

Village Sermons on the Baptismal Service
by John Keble

SERMON VIII.
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1 Cor. x. 1. 2.

“All our fathers were under the cloud, and all passed through the sea: and were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea.”

IN considering our Church’s baptismal service, we are come to that sentence in the first collect, which makes mention of the Israelites’ deliverance from Egypt. “Almighty and Everlasting God, Who of Thy great mercy didst save Noah and his family in the ark from perishing by water; and also didst safely lead the children of Israel Thy people through the Red sea, figuring thereby Thy Holy Baptism—look upon this child,—wash him and sanctify him with the Holy Ghost, that he, being stedfast in faith, joyful through hope, and rooted in charity, may so pass the waves of this troublesome world, that finally he may come to the land of everlasting life.”

Here we see, as I have pointed out before, how great a thing Baptism is; seeing that the two chiefest and most wonderful deliverances in the old Testament are but shadows and figures of it:—the ark which saved the race of Adam, and the passage of the Bed sea which saved God’s own favoured people. And we know that what happened at the Bed sea, as well as what happened about the ark, was meant to be a figure and type of Baptism. We do not only guess it, but we *know* it; for it is expressly taught us by St. Paul, as the other is by St. Peter. “All our fathers were under the cloud, and all passed through the sea: and were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea.” Now these things were types and *figures* of us... “all these things happened unto them for types.”

As therefore we considered, not long ago, how the ark and its safety was a type of Christian Baptism, so it falls to-day to be considered, how the passage of the Red sea by the Israelites is another type of the same great reality. And of this you heard a good deal in the Catechising: how that the profane and heathen land of Egypt, in which God’s people were slaves, answers to this wicked world, in which by nature we are all born. Egypt is the world, and Pharaoh the king of Egypt is Satan, the prince of this world, who boasts to have all its kingdoms and the glory of them made over to him, to bestow them on whom he will: and who will never cease to do his worst against the faithful people of Christ. Pharaoh is Satan, and his work and bondage is sin—those foul dark miserable ways, in which he compels his unhappy subjects to walk against their own judgments and better will. Canaan, on the other hand, is the better country, of which the Israelites had heard and to which they looked with faith: for none of them had seen it. Canaan was the type of Heaven, our eternal rest. And the wilderness, through which they had to pass in making their way into Canaan, is the type of our condition here as Christians; the Church militant here on earth, our state of trial intended to prepare us for Heaven. The passage then from Egypt to the wilderness is the passage from the world to the Church: and that is none other than Holy Baptism. For our Lord’s own Word is, “Verily verily I say unto you, except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the Kingdom of

Heaven.” You see then, how aptly the water of the Red sea, through which God’s people had to pass in order to be delivered from Egypt—you see how aptly that water represents the water in our Fonts, the water of Holy Baptism; the water, through which we passed out of Satan’s kingdom into the Kingdom of Christ. And as the sea represents the water, so the cloud represents the Holy Spirit coming down upon the water, to quicken and bless it and make it effectual to the good purpose for which God’s providence has set it apart. And so St. Paul’s saying is, that they were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea: even as we all are baptized unto Christ in water and the Holy Ghost. And, in this our Baptism, whosoever outwardly performs it, Christ is the real Baptizer. It is He that baptizeth with the Holy Ghost: much in the same way as none but Moses might lift up his rod over the waters of the sea, and cause them to go back for the people. And as Moses did this by his rod, so our Lord by the Virtue of His Cross. He did not ordain His Sacrament of Baptism, He did not begin to baptize with the Holy Ghost, until after His Saving Passion and Resurrection. The water of Baptism saves only by the power of Christ’s Cross, as the Red sea parted to save the Israelites, only at a token from the Rod of Moses. And lastly as Pharaoh and all his host, all the might and power of Egypt, essaying to follow Israel through the sea, were drowned, so that all Israel saw them dead upon the sea-shore and they could never again do them any harm for ever:—so when one is rightly baptized the body of sin is destroyed within him: i. e. the power of sin, which it naturally has over us: so that we are made free to keep the Commandments, if we will. That is one deliverance: just as it was Israel’s deliverance, to be released from the heavy burdens and painful and irksome labours imposed by Pharaoh’s taskmasters. The Son, the Eternal Son of God, the Great Master and Owner of the family, has made us free; and we are free indeed! It is a great, a high, a blessed, yet fearful thought; *very* blessed, and therefore *very* fearful. Let us try and think it well over; let us turn it this way and that, in our minds. We were all, one and all, baptized unto Christ with water and the Spirit. We have all been made free indeed: we have been admitted to the glorious liberty of the children of God. What follows?

In the first place, this is most evident; that now we are without excuse, if we any more serve sin; if we make ourselves slaves to it. What would you have thought of those Israelites, if, as soon as they were safe on the farther side of the Red Sea, they had again set about their hard bitter slavish work? Gathering stubble, and making bricks, and building cities for their severe unpitying master? If they had forgotten God their Deliverer, and had taken pride and pleasure in being again servants to Pharaoh? Should we not at once say, that they were mad? But their madness is nothing to ours, as often as we, being baptized, give up ourselves anew to serve sin. The foulness and noisomeness of their dirty work is nothing, compared to inward uncleanness and corruption of heart and body. The pain and toil and weariness of making bricks is not to be compared with that of making money by dishonest and irregular ways. The task-masters, who kept the Jews to their work, were not half so hard and severe, as the evil spirits driving us on ever in mischief. Think, my brethren, but for one moment; think steadily on the wretched condition a man’s heart and mind must be in, who actually chooses to say with the heathen, “The good that I would I do not, but the evil which I would not, that I do,” rather than to say with S. Paul, “I can do all things through Christ which strengthened me. Think on it, you who unhappily allow yourselves to give way to anger, or lust, or any other evil habit. Say in your hearts; “it need not be so: I am free, I am not in Egypt; the

Holy Spirit has been given in Baptism, to help me: why should I do this great wickedness and sin against the Lord, and bring back upon myself the chains which He mercifully brake, and bind them for ever?" For, although you are not a slave now, yet be sure that every known sin brings you some way backward towards a state of slavery. Every time you tell a lie, or say knowingly any other kind of bad word, you help to make a sort of chain for your tongue, a chain of evil and accursed habit. If it be continued long enough, it will seem as if it left you no choice, as if you were under a perfect necessity of lying, or otherwise sinning with your tongue. This is the kind of thing, of which the apostle warns all Christians, when he says, "stand fast in the liberty with which Christ hath made you free, and be not entangled again in the yoke of bondage." Assert this freedom, my brethren: claim it wheresoever you go, as St. Paul claimed the privilege of being a citizen of Rome. St. Paul told the Roman officer who would have used him disgracefully, "I was free-born; "do you make the reply to the enemies of your soul, when they would fain get you to disgrace and pollute yourself with sin. When the evil spirit of lust comes near you with a tempting thought—when he whispers; "all men give way sometimes, and you cannot be perfect; you of course must have your faults as well as other people, and it may as well be now as any other time, just this once, now that the temptation is so strong;"—when you perceive such whisperings as these in your frail heart, you may know for certain, from whom they come, and how you ought to treat them: you should reject them at once, and say "I am free-born; I am born anew, by God's great mercy, of water and of the Holy Ghost; I am a member of Christ, Who is my life; I have or may have such thoughts, that for me to indulge this sin is quite inexcusable: I cannot, and I will not; Get thee behind me, Satan." Do this once with a firm purpose of heart, and pray to do it better the next time: and, when that next time comes, do the same again: oppose the remembrance of your Baptism, and faith in its privileges, to each temptation as it arises: and you will find that, like a mighty shield, it will shelter you against all bad thoughts, all the fiery darts of the wicked one: it will quench, them, as the Apostle says, before they have laid hold of your mind, and kindled it into any flame of evil desire.

But, in order to get this benefit from the remembrance of your Baptism, you must have it always at hand, always in use, as a soldier, who would catch on his shield or buckler all the darts of the enemy, must not lay it by, but must wear it constantly on his arm, to accustom himself to turn it every way at a moment's warning. Therefore the good thought should be renewed every morning: every morning the distinct acknowledgement of our baptismal blessings should go along with our prayers, and also of our baptismal vows: as in Bishop Ken's morning hymn, well-known to many of us; "Lord, I my vows to Thee renew." Surely it would be well, in saying or thinking over those words, to recollect for a moment what the vows are, by which as Christians we are bound: to say unto God solemnly, every morning, for ourselves what our godfathers and godmothers said in our baptism once for all, "I renounce &c. I believe &c. &c. and I will keep &c." Do this in the morning with devout prayers, and you will find help, I doubt not, to do it in the day from time to time, as often as you are aware of temptation coming near you; and so the Sock will, as it were, follow you; Christ the Rock, and the Water which flowed from His Side, will be in a manner always at hand; and there you will quench all impure and unholy fires, and go on your way, like Israel in the wilderness, not indeed without hardships and trials, but with a sure and certain trust that you are free at least from your Egyptian slavery; that the Bed Sea, Christ's Holy Baptism, is between you and your

enemies; and if we believe this, we cannot but be very thankful, even as we read of Moses and the children of Israel, that, when they had passed over as on dry land and they saw the Egyptians dead on the sea-shore, they presently brake out into hymns and triumphant singing: “Sing unto the Lord, for He has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider hath He thrown into the sea.” Christians! if we truly call ourselves Christians, we are partakers of a deliverance as much more awful and wonderful than that of Israel, as hell-fire is worse than Egypt, the devil more cruel than Pharaoh, and the Kingdom of Heaven purer and happier than Canaan: and shall not we, as Christians, be joyful and glad in our Lord? Shall we suffer any temporal affliction, much less any passing annoyance, slight or disappointment, to ruffle our temper, make us cross and unthankful, cross towards man, unthankful to our gracious God? Ought we not rather to use the recollections of this deep baptismal Love, breathing over our hearts like fragrant airs of a summer morning? ought we not to be refreshed by them, especially on a Sunday morning and most especially on days of Holy Communion—so that, all our earthly cares and sorrows being soothed and turned into pledges of His Love, we may approach His Altar with all fervency and gratitude? Yes, surely, so it ought to be, and so by His grace it will be with us, in such measure as we are sincere and constant in our devotion. We shall not be so grievously put out, as most men are, when news comes to us of our having lost so much money, or of a friend’s illness, or of the ill behaviour of some one whom we trusted. None of these things, not even the sudden death of a dear friend, will disturb the thankfulness of that man’s heart, whose joy is in God, made his own God in Holy Baptism.

And if we are thus thankful, we shall, of course, be sincerely obedient. Little good would Israel have obtained by the passage of the Red sea, had the people, then landing in the wilderness, refused to follow the guiding cloud. And little good will even our Baptism do us, good and holy and perfect as it is in itself—if we will not follow on through this life, where that Holy Spirit shall lead us, Who was present in our Baptism—Who alone made us Christians—He is our Sanctifier and guide as well as our Comforter. If we will let Him, He will be to us more than a pillar of a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night: only we must make up our minds to go where He guides us: no great thing surely to ask, when the guide is God Almighty, and the end to which we are guided, everlasting Life.

Moreover, as we know that the Israelites in the passover always kept up the special remembrance of their deliverance from Egypt by the blood of the Paschal Lamb, as the Lord had said, “remember this day;” so it is good and wholesome for us Christians to bear in mind, as well as we can, the day of our baptism, and to make it a day of solemn thoughts and good resolutions, a day of deep penitence for our many sad breaches of our vows: a day, wherein to sacrifice ourselves, our souls and bodies, more devoutly than ever to our Lord. More particularly is it good and useful to think of our Baptism, when we are preparing to draw near the other Sacrament. For how shall we examine ourselves thoroughly, if we do not go back to our first vows? They are the very rule, by which we are to be tried: by them, accordingly, we must try and judge ourselves. How again shall we be sorry and ashamed, as we ought, for our sad transgressions of God’s law and our own engagements, except we duly bear in mind the abundant grace which was given to help us in keeping them, and against which we have sinned? how shall we stedfastly purpose to lead a new life, but by reliance on the same merciful Spirit Who gave that first grace? how shall we be thankful enough in our remembrance of God’s “mercy through

Christ,” and of His saving Death, without bearing in mind always, how we ourselves have been made partakers of that Death and those mercies in our Baptism which joined us to Him? Thus you see, the recollection of our Baptism should always go with us to Holy Communion. Finally and above all, since without it all would be void, it behoves us, as baptized children of God, to walk on our way through life with a deep sense of His awful and peculiar Presence, in Baptism first imparted to us, His presence in our very hearts: wherein also the children of Israel may be an example, going on their way through the wilderness in company with that pillar of fire, that guiding cloud, under which they all were in the sea. Ought not they to be full of reverence, having God so nigh unto them? and if they, much more we! O my brethren, what shall we say? For it is even now our own case. We, you and I, and all of us here present, are under that miraculous cloud; all our ways, our words, and our thoughts, good, bad, or indifferent, are immediately and specially before Him, and, as such, are noted down by His angels. What shall we do? We must fly to His mercy, which is over all His works. We must try to serve Him, as well as we can, in our poor and low way, and He will reward us in His rich and overflowing way. If *we* remember the covenant of our baptism, be sure *He* will never forget it.