

Village Sermons on the Baptismal Service
by John Keble

SERMON XVIII.

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“Compel them to come in.”

YOU will remember, many of you, that these words are part of a prophetic parable of our Saviour's, in which, under the similitude of a great supper, He told His disciples how they might expect men to behave, when His Kingdom the Church should be set up, and all should be invited into it. When those who were first called, the Jews, had made their un-dutiful excuses, and were rejected, the servants were to gather in, first the poor, maimed, halt and blind, out of the streets and lanes of the city, then those who were scattered in the highways and hedges, the lost and undone Gentiles, wherever they are. They were to be compelled to come in, to be urged and pressed and not let alone, to be constrained with a holy and loving violence, if haply they might be brought to take care of their own souls.

But besides all this, it has been truly said, there is another way of compelling persons to come in, i. e. of bringing them into the Church of Christ, by a sort of compulsion, without asking their leave. I mean, when little children are brought, as the manner is and always has been, to be made partakers of Holy Baptism. Plainly they are brought to Christ without their own leave; they are, in a manner, compelled to come in. Now this is brought strongly before us in the part of the Baptismal Service to which we are now come. After the Priest has made enquiry about the Articles of the Christian Faith, and has had answer made him in the child's name, “All this I stedfastly believe,” he is directed to ask, “Wilt thou be baptized in this Faith?” and answer is made for the child, “That is my desire:” and yet we cannot well think, that the child has any such desire, so as to feel it, in his little heart; it is answered for, and made a Christian, without any permission from itself; very often, as we know, in its sleep: and we need not doubt that all this is right, seeing that our Lord tells His Apostles, and through them all His ministers, not only, “Suffer the little children to come to Me,” but “compel, force them to come in.” They cannot give you leave in words, but you are to bring them, and answer for them, all the same for that.

And in this you do them no wrong, but the very greatest good you can do them. So that you may truly say in their name, “That is my desire,” being so very certain as you are, that if they could know, they would desire it above all things. Just as if one had a humble petition to make to the Queen for any child who was too young to know the meaning of it, to have its property taken care of, or the like, one should present it in the name of the child, and call it that child's petition. Or, if an infant was crying at the door for hunger, though it were too young to understand its own wants, or at all to speak them out in words, yet we should not scruple to say, The child is longing and asking for bread. So here comes a little child to the door of the kingdom of heaven; it comes, partaking of the distress and weakness, spiritual and bodily, in which all children are born; rehearsal is made of those blessed and saving truths, which make up the Creed or Gospel or Faith of

Jesus Christ; and the child being asked, “Wilt thou be baptized in this Faith?” well may we answer for it, that such is its desire; knowing as we do most assuredly, that this is the very thing which it wants, the only petition which being granted will do it real good.

For let us consider one by one, but very shortly, the articles of the Faith into which the child is to be baptized. Let us try and look at them with the eye of a parent who is just bringing his child to Baptism; a serious and faithful parent I mean; one who, in presenting his little one at the Font, does not only mean to go through a serious and proper form in a dutiful manner, but who really believes that Holy Baptism is to that child the one thing needful, because it is thereby put into the Arms of Jesus Christ. How will such a parent as that feel when he hears the Priest in our Lord’s Name asking his child, if he believes in God the Father Almighty, and in the other articles of the Creed?

I should think that when he hears, first of all, of God the Father, he might very well say to himself, “Yes indeed, thankful may I well be, and I desire to thank God with all my heart, that He invites this my child to be His child; to have the great Almighty Father of all for his own Father by special adoption and grace. Poor child, if he knew his own condition, sinful and born of sinful parents, cast out of the great family for the sin of his first father, and with no chance, if left to himself, of not perishing eternally:—how earnestly would he join in the answer, ‘That is my desire,’ when asked if he wished to be baptized in the Faith of God the Father.”

So again, when the priest goes on to make mention of Jesus Christ His only Son, our Lord, may not a parent well say in his heart, “how great, how awful a blessing, that our little infant should be thus enlisted on the right side, on the Church’s side, before he could believe or know anything.” Our hearts sometimes burn within us, when we read of our Lord taking up the little children, embracing them in His Arms, laying His Hands upon them and blessing them, though He presently set them down and departed thence. But here, Christian Fathers and Mothers, here at the Holy Baptismal Font, your children are taken into Christ’s Arms, not to be set down again, but to be embraced and blessed and lifted up by Him for ever. The parents know how the child very early begins to cling to them, what pain and tears it very often costs him to go to any one else. Well may they say for him, “That is my desire,” when he is asked whether he will go to Christ, and abide with Him, Who is the very fountain of all fatherly and motherly love.

Next the Priest, reciting the Creed, goes on to speak of our Lord’s Sufferings; how He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; and when, having done so, he asks the child, “Wilt thou be baptized in this Faith?” in the Faith especially of Christ crucified;—what father or mother who believes will not in heart eagerly answer for their child, “That is my desire;” the very desire of my heart; of all things I long to be partaker of Christ crucified? And while you thus answer for your children, you will lift up your hearts in loving thankfulness to Him Who has vouchsafed to be their Saviour. You will imagine to yourselves what misery it would have been for you, the parents of these little ones, who feel as if your very souls were bound up in them, to know that they were doomed to eternal ruin, that they were lost, body and soul for ever. Why, when you hear of any dangerous and frightful disease, such as we have been lately delivered from, it is more than you can well bear to think, What if one’s own dear children should be seized and taken away by it, first one and then another? And if this thought is so shocking, how would it be, were there no deliverance in eternity, nothing between them and everlasting death? Set your minds to it earnestly, my brethren; for surely it is quite true, that without

Christ crucified these your treasures, so unspeakably dear to you, must have been lost for ever and ever. Well may they, and you for them, desire that they be baptized in the Faith of Him; for so they lay hold of the only Hand which may keep them from falling into the bottomless pit. And when you think of His sad Sufferings, and reflect that He bore it all willingly for the sake of these dear children of yours, surely your hearts cannot be so hard, but that, even on your children's behalf, you will love Him and try to please Him.

And this so much the more, if from His Cross you go on in thought to His Judgment. For so the Faith teaches you, into which your child is baptized; it says that "He shall come to judge the quick and the dead." We have heard it often, may be, in Baptisms as well as at other times, without its making much impression upon us. Yet assuredly it is a most solemn thing, to be thus reminded of the judgment to come, when we stand by the Font. It may be, the parties who are there assembled, child, sponsors, minister, attendants, may never meet again in this world; but there will be one day known to the Lord, in which they will assuredly meet. Then the mark, which is now to be set invisibly and mysteriously upon the infant, will be seen openly before men and angels, either to his exceeding glory, or to his incurable shame and torment. This moment of Baptism is a sure pledge and token of that moment of absolution or condemnation. *Now*, we are made God's own for the time; *then*, He will determine whether we shall be His or the prey of the Evil One for ever. O that Christians would so remember, so use, what is given them *now*, that it may be their joy and not their condemnation in that hour!

They may do so if they will. You may do so; you children may do so, every one who is baptized may do so. Do you not hear how the Priest, after the questions about the Father and the Son, saith to your children, "Dost thou believe in the Holy Ghost?" and then they desire to be baptized into the faith of the Holy Ghost, as well as into that of the Father and the Son. Thus their Baptism introduces them to a Comforter, as well as to a Father and a Saviour; and all Three alike Divine, One God in substance, power, and eternity. Thus the hearts of thoughtful parents may be comforted concerning their children, of whom otherwise they might almost despair. Knowing by sad experience the sore temptations which await them, they might be swallowed up with fear, lest their children, after all, should forfeit the mercy so dearly bought for them. But seeing that their little ones are baptized into the Faith of the Holy Ghost, they may take courage; for the Holy Ghost, they know is, Almighty; and where He is, there is liberty, and persons are free to keep God's commandments, and to save their own souls, be their enemies never so troublesome. Thus He, Whose Name is the Comforter, is so in this respect among others, that, in coming to young children at the Font, He comforts and assures the hearts of believing friends and Parents by the certainty, that the infant, come what may, will not be left to himself. He will not be left alone in the forlorn and dangerous world, to wrestle with the evil powers. His father and his mother may forsake him; death or other change may remove them; but the Lord hath taken him up. If ever the thought comes over parents' minds, (as I suppose it must now and then come,) What if we should be called away, and these children be left orphans? what greater relief could they have under such a sad thought, than in remembering how their children have been baptized into the faith of God the Holy Ghost, the Comforter; how He hath taken them under His especial guardianship; how He hath said to them, I will never leave thee nor forsake thee? Surely such a remembrance as this must be everything to a loving parent, when his spirit is vexed with the thought of having to leave his children unprovided for.

Then, my brethren, think of those comfortable truths, which follow the mention of the Holy Ghost in the Creed; the Holy Catholic Church, the Communion of Saints. Is it not a great thing to a parent, to be sure of a home for his child? Now the Holy Church of God is a sure Home to every Christian. Is it not a great thing to have kind, good, near and powerful friends, ready to help your children in need or trouble? Well, here are all the Saints of the Most High, in Paradise and in earth, made your child's friends at Baptism, and ready and willing to help him by their prayers to God. And, O my Brethren, which of us all, that unhappily knows what wilful sin is, how bitter, how noisome, yet how subtle and ensnaring, how hard every way to cure,—which of us, I say, who knows this, but would thank God with all his heart for making the Remission of sins, a part of his own and his children's Baptismal Creed? So that he may yet feel hope concerning those little ones, though in this miserable and naughty world they should be offended, and do things which would ruin their souls: he may hope and pray and labour that they may truly repent; and, truly repenting, he knows that they will be forgiven; for they were baptized into this Faith, of the Remission of sins.

Lastly, since in presenting your babes at the Font, you make them declare that they believe in the Resurrection of the Flesh, and everlasting life after death; ought it not to reprove you, and make you tremble, if your life and behaviour be such as to shew, in God's sight if not in man's, that you care little for such things, that you are wholly swallowed up in minding this body which you now have, and in the business and gain and amusement of this present life? Still, whatever your conduct be, you can scarcely be so blind, so irreligious, as not to believe in your heart that there will be a Resurrection, a Judgment, an Eternity of Life or Death. Then you must needs be glad to have your children early brought to that faith; you will wish and pray that they at least may be better than yourself; and who knows but such wishes and prayers may come home to your own bosom, and our long-suffering God in His own good time may give you true repentance, as He has to so many others, shewing charity for His sake?

I have mentioned now the chief heads of the Baptismal Creed, that parents, going over it in their minds, might perceive how comfortable a thing it is to have their children brought early to the acknowledgement of it; and also for the parents' own sake, that they may be ashamed to have set so little store by these greatest of all truths. In conclusion, mark this. We are to be baptized *in this Faith*. We were so, all in our turns; that is, as holding this Faith, as professing it, and saying that, because we believe it, therefore we ask to be baptized. Again, we are baptized in this faith, as it is our state and condition, in which we hope to grow and improve, as we should in any bodily state and condition. Therefore, my Brethren, dearly beloved in the Lord, if we would not renounce our Baptism, and with it all our hope, we must hold fast this faith; we must cling to it; it must be very near and dear to us; we must sooner die than part with it, or any considerable portion of it. Come what will, we must never slight nor deny it.

We must live by it; live as believing it, and then it will be sure to stay with us. Then we shall die in the same holy faith; it will rise with us in the Last Day; it will save our souls; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.