

Village Sermons on the Baptismal Service
by John Keble

SERMON XVI.

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2 COR. vi. 14.

“What communion hath Light with darkness?”

SINCE it has pleased Almighty God to give us His unspeakable Blessings, freely indeed, for we never could deserve them at His Hands, yet by way of an agreement, signed and sealed, the Baptismal Service goes on next to declare the terms of that agreement: as if one who knew should read over to another the terms of any lease or covenant before he had to sign it. And whereas in earthly covenants it happens sometimes, that people set their names in a hurry to what they do not well understand, here in God's agreement with us, what we are to do is so plainly expressed, that no one can fail to understand and know it, when once plainly set before him. It consists of three parts, as every child knows; for it is taught near the beginning of the Catechism. The first condition of the Covenant is, that we renounce the Devil and all his works, the pomps and vanities of the wicked world, and all the sinful lusts of the flesh: the second is, that we believe all the Articles of the Christian Faith: the third, that we keep God's Holy Will and Commandments, and walk in the same all the days of our Life. Or, to put it in a shorter form, first we are to renounce what God hates, secondly to believe what God teaches, and thirdly to do what God commands. For since Baptism makes us members or parts of Christ, living by a life from Him, of course we must have the will and mind of Christ. The members must agree with the Head, and not go contrary to it. Therefore we must love what Christ loves, and hate what He hates. And because we are naturally in a bad way, in a way to do the very contrary of this, to love what Christ hates, and to hate what He loves: therefore the renouncing part is the *first part* of our three-fold vow. We are as people who have their faces turned away from the Light, and looking towards darkness: if we would come to the Light, the first thing is to turn our backs on the darkness. For what communion hath Light with darkness? The two are contrary, the one to the other, and we cannot look towards both at once. God is our Light, and all that is against God, all that God hates, is utter darkness. If we would come to God in Holy Baptism, we must first of all turn away, in the purpose of our mind and heart, from all that God hates.

For this reason, there being, as you know, three engagements, which the priest requires the child to make by his sureties, the first is as follows: “Dost thou, in the name of this child, renounce the devil and all his works, the vain pomp and glory of the world, with all covetous desires of the same, and the carnal desires of the flesh, so that thou wilt not follow, nor be led by them?” And we read in old books, that in very ancient times this renunciation was made, not in words only, but in action also, at the Baptism of every grown person. He stood with his face towards the West; because that is the region of darkness; looking Satan as it were in the face: and then, while he repeated the words, “I renounce Satan and his works and his pomps and his service,” he was bidden to stretch out his hand, as though he were putting something very disagreeable away from him: whereby all that saw might understand that he was pledging himself to have no more to

do with Satan, his pomps and his works.

And this shaking of the hand at the enemy and ordering him, as it were, away, with some other expression of abhorrence, was ordered to be done three times, perhaps because of the three enemies, which we renounce. For we have three enemies, as you know, the devil, the world and the flesh, all banded together for our ruin. First, there is the devil, the malicious and subtle spirit who has hated man from the beginning, because God loved him; and is never far off, never off the watch for occasions of hurting us; as the Psalmist, you know, describes him. "He sitteth lurking in the thievish corners of the streets, and privily in his lurking-dens doth he murder the innocent; his eyes are set against the poor. For he lieth waiting secretly; even as a lion, lurketh he in his den, that he may ravish the poor." This enemy is without us, just the same as any wicked person among men desiring our harm: only he is so much the more dangerous and dreadful, as he is out of sight. We never can tell at any time how near he is to us, or what encouragement we give him by the slightest word look or gesture of known sin. We know that, when he is near us, he is very sharp-sighted and watchful: nothing escapes him: he never lets the moment pass for putting what he knows will most tempt us full in our way. He contrives so to bring the wicked world before us, as that it shall most effectually tempt our frail and corrupt hearts. Still he can do us no harm, except by our own fault. His only way of really hurting is by making men sin: and he cannot make them sin against their will. Therefore we may be bold to defy him. Holy Scripture encourages us to be so: as David with his sling and his stone was bold to defy Goliath with his full armour. "Resist the devil," it says, "and he will flee from you."¹ Say to him in the Name of Jesus, "get thee behind me, Satan:" and he will by and by depart. This is in effect said to the Evil one at every Baptism; and though it is but a little child who says it, and he is a great and strong and wise spirit, an Archangel, though a fallen one, yet he trembles and departs when it is said to him, and the saying is sealed with Holy Baptism: he is forced to let that little child go, having no power at all against it, until it shall have grown older and shall have given him power by wilful sin.

But we renounce not the devil only, but likewise all his works, that is to say, all sin; for all sin in man is originally the devil's work, as we know by the account of the Fall. However, those sins more especially are reckoned works of the devil, which are practised, as Scripture teaches, by the devil himself: not what are called carnal sins, for he, being a spirit and having no body, cannot be guilty of such. For example, he cannot be a glutton or a drunkard, but he can and doth abound in spiritual sins, such as Pride, Envy, Malice, Aversion to God: he was a murderer from the beginning: he is also a Liar and the father of it. Thus, then, in renouncing his works, we put away from us all pride of heart, all setting-up of ourselves against our God: we draw back also from the thought of envy, or of grudging our brother any good thing which God has given him: for this was that very sin of Satan which caused Adam's fall and all our misery. He could not bear to see our first parents so happy as they were in Paradise, and so he contrived how to tempt them and get them turned out; and in doing this he told most fearful lies, say that sin would not bring death: so that whenever men lie, whenever they indulge envy or malice, they are but rehearsing over again the great sin of our great enemy. Remember this, when you are next tempted: especially when you are tempted to tell a lie: and say to yourself, "It is the devil's work: I have renounced it and can have nothing to do with it." Next, we

¹ James 4:7

renounced “the vain pomp and glory of the world with all covetous desires of the same:” i. e. all things around us, so far as they draw off our heart from Heaven, and make us to be in love with this present world: such as money, or things that are money’s worth, beauty, dress and fine clothes: skill and strength in bodily labour: the praise and honour and good opinion of men: satisfaction in being admired, and in feeling that we ought to be. All these things are “the world;” they are “pomps,” when the world sets them before us in any remarkably subtle and enticing way; as when Balak tempted Balaam with the promise of promoting him to great honour: and they are “vanities,” because they are vain, and have no soundness in them: they are sure, before long, to pass away as in a dream. Whatever they are, and on what side soever they tempt us, we have renounced and must renounce them: we must not, for money nor for beauty nor for pleasure nor praise nor amusement, go near any of the things or places which we know to be hateful to God. For these things, vain as they are, have a wonderful power to attract and dazzle our poor frail spirits. Gold and silver, jewels and embroidery, take a great hold upon some minds: praise and honour, and seeming to be of consequence, upon others: it is not easy to turn away from them undazzled, and to make up our minds to do without anything of the kind; especially since the malicious Adversary is ever putting things in our way, shewing to us, as he did to our Lord, the most tempting objects in the most seducing way, and causing us, even if we can do nothing, to sin in covetously desiring such things.

And even if we had no world without us, no evil spirit to put the bad world in our way, there is an enemy in the very fortress, a Serpent lurking in our own bosoms: “the carnal desires of the flesh,” which are therefore mentioned to be renounced in the last place. To see how these desires are distinct both from the world and from the devil, consider the first sin, that of Adam. There was the devil, standing beside the Tree, pointing to it, and saying the false words. That was one enemy. There was the Tree itself with its forbidden fruit within a near distance of Adam. That was as “the world,” a second enemy; and both these were without the man. But there was also the frail and evil desire within his own heart, whereby he consented to the wickedness suggested to him: that was the third enemy, “the lust of the flesh:” and so this last, having conceived, brought forth sin, when Adam ate of the fruit.

If then the mischief wrought in us by that first sin is to be cured, we must renounce all three: as we do renounce them in our Baptism. We must neither listen to the unseen Tempter, nor look greedily at the outward and visible world, nor indulge the evil craving within our own heart. So we have promised. God grant we may be keeping our promise! If not, we know the consequence.

But there is another thing which we had need observe very particularly in this first parcel of our Baptismal vow. We promise concerning these our three enemies, and especially concerning the sinful lusts of the flesh, to “renounce them, so that we will neither follow nor be led by them.” To be led away by temptation, in either of these kinds, is bad enough; to follow after temptation is much worse. It is not so very hard to perceive the difference. David was “led away” by temptation coming in his way, when from the roof of his palace he beheld his neighbour Uriah’s wife, and all that sad and mournful history followed. That was being “led by the carnal desires of the flesh.” *That* was bad enough, so bad that all his life after was spent in the deepest penitence; but it would have been still worse, had he gone up to the housetop, foreseeing the mischief, on purpose to put himself in the way of it: which kind of thing, following after enticement

and seeking to be tempted to sin, is alas! but too common even among Christian people, though they have all so expressly renounced it. However David in this instance, as it appears, was *led* by the sin, he did not *follow* after it; but it came in his way, and he was too frail to resist it. The Prophet Balaam, on the contrary, seems to be an instance of one who wished to be tempted, who, as it were, went out of his way to get near temptation, i. e. in the words of our Baptismal Service, he *followed* after evil desires. His covetousness was so strong on him, that, although God had forbidden him most plainly to go to Balak and curse the people, yet, when the messengers came to ask him, he would not send them away at once: he said, “lodge here this night, and I will see if God will permit me to go with you:”² that is, he would not send the temptation away, he kept it as near him as he dared, he sought somehow to persuade himself, that, if he sinned in strong temptation, God would be merciful to him and forbear to punish: and so he went on following his covetous fancy, making his own temptation strong, and came at last to that miserable end.

Do you seek a plain example of what I mean, on the difference of “following” and being “led by” sinful lust? Suppose then—a common case, alas! that there are two persons in the same parish or family, alike in this respect, that both are apt to sin in the matter of strong drink: but suppose also this difference between them, that the one has to pass the public-house every day, going and returning from his work: the other we will suppose to have his home quite in another direction: so that he, if he go to the alehouse, sins more wilfully, he follows after the temptation; the first does but permit himself to be led. Do you not see that the one of these is at the beginning *so far* worse than the other? But if the other use himself to give way, he will soon be just as bad as the first: he will be contriving excuses to put himself in the way of mischief. It is just the same with regard to all other sins. The course of them commonly is, that, men being overcome by surprise and strong temptation in the first instance, the false and miserable sweetness of the sin haunts them afterwards, corrupting their minds, and if they have not a real fear of God, and sense of His presence, this will tempt them to sin again; they will be rather glad to have the sin come in their way: and when they have sinned a second or third time, they will even follow after the temptation, and try to make themselves opportunities of sinning: each time, perhaps, saying to themselves, “only this once,” but alas! it comes over and over, until by degrees they are past feeling and give themselves over to their sin, committing it with greediness. O fearful, but too true history of thousands of redeemed and regenerated souls! And there is no security, no recovery from it, without our earnestly and constantly remembering this our solemn and sacred vow, “neither to follow nor be led” by such things. Especially let young people, who are as yet happily ignorant of many sins, draw back from seeking even to *know* any thing about them, except so far as they are warned against them in Holy Scripture and by such as have care over them. To look after sin, except just so far as is useful in order to avoid it, is in some measure “following after” it—tempting ourselves: and we shall be so much the more easily “led by” it. Therefore “stand not in the way of sinners:” say not, “*How* do such and such transgressors go on? I will just look on and see:” nay, my brother, but rather give ear to our Lord’s warning; “Turn away your eyes lest you behold vanity:” let not the evil way, if possible, be “once named among you;” be not ashamed to be entirely ignorant of it; much less dwell upon it in your thoughts: for why should you go out of your way to corrupt your new-born soul, and put such a stain upon your white baptismal robe, as will

² Numbers 22:28

either make your life anxious by a sad and careful repentance, or what is infinitely worse, being found on you at the Last Day, will cause you to be cast into the outer darkness?