

Village Sermons on the Baptismal Service  
by John Keble

SERMON VII.  
July 29, 1849.

1 ST. PETER iii. 20, 21.

“The long-suffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing, wherein few, that is, eight souls, were saved by water. The like figure whereunto, even baptism, doth now save us.”

WE have now done with the priest’s exhortation, in which he tells the people the need of Holy Baptism, and asks their prayers for the child now to be baptized. They kneel down; and what are the words in which the Church instructs you to pray? “Almighty and everlasting God, Who of Thy great mercy didst save Noah and his family in the ark from perishing by water . . . We beseech Thee, for Thine infinite mercies, that Thou wilt mercifully look upon this child: wash him and sanctify him with the Holy Ghost, that he, being delivered from Thy wrath, may be received into the ark of Christ’s Church.”

You see, in the very first prayer, we are put in mind of the ark of Noah: how that, when we read of it, God would have us think of Christ’s Church, and how that, as the ark and all that were in it was in God’s providence saved by water, so the Church; and each Christian soul in the Church, according to the law of the kingdom of heaven, is saved by Holy Baptism. The flood in the time of Noah was really and truly, in the purpose of Almighty God, a type of Christian Baptism. The Church has known this, ever since the time of St. Peter. For he, speaking by the Holy Ghost, saith, that Baptism, being the thing represented by the waters of the flood, saves us, bearing up the Church of Christ, as the flood bore up Noah’s ark. Then he gives us to understand, that, as that old world of the ungodly, being overflowed with water, perished, so the heaven and the earth that now are, shall one day perish in a flood of fire; and as nothing escaped that destruction, but only Noah and those who were with him in the ark, so nothing will escape the fire of the last day, but only those who shall be found in the ark of Christ’s Church. As the flood came not without warning (for God gave one hundred and twenty years’ notice of it, commanding Noah to prepare the ark); so likewise of the Day of judgment, ample notice has been given beforehand, seeing that for eighteen hundred years every Christian child has been taught to prophesy of it, repeating his creed and saying, “From thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead.” But as then they made scorn of Noah and his forebodings, and went on just as they had been used to do; so it will be in the last days: “they will eat, they will drink; they will buy, they will sell; they will plant, they will build; they will marry wives, or be given in marriage, until the day that the Son of Man is revealed; and the flood will come and destroy them all.” They only who believe what the Church teaches, of a judgment to come and everlasting life, and who therefore have entered into Christ’s Church by Holy Baptism, and have remained there, they only will be saved; just as all, who did not with Noah go into the ark and abide there, were drowned in the flood. And as the ark was a long time preparing, even one hundred and fifty years, so

is the Church of Christ a long time building up. For all this eighteen hundred years that work has been going on; Noah, i. e., Christ and His apostles, have been preaching, and the ark, i. e., the Church, has had daily additions made to it. As the ark was framed, it is said, of incorruptible wood, so is the Church made up altogether of the Cross of Christ, and of those who by faith are nailed to it. As the ark was builded under the Almighty's particular direction, so also is the Church. For we know that our Lord, during forty whole days, was teaching His Apostles after His resurrection; and what things did He teach them? the things pertaining to the kingdom of God. And when they went out and preached everywhere, gathering disciples into the Church, this was Noah's building up the ark according to all that God commanded him. There were clean and unclean in the ark, so there are in the Church of God: some faithful and some hypocrites. Of all that whole generation, only seven besides Noah were saved in the ark; and we know that our Lord's way of life is narrow, and the gate is straight, and few there be that go in thereat. And as it might be truly said, that all those who were in the ark were saved by water (for the water bore tip the ark, and it went upon the face of the waters); so, and much more, may it be truly said, that all Christians are saved by Baptism. The water which joins them to Christ is the means of their salvation: not of course in itself, but in that it joins them to Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Ghost going along with it.

Thus you have heard some of the chief points of resemblance between Noah's deliverance and ours. Now what should be the thought of a good Christian going over these things in his mind?

First, he cannot fail to perceive how great, how unspeakably great is the gift given and the work wrought in Holy Baptism; seeing it is compared to the two greatest deliverances of God's people in the Old Testament. He will say to himself, "When I see a little child christened, I see an instance of God's power and goodness, of which the preservation of Noah in the ark was but a faint image and shadow. The preservation of Noah in the ark, and the passage of Israel through the Red Sea, were the two greatest and most wonderful miracles whereby God delivered His ancient people; the one kept all mankind from perishing, the other the holy and chosen seed; and both these were by water, and were types and tokens of the Holy Sacrament of Baptism; both these great deliverances, the wonder of the world, were but types and tokens of what Almighty God did for me, when He by His Spirit came to me in my Baptism, and made me a member of His Son. This is our deliverance, my brethren, yours and mine; it has been really wrought for us: let us not cast it away. Think how it would have been with Noah, or with any of his sons, if they had refused to go into the ark, or had cast themselves out of it, after they had been admitted. The ark, as we read in Genesis, was finished, and Noah and his sons invited to come into it, full seven days before the flood was upon the earth. We are not told that to the eye there were any signs of a great storm, any gathering of dark clouds, any lightning or thunder, or other such tokens; we are told that everything around went on as it had done before. Whichever way Noah looked about him, he might see people building houses, planting forests, making bargains and sales with one another, contracting marriages, and doing everything else, just as if the world were to last for ever,—as if God had never said a word of His anger against it for its sins. There was no sign of a flood, and nobody thought there would be one; or, if they did ever notice what God had said to Noah, they made sure it would not be in their own time. Well! what if any of Noah's sons had said, "After all, I see no sign of a flood, and I see that nobody but my father believes

there will be one; I am sure there must be some mistake; I am not going to make myself foolish by entering into this ark before there is any occasion; it will be time enough when it begins to rain; till then at least I will enjoy myself as other people do." I say, if any one of Noah's family had reasoned in this way with himself, and in consequence had stayed out of the ark, refusing to know and consider until the flood came, we know what the consequence would have been. The ark, as we read in Genesis, was closed, after Noah and his family went into it. That was a full week before the flood began.

They went in, and the beasts and the fowls which were to be preserved with them; and the Lord shut them in. The Lord shut and fastened the door of the ark, when all had gone in, who were obedient to His call; it might not open again to receive any more. If then any of Noah's sons had waited, as I said, till the rain had actually begun, and then had come to the ark, intending to go in, he would have found himself too late; he would have been in the condition of those foolish virgins who came knocking at the bridegroom's door, after he and the wise virgins were gone into the wedding, and found it shut, never to be opened unto them.

This would have been the condition of any person who had put off going into the ark. And would it not be very like the condition of any of us who should wilfully delay his entering into Christ's Church, because he saw not yet with his eyes the horror and misery, from which the Church would save him? Yes! I am sure you perceive at once that a person refusing to be a Christian casts himself away in a manner infinitely more fearful, than if he had been unbelieving in Noah's time, and had refused to enter into his ark.

But you may be tempted to think, "What is all this to me? I am a Christian. I am no unbeliever. I have been in the ark long since, ever since I was baptized in my infancy." True, my brother, you have been so; it is your great privilege, and you cannot thank God enough for it. But think of this again with yourself, that it is not enough to have been once in the ark; no, nor even to be there at present; but the thing is, to be there when the flood shall come. For suppose either one of Noah's sons to have gone indeed into the ark when God bade him, seven days before the flood, but to have grown tired of waiting there; suppose, when he looked out through the window, he had seen his neighbours and acquaintances, and thousands besides, enjoying themselves, just as they had been used to do, or rather more; some of them perhaps mocking at him for shutting himself up where he could have no such pleasure; and suppose therefore he had grown restless and uneasy, and had first in his foolish heart longed to be with them, and then at last contrived to get out of the ark, and join them, and had been caught in that condition by the great waters when they arose. I say, such a miserable person as that would not be half so miserable as you, baptized as you are and born again in Christ, if you so go after the things which you in Baptism renounced, as that, when the Judge comes and the fire goes out before Him, you shall be found out of His Church, and among His enemies. And this will be, if you either die in your sins, or be caught by Him living in them. You, having been baptized, think you are safe in the ark. God grant it may be so! It surely is so, if either you have kept your robe pure from grievous sin, or, having fallen, have truly repented and received our Lord's absolution. *Then* you are not only in the ark, but are safe in it; for in that case it would be well with you, were you to die this very moment; but if you are going on in carelessness, or any other known sin, you may indeed be in the ark, I don't deny that, but you are by no means *safe* in it. If the storm were now to arise, you would find yourself suddenly cast out and exposed to its fury. Do not say, "I have plenty of time, I see no

storm as yet.” That was the very saying which the sinners of the old world had in their mouths, when the flood came and took them all away. Do not say, “Why should I be strict and particular? they will all laugh at me, and I cannot bear this laughter.” Look on a little while: imagine the flood come—the flood of fire which shall drown all sinners, and consider, how such an excuse will appear to you then.

Neither, again, can it be safe for you to say (as the manner of some is), “why make so much ado about my being in this ark, the Church? why cannot I be saved without that? I see in this Church clean and unclean together; surely God’s mercy is not limited to such a company.” Nay, but what should you have thought of Noah, if he had scrupled about trusting to the ark, because beasts and fowls, as well as men, were to be in it; and because it was to hold for a time the clean and unclean alike?

Sometimes the evil one puts it into our minds to think less of Christ’s Church, because even outwardly it has been received as yet by much the smaller portion of the sons of Adam, and because at the last it would seem that but a few of many will be saved in it. But do you not observe what is written of the ark? “Few, i. e., only eight souls were saved in it;” yet it was God’s way of salvation, and those who slighted it brought ruin on themselves.

Much less will any person, who has faith as a grain of mustard seed, stumble at what Holy Church and Holy Scripture tell us of Baptism, for want of understanding how such great good should come by water.

This would be no wiser, nor more dutiful, than if we had lived in Noah’s time, and had despised the ark, because it was merely wood: or if, living in our Lord’s own time, we had despised the Cross for the same reason.

But let us all, who by His great mercy have been, before we could know it, saved by water; whom His Fatherly hand has so far brought in safety over the waves of this troublesome world, outwardly at least within the ark of His Church; let us put away once and for ever all thoughts of doubting, indifference, or scorn as to the high privileges of our baptism; and having seriously confessed and amended our sins, let us with earnest and thankful hearts contemplate what is prepared for us, when the flood shall have finally abated, and the ark should have settled on the mountain of God. The raven, i. e., the unclean and the heretic, will have been turned out of the ark for ever; the dove, i. e., the spirit of prayer, will have brought the olive leaf, the token of peace. The rainbow of our Lord’s forgiving mercy will be all around Him on His Judgment Seat, and Noah and his sons, all good Christians (God grant we may, be there) will come out of this earthly ark, to glorify Him in His nearer Presence with, a sacrifice of eternal thanksgiving.

Then, and not till then, shall we know what He did for us when He had us baptized.