

# Village Sermons on the Baptismal Service by John Keble

## SERMON VI.

July 22, 1849.

ST. JOHN VI. 44.

“No Man can come unto Me, except the Father which hath sent Me draw him.”

THERE are two very great mistakes which are apt to haunt us as it were, and trouble us, because of our sin and frailty, all our way through this world: the one, that we can do nothing at all, nothing, I mean, towards our own salvation; the other, that we can do anything without God: According as men are slothful or presumptuous, they are apt to take up with one or other of these. He who is spiritually slothful, and had rather not take any trouble about his soul, too readily takes up with the notion, that Almighty God, when He pleases, will touch his heart and bring him to a better mind, and that in the mean time he can but wait; it is no use for him to take any special pains; that, if he keeps from sin one day, he will fall into it the next, and so he may as well let things take their course. Such an one as this, will too commonly neglect his prayers, because, not finding that he takes delight in them, he will fancy they do him no good.

On the other hand, there are some who neglect their prayers as well from a habit (not distinctly known to themselves yet really lurking in the bottom of their hearts), that they are well enough as they are; that, on the whole, they are in a good way, and need not be so earnestly calling upon God for special help so very often or on every sort of occasion. Such persons do indeed say their prayers; but too often they allow themselves to think of something else all the while.

But all who in earnest care for their souls, and especially all dutiful children of God and of His Holy Church, having learnt of our Lord to pray always, and of the Apostle, to pray without ceasing, will neither leave out any of their prayers, nor say them over carelessly, as though they could do as well without them. Whereas our Saviour said, “No man can come to Me except the Father draw him:”<sup>1</sup> they will own and feel, that in everything, little or great, we have need of His special grace, to go before, to accompany, to follow us; without it, we cannot move one hair’s breadth

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<sup>1</sup> John 6:44

towards Heaven. Again, whereas the same Saviour complained, “ye will not come unto Me, that ye might have life:” they will understand that to all, unto whom He makes Himself known, He offers so much grace, as that they may come unto Him and have life, if they will. There are two things, then, which should always go together, if our souls are at all to prosper. Those two things are, prayer and work. All good prayer is in order to good works: no work can ever be good without good prayer. As the meat which God has not blessed will do us no good, so the plainest undertakings, which we enter on apart from God are sure to fail. It is vain to expect a blessing on them.

All good Christian works must be begun with prayer, with earnest prayer. No wonder if the work of baptizing a child or person, which is in one sense the greatest of the works which God calls us to do here on earth, should be ordered by the Church to begin with very earnest and special prayer, since “no man can come unto Christ except the Father first draw him;” none can enter into the kingdom except by God’s free gift in Baptism—“except he be regenerate and born anew of water and the Holy Ghost:” no wonder if the priest, at the very entrance of the Service, beseeches “us to call upon God the Father, through our Lord Jesus Christ, that of His bounteous mercy He will grant unto this child that thing which by nature he cannot have, that he may be baptized with water and the Holy Ghost, and received into Christ’s Holy Church, and be made a lively member of the same.”

Consider, my brethren, what a great idea these words give us of Holy Baptism. To our outward ears it may seem a very simple thing for the priest to take the child in his arms, to pour the water on it and say the words; but you see here that it is a work so high and so serious, that the whole Three Persons of the Blessed and glorious Trinity are called in, as it were, to bring it about. Even as they consulted together in the first creation of man, saying, “Let Us make man in Our Image, after Our likeness,” so they are to be prayed to for their heavenly grace and Blessing in the new-making, the new creation of the soul of every poor little helpless infant, brought here to receive It. Observe, how all the Three Holy Persons are named; the priest says, “I beseech you to call upon God the Father through our Lord Jesus Christ.” As if he should say; Here, as we stand round this Font, we see only a few weak and sinful mortals like ourselves, the infant, the nurse, the sponsors with the rest of the congregation, and within the Font we see nothing but ordinary water; but Faith, if we have but ever so little of it, tells us of a great deal more here present, which we do not see. By faith we know that God the Father is here; God, Who made all things in their season and ordered the times before appointed and the bounds of

their habitation. He did from all eternity predestine this little child to be born, not among Jews or heathen, but here among His own people; not to have unbelieving parents who might scorn and blaspheme Holy Baptism, but such as would send it here into the Church to be christened. His merciful Providence has caused this child to be born alive, and He has preserved it hitherto: (whereas so many little ones are caught away before they can be brought to the Font.) He is here, prepared in His unspeakable mercy to bless what He has put in our hearts to do, and give this child the new and heavenly birth, as He has already given him the first birth from Adam. The Great King is here; the gift is ready; but He expects that we should humbly ask Him for it.

And how are we to ask? In the name of God the Son. We are “to call upon God the Father through our Lord Jesus Christ.” For He too is here, doubt it not: the Saviour of us all, and of this little one also, is with us by this Font, around which we are gathered together in His Name: and He is ready to receive the prayers of this congregation now humbly to be offered up, and to present them to His Father, in union with those of His whole Church in heaven and in earth and with His Own mysterious Intercession. Through Him, all the petitions we shall now offer for this little one will be favourably heard by the Great Eternal Father.

He will intercede: He will be this child’s Advocate and Mediator: for to this end was He born and for this cause He came into the world, to save this child among other sinners. As He had us all in His Heart, when He took the Body prepared for Him and said to His Father, “Lo! I come to do Thy Will, O God,” so did He, at that time and all along since, know and foresee all concerning this particular child also. For He was made Man and born into the world, to be poor, helpless, tender, as this child now is: for him, as for us all, He was baptized; by the Touch of His Sacred Body giving virtue to all the waters of the world, and among the rest to that water which is now in this Font, to the mystical washing away of sin. When He was baptized, He had us all, and especially this child, in His Heart; and so He had when He was dying; He poured out His Divine Soul unto death, He gave His Body to be torn and pierced, with distinct purpose to redeem this little one whom we see now here in his nurse’s arms, just as much so as if there were no other but this one child to be redeemed; and ever since, in His Work of Mediation in Heaven, this same infant has been in like manner present to His All-knowing Mind. And now since He is here with us, doubt not but He will both hear our prayers and intercede for this child to His Father, that it may receive the fruit of His ancient undying Love, and may be truly made a member of Him Who hath loved it.

And then, whereas the priest adds further, that the particular grace

now to be asked of “God the Father through our Lord Jesus Christ,” is that “this child may be baptized with water and the Holy Ghost;” you see what a very special place the Third Person also in the most Holy Trinity graciously takes in this assembly of ours. For He too is present, ready to come down as on the Day of Pentecost, and overshadow these waters, so that they shall be apt to bring forth living creatures, souls full of heavenly life. He is present; ready, when the Sacrament is given, to enter into the soul and body of this child, as He hath entered into the souls and bodies of all who have been rightly baptized hitherto: to make him “a member of Christ, a child of God, an inheritor of Heaven:” to destroy the old Adam, the power of sin within him, and make him for ever, (if he fall not wilfully away), pure and free, holy and happy.

By this you see, what a solemn thing it is in the account of our holy Mother the church, whenever an infant is baptized, and how much we ought to think of it. It is in fact no less than the Day of Pentecost over again, so far as that infant is concerned. It is Jesus Christ Himself coming down to baptize that child with the Holy Ghost. The Whole Sacred Trinity, as you have heard, is called to the work. No wonder that the priest goes on, in speaking of the Baptismal gift, to declare it to be “that thing which by nature the child could not have.” For being by nature conceived and born in sin, the child of the old Adam, heir of God’s wrath and damnation: how could it ever redeem or sanctify itself, any more than a dead carcase, thrown to the bottom of some loathsome pit, could raise itself up and make itself an angel? The baptismal gift cannot be had by nature; it cannot be given by any created being; it is such a gift and such a work, as only the Most High Himself can accomplish for us. For who but God can make one partaker of God?

To make us understand this the more thoroughly, the priest goes on to give some account of what the child is presently to receive. The great and good gift, too high for nature, which will go along with the simple pouring of water on the child in the Name of the Trinity, is, first, that he will be baptized with the Holy Ghost; secondly, that he will be received into Christ’s Holy Church; thirdly, that he will be made a lively member of the same.

He will be baptized with the Holy Ghost, i. e. as I just now said, the same Spirit, Which came on the Apostles on the first Whit-Sunday, will descend upon him, to change his heart and soul, to give him a new nature after the likeness of Jesus Christ, to renew in him that Image of God, in which Adam was at first created. And hereby he will be admitted into Christ’s Holy Church; he will be made a member of that Body, of which Christ is the Head; one Christian more, among all the millions of

Christians who make up the holy family in earth and in Heaven. Now this may seem to many a very simple thing. We all profess and call ourselves Christians; and so do all, or almost all, with whom we have ever been acquainted: therefore to be made a Christian may appear to us no great thing, no extraordinary work, no special favour. Moreover, we see with our eyes that both good and bad are members of the outward Church. A great many, almost all, fall very short of their profession. Some forget or renounce it entirely: and so people come to think, “after all, it signifies very little whether I belong to the visible Church or no.” But think it once over again, my brethren, and think of it in this way; that the sheep who stays quietly in the pasture has not the less to thank his shepherd for, because there are a great many others enjoying the pasture, if it be abundant, with him; nor yet, because some are so foolish as to wander from that pasture or to neglect it, not knowing when they are well off. Neither ought the blessing and favour of God towards each Christian to be at all the less thought of, though all the world were Christians as well as ourselves: nor yet, though ever so many should prove hypocritical unstable Christians, and in the end fall away. Still to each one of us the offer of mercy is the same: our own souls are equally precious, and ought to be equally dear to us, whatever happens to the souls of others: and besides, who would not find it a joy and an encouragement to know, that, in every right thing he does, he has with him all the blessed spirits and souls of the righteous, all who go to make up the whole Church? He is never alone: there are always more for him than there ever were against him. This is an exceeding privilege, to be really one with all the saints and martyrs, all who at any time have served Christ faithfully; and this we could have in no other way, than by being united to Christ and through Him to all Christians.

And, thirdly, this again depends on one thing mentioned before, that we be *lively* members of Christ’s Church: lively, i. e. living, not dead, having life and spirit within us. That is, as we are limbs of Christ’s Body, we may never become dead and palsied as to the doing of what God commands us, but all of us be always quick, earnest, and alert in performing it: that we may not be like withered hands which will not, or cannot obey the Head, that would fain stretch them out to do good: nor yet like feet that are benumbed and useless, and unable to go where He, Whose they are, would send them.

This is the Prayer that our Church instructs us to make over every child that is to be christened, that it may become a lively, or living, member of Christ’s Holy Catholic Church. Observe that, “of Christ’s Holy Catholic Church.” Our Prayer-Book has no thought of any salvation or

regeneration, any union with Christ or interest in Him, apart from the Holy Church throughout all the world, His Mystical Body, to which all His Promises are made. Of Christ's Holy Catholic Church we are to be members, not dead but living members: we must be so when we come to die, else we are surely lost for ever. We had need be so all our lives long; for we may die at any moment. O Lord, can we ever think enough of it? Simple as it may seem, and a mere matter of course for a child to be brought here and christened, it is indeed the greatest of all changes. It places that child ever after in a supernatural and miraculous state, with God for his Father, the Church for his Mother, angels to wait on him, Christ's Body and Blood to be his nourishment. He belongs from that hour to Christ in a nearer and more awful way than he belonged to Him before: as the children of Israel were the Lord's people in a different sense from all other nations, though the whole earth is His. This is our condition, as many as have been baptized; we cannot be as the heathen, though we wished it: we cannot give the heathen's account; our account, whenever we give it, must be that of members of Christ. God grant, it may be the account of true and living members, that we, and all who are concerned for us, may render it with joy, and not with grief.