

Village Sermons on the Baptismal Service  
by John Keble

## SERMON XXXII.

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1 SAM. i. 22.

“I will bring him, that he may appear before the Lord, and there abide for ever”

IT is Hannah who speaks these words, the mother of Samuel, that mother who shewed her love to her child in nothing so much, as in being willing to part with him. She thought not of her own comfort, but of his good; she wanted to do the very best for him; therefore she thankfully gave him up to his God. As soon as ever Samuel was weaned, just at the time, perhaps, when he was as precious to her as he could well be, and she would most entirely feel as if she could never do without him, just then she brought him to God’s Priest and left him there, to pass his life at a distance from her. It was a great sacrifice, and the Almighty rewarded it with a very great blessing: as He will always richly reward those parents, who for love’s sake give up their children to Him. No doubt it was, for the time, very trying. Samuel was as yet her only child, much prayed for, long waited for: and it must have gone to her very heart to leave him there, where for the future she would only see him for a short time once a year, when she and her husband came to offer the yearly sacrifice. But Hannah had faith, and therefore she willingly endured it: and God made her one of the happiest of mothers, a true type of her whom “all generations shall call blessed,” Mary the Mother of our Lord Jesus Christ, who brought her Child also in His Infancy to present Him to God in His Temple, but did not for the time leave Him there, as Hannah did Samuel. He, the Child Jesus, willed for the time to be redeemed with an offering of turtle-doves or young pigeons: but His mother only took him back, to part with Him by and by, in a way infinitely more grievous and trying, when she had to stand by His Cross, and the sword was piercing her own soul also. One cannot imagine any other parting like that. Still, Hannah’s parting with Samuel was in some respects an image of it: even as are all partings of Christian mothers with their children, for heavenly love and duty’s sake. And Hannah’s words, in preparing for it, as they speak a real parent’s mind, so are they not ill fitted to express the mind and purpose of a Christian godfather or godmother, standing in a parent’s place. Therefore I have made mention of them on this occasion, when I am to say something to you on the last portion of the whole Baptismal Service, the admonition to the godfathers and godmothers.

Hannah’s words in themselves are very plain and simple; “I will bring him, that he may appear before the Lord, and there abide for ever;” a short and easy saying, yet, if I mistake not, sufficient to remind us of the whole duty of those whom we call godfathers and godmothers. For they set before us two things; first, Hannah’s act which she was about to do, the bringing the child to Eli the Priest; secondly, the purpose for which she was to do it, that he might appear before the Lord, and there abide for ever. Now these are just the two purposes, for which godfathers and godmothers are appointed: first, they are to present the child to be baptized; in which respect they stand for the whole Church, which is our true Mother in God. The Church brings her children to be christened, as Hannah brought her child Samuel: and she makes their profession for them by the mouth

of the sponsors, as Hannah declared to Eli that Samuel should thenceforth belong to God only. "For this child I prayed, and the Lord hath given me my petition which I asked of Him: therefore also I have lent him to the Lord: as long as he liveth, he shall be lent to the Lord."<sup>1</sup> That saying of Hannah, you see, comes to very nearly the same as the promise and vow which infants make by their sponsors: "I desire to be baptized in this faith, and I will keep God's holy will and commandments, and walk in the same all the days of my life." This is the duty of godfathers and godmothers, so far as it is set down in the first part of the baptismal office: to present the child for Holy Baptism and make the promise and vow in his name; and this is why they are called "sureties." For sureties, you know, are persons who answer for another, and become bound for them: as, when a man is put into a place of trust, and some friend pledges himself in writing, that the man will perform the duties of the place, and agrees to forfeit so much if it prove otherwise, then you would say he became surety for his friend. Something like this, though not exactly like it, is that which sponsors do, in making the answers required of them in the Baptismal Service: and therefore, you know, they are called "sureties," both in the Service itself and in the Catechism afterwards to be learned. In the service the Priest says to them, after rehearsing Christ's part of the covenant, "Wherefore, after this promise made by Christ, this infant must also faithfully, for his part, promise" so and so, "by you that are his sureties." And again in the Catechism, when we were asked, why should infants be baptized, if Repentance and Faith be required, they as yet not being capable of either; our answer, as you know, was, "because they promise them both by their sureties."

But now it is very plain, that, when any persons have engaged for another that he will fulfil certain duties, if they have it in their power at all to help him or encourage him in doing so, they are bound to do their best for that purpose: just as Hannah, presenting her son to the Lord, was bound to do her best, that he might continue always the Lord's servant; for she says, herself, that she brings him, not only that he may appear before the Lord, but also that he may abide with Him for ever. In this sense Godfathers and Godmothers are not only sureties, but trustees also; they are to do what they can towards the child's abiding for ever with the Lord, to Whom they have brought him: and this is what the Priest reminds them of in the very end of the Baptismal office. "Forasmuch as this child hath promised by you his sureties to renounce the devil and all his works, to believe in God, and to serve Him; ye must remember, that it is your parts and duties to see that this infant be taught, so soon as he shall be able to learn, what a solemn vow, promise and profession he hath here made by you." Now it is very much to be noticed, that this instruction, and the words which follow it, do in fact draw out a short plan for the Christian education of all children, a short and simple plan, but a very complete one, and sufficient, if carried out, to make them good and happy for ever, through Christ Jesus. Therefore this is a part of the Prayer Book, which concerns not godfathers and godmothers only, though it is specially addressed to them, but it concerns all who are engaged in the care of young children, and most nearly and dearly does it concern all fathers and mothers. Surely it is their part, even more than the sponsors', to see that these infants be kept as near as can be in that happy state of pardon and salvation into which they were brought by Baptism. Surely it will be a fearful hearing, one day, for that father or mother, to whom the Judge shall have to say, "where is thy flock that was given thee,

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Samuel 1:27

thy beautiful flock?”<sup>2</sup> thy beautiful flock of sons and daughters, lent unto Me, for all their life long, in Holy Baptism, and committed to thee to be taken care of for Me? Where are they? What is become of them? Why are they on the left hand, in the wrong place? Oh how shall we look up, when that question is asked of us, if our own hearts shall bear the sad and shameful witness against us, that our neglect was too much the cause of their being where they are, of their losing Christ out of their hearts? Some of us may have had such a thought as this: “Nay, I do not willingly neglect those under my charge; but it is so great a matter, that I know not how to set about it, and so I neglect it from day to day, and can only hope that God will forgive me at last.” But we ought not to talk or think so; indeed, we ought not. Only just consider these few short sentences, which you hear as often as you are present at Holy Baptism. “It is your parts and duties to see that this Infant be taught, so soon as he shall be able to learn, what a solemn vow, promise, and profession, he hath here made by you.” Here is the very principle and beginning, the corner-stone of Christian teaching. Fix very deep in their young hearts, that of all things their vow in Baptism is to be kept. It is that, which the Church mentions first in her short account of your duties: and if you live to lie upon your sick bed, and to be in need of Church ministrations there, this matter, of the Baptismal vow, is the very first which the priest will begin impressing upon you: “I exhort you,” will he say, “first of all, to remember the promise which you made unto God in your Baptism.” O fathers and mothers, can it possibly be, that you think it too much trouble to use your children in good time to that, which will be their greatest help on their deathbed? What if you are no scholars? What if you cannot understand long discourses? Thus much surely you can understand, that it is your duty and your children’s duty, to keep a promise when you have made it, much more when it is made to God: and therefore that both you and your children, to keep the vow, must have it continually in mind. That is the first thing: and if you heartily set about it, you will soon find that the most ignorant, by God’s gracious help, may understand and remember it to good purpose. None so ignorant, none so dull, but he may ask himself, and teach his children to ask themselves, “is this which I am going to do, agreeable to what I have vowed or no?” Next, the godfathers and godmothers are told, “that he may know these things the better, ye shall cause him to hear sermons,” i. e. as I understand it, you shall make him regularly go to Church, as soon as ever he is of age, and you shall see, as well as you can, that he attends to the holy lessons which are there taught him. This is one among the many reasons, why children should be brought to Church very early, and very early instructed to make a religious difference between the Church and other places: not only for the prayers’ sake, (though that is a most sacred matter which ought never to be forgotten), but also for the instruction’s sake, that, being all their lives long trained to attention and reverence in the holy place, they may be ready and disposed to receive the sermons and lessons, when they shall be able to understand them, into their very minds and hearts. And this, about hearing sermons, which cannot be without going regularly to Church, is set down specially in these directions to the godfathers, not only, I suppose as being a needful part of the child’s Christian education, but also as being a thing in which the godfather may be of special use in many cases. For if he misses the child often from Church, he ought to take some friendly way of remonstrating with the parents about it: if he may see him inattentive, or otherwise ill-behaved, a quiet word or two from him can hardly be out of

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<sup>2</sup> Jeremiah 13:20

season. And this is a part of a young person's duty which all can see and take notice of; so that the godfather, if he see it neglected, can hardly be thought wrong in interfering: and here is one among the infinite reasons, why all, who are in any way trusted with others, should be very diligent themselves in their Church duties. For how can you really and truly cause your children and godchildren to hear sermons, if you do not set them the example, and consequently are not yourself at Church to see that they are there, and that they behave properly?

The next caution relates to the Catechism. "Chiefly ye shall provide that he shall be taught the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the ten Commandments in the vulgar tongue, and all other things which a Christian ought to know and believe to his soul's health." This plainly binds it upon all godfathers and godmothers to do their best to make sure that the young persons for whom they answer, shall be properly taught the Catechism. They ought to look to it early, and to see about it from time to time. If they find it neglected, they should put the parents in mind, not minding if they are sometimes a little affronted. One day, they may depend upon it, both parents and children will own, that they ought to have thanked their baptismal sureties for any such kind and Christian interference. No one can say, how much good might be done by a word, now and then spoken in due season, seriously and lovingly, for the souls of these tender little ones, by those who are so bound to look after them; or how much it might strengthen the hands, both of their pastors and of those who have to teach them at school. What a blessing it might bring down upon the charitable godfathers or godmothers themselves, if they put themselves a little out of the way, according to their vows, to do good to the children's souls! May God give grace to all who are concerned, to think more and more of it! Of course, when parents do their duty, the cares of the godfathers in this respect are greatly lightened. But then too there ought to be this very serious thought; "What if the child, otherwise in a good way, should take any hurt or hindrance by my neglect or ill example?" And there should be constant prayers and endeavours that he may prove not only *good*, but *very good*: not only escaping damnation, but going on or, as the Church says, "daily proceeding in all virtue and godliness of living." But of this I must speak next Sunday, when I hope, if it please God, to finish what I had to say on the service of Holy Baptism. In the mean time I wish we might all pray, that He, Who baptizeth with the Holy Ghost, Who never fails to be present at our Fonts, may give unto us all, and especially unto all parents and godfathers, and to all whom He has entrusted with young children, grace to think more and more of Christian perfection, as it is written of those whose strength is in God, "they shall," not merely abide in Him but, "go on from strength to strength,"<sup>3</sup> better, purer, more loving, and more humble, each new day, than they were the day before.

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<sup>3</sup> Psalm 84:7