is born again to a new and heavenly life, we are *sure* he is adopted into our Lord's own family: we are *sure* he is united to Him, and made a member of Him. What a thought is this to fill all the heart of a father or mother who truly loves his Child! and what a sad calamity, what a grievous loss will it be, if we listen to those who would disturb us in our faith and thankfulness, and say the child's blessing is doubtful: all indeed are baptized alike, but only some, we cannot tell which, are blessed. Surely this, though not so intended, is both unthankful to God and unkind to man. Far be it from those who gather round this our Font, this our blessed Laver of Regeneration, to have any such doubt in their hearts. The Angels, who are with

us invisibly, have no such doubt. As they gave thanks to God with no uncertain sound at the Birth of the Lord Jesus Himself, so do they, depend on it, at the new birth of any of His little ones. Fear not and doubt not: only try to praise Him as they do, and humble yourselves, as unworthy of so great a blessing.

After the Thanksgiving, the Church falls to Prayer again: Prayer for improvement, and Prayer for perseverance: for those are the two graces which the infant now stands in need of. As for improvement we humbly beseech God to grant, that this child, being dead to sin and living unto righteousness, and being buried with Christ in His Death, may crucify the old man, and utterly abolish the whole body of sin. You see, the Prayer takes up the notion of Death and Burial as representing our Christian condition. The child is so far dead to sin, as that the guilt of its original sin is clean washed away, and as yet it has no power to commit actual sin. It is also alive unto righteousness; for it has within it the Quickening Spirit, the Lord and giver of the Life which is in Christ: so that in Him it can do all things, though of itself it can do nothing. Still there is abiding deep in the heart of that child, the sore and plague-spot of what we call original sin: that is to say, the old man, the likeness of Adam, that, of which comes the body of sin. This then we pray, that the child may be always crucifying, and at last that he may utterly abolish it. For the Christian's calling is, not simply to overcome sin, but to crucify it, i. e. to get the better of it by the Cross of his Saviour: putting it down by faith in the Cross, and by real mortification and self-denial after the pattern of the Cross. We pray that the child may be doing this continually, that it may be his daily and hourly exercise, all his life long. And it is perhaps but the same prayer in other words, when we add, that as he is made partaker of the Death of Thy Son, he may also be partaker of His Resurrection. The child is baptized once for all into Christ, into His Death; he is once for all made partaker of the benefits of His Death. But during the child's whole life and being afterwards, God graciously means, and we are humbly to pray, that the child may partake of the Resurrection, i. e. of what is sometimes called the Risen Life of our Lord: that as Christ dieth no more, so the baptized may sin no more: that as Christ ascended into Heaven, so we may in heart and mind thither ascend. Thus we ask for each little one the grace of improvement: and we end with asking the grace of final perseverance: "that finally, with the residue of Thy Holy Church, he may be an inheritor of Thine everlasting Kingdom." Thus from the beginning we look on with hope unto the end. We stand in the strait and narrow gate, the lowly baptismal entrance into Christ's Kingdom, and we look along the strait and narrow way, and see the glimmering, more or less clearly, of Eternal Life at the end. We look on in faith and charitable prayer, as St. Paul looked on for his Thessalonians: praying that God would sanctify them wholly, and preserve their whole spirit and soul and body blameless unto Christ's "aweful coming." This is our prayer, our hope is stedfast: for we know how faithful He is. He hath called us: He will do it. He for His part is most sure to hear His Church's prayer, and to keep us in the right way. Only it rests with each one of ourselves to confirm His mercy or make it void. It is an aweful burden: may He give us grace to bear it, and turn it into a Crown at last.