

Village Sermons on the Baptismal Service

by John Keble

SERMON II. Feast of St. John Baptist, 1849.

ST. LUKE iii. 16.

“I indeed baptize you with water, but One mightier than I cometh, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to unloose; He shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost and with fire.”

WHEN you come into Church, the first thing you see is the Font, close to the principal entrance. We all know, why it is placed there; it is, because Baptism is the beginning, the way into the Kingdom of Heaven, and, without Baptism, there is no ordinary way to the other good things which our Lord gives us in His Church. We must pass by the Font, in order to take our place among God’s people for Prayer, before hearing of Scriptures, for Confession and Absolution, for Confirmation and all other Holy ordinances, and especially for Holy Communion. And as the Font stands at the entrance of the Church, so Baptism, if you mark it, stands at the beginning of the Gospel. The very first thing related in the history of the New Testament is the promise given to Zacharias that St. John Baptist should be born. St. Mark’s Gospel opens as follows; “The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God; as it is written in the prophets, Behold I send My messenger before Thy Face, which shall prepare Thy way before Thee; The Voice of one crying in the wilderness, prepare ye the way of the Lord, make His paths straight. John did baptize in the wilderness, and preach the Baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.”¹ St. John, as soon as ever he has declared the Godhead of Jesus Christ, and His wonderful Incarnation, goes on to tell us of John the Baptist, how He came to bear witness of that Light, baptizing with water. St. Matthew relates at large, how our Lord, when He would begin His ministry, came to be baptized by St. John in Jordan. Thus in every one of the Gospels you see that Baptism was the beginning. But what Baptism? “Not that of Christ, but that of him who was only the forerunner of Christ. The Master Himself did not for a long time begin to baptize, but left it entirely to His servant. St. John’s Baptism, to which the people from all parts thronged so largely, was not at all the same thing with the Baptism

¹ Mark 1:1-4

which we have received, and at which we are continually present in the holy Church. It was no Sacrament of Christ, as ours is. No special promise of heavenly grace was added to it; much less the great and heavenly Promise, “He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved.” Hear how the Holy Baptist himself points out the difference of the two. “One mightier than I cometh, the latchet of Whose shoes I am not worthy to stoop down and unloose.”² *That* was one unspeakable difference, namely in the *persons* baptizing: no lesser difference than between God and man.

Another was the difference in the Baptism itself. “I indeed baptize you with water, but He shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost and with fire.” St. John had no power but to apply the outward sign. The Holy Ghost he could not give; but when our Lord began to baptize on and after the Day of Pentecost, He baptized with the Holy Ghost—the same Holy Ghost Who on that day came down as fire, as fiery tongues lighting on the Apostles.

And when St. John spake of our Lord thus baptizing, he meant no other than the Baptism which now goes on in the Christian Church. Wonderful as it is to think of, yet by God’s mercy we believe it to be most certainly true, that this prophecy of the Baptist is fulfilled even among ourselves, as often as a young child is brought to yonder Font to be baptized. The person then and there baptizing is not St. John nor any mortal man, but it is our Lord Jesus Christ Himself: the Priest or Deacon standing there in his surplice, and taking up the child in his arms, is in himself nothing at all to the Baptism; whether he be good or bad, the infant is just as truly christened: because the minister is simply and only a token of the Presence of Jesus Christ, Who by him takes the child into His loving Arms, pours the water upon him, and blesses him with the very greatest of His gifts and blessings, i. e. with the Holy Spirit then and there given him, to make him “a member of Christ, a child of God, and an inheritor of the Kingdom of Heaven.” This, I say, this great and miraculous work is truly wrought among Christians, whosoever and wheresoever any one is rightly baptized: and though there seem to be as many baptizers as there are ministers to apply the water, yet all the while there is but one Baptizer, even Jesus Christ Himself, even as all are baptized with one and the same Spirit. All this goes on as truly and as wonderfully, whenever a child is christened here, as it did in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, the first day of Christian Baptism, when they who gladly received St. Peter’s words were baptized, not with water only, but with the Holy Ghost also and with fire.

As a certain proof, how much greater and holier the Baptism of Christ was than the Baptism of John, we read again and again in the Acts of the Apostles how they who had received John’s Baptism only, were obliged, on

² Matthew 3:11, Mark 1:7, Luke 3:16

becoming Christians, to be again baptized with water. And again, whereas St. John Baptist simply baptized men with water unto repentance, our Lord in His Baptism, i. e. His Apostles and Priests in His Name, always baptized in the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost: for so He Himself had ordained. This again is a great difference, a hidden wonder of Christian Baptism, that in it the Name of the most Holy Trinity is put upon men, which it was not in St. John's Baptism. Thus every way is our Baptism so much higher and more blessed than St. John's, that there is no comparing them one with another.

See then how high and holy and sacred even St. John's Baptism was, how much it required of the baptized person, and consider thereupon what manner of persons we ought to be, who have received so much greater gift from a Person so much more holy and glorious.

For indeed St. John was a very holy person filled with the Holy Ghost even from his mother's womb: such an one that our Lord said, "Among them that were born of women there had not arisen a greater Prophet."³ And our Saviour gives us to understand that St. John's appearing among the Jews left them entirely without excuse, if they continued in their impenitence. "John came unto you in the way of righteousness, but ye received him not."⁴ But if the Jews of that time were without excuse for not receiving John the Baptist; what shall we say for ourselves, in so far as we stand off and refuse to receive Jesus Christ? John, when he had baptized any, went away generally from them or they from him, and they saw no more of him: yet the mere remembrance of him ought to have been enough to keep them in order. But we Christians know and are sure, that He who baptized us is with us always. He is with us always, by day and by night, watching to see whether we are keeping the promise which we made to Him, whether we are making use of the gift and grace which He trusted us with. And then, what great things He hath done for us! The Israelites, when St. John first appeared, thought it a great thing that he had spent so much time in the desert, hardly clothed and sparingly fed, in order that he might prepare himself to do them good: but what is that to our Baptizer, Who left the glories of heaven to do us good, and made Himself one of us, to live a whole life in the wilderness of this world, among evil men and evil spirits, and at last had Himself crucified for us?

Again, the Baptism of St. John was a very serious matter for the Jews of that time, because it required a solemn confession of sin: as we read, "Then went out unto him all the land of Judea, and they of Jerusalem, and were all baptized of him in the river of Jordan, confessing their sins." It is a fearful thing to come into the presence of the Living and True God, bringing

³ Matthew 11:11

⁴ Matthew 21:32

with you the sad account, how grievously you from time to time had offended Him. But if it was a sharp and severe trial to confess with a view to that Baptism by water only, much more is that confession sharp and severe, which Christian Baptism requires of all grown-up persons who have received, or are to receive It: because if we keep back anything from that confession, we do not only profane a holy ceremony, as persons coming lightly to St. John's Baptism did; but we make void the grace, the pardoning grace of our God, and cause His merciful absolving Words to be of none effect; and besides, people coming to St. John had only to acknowledge what they had done amiss in their natural unregenerate condition: but our sins are the sins of the regenerate; so much worse than theirs, by how much the grace we have received is greater. We alas! are so used to transgress and to see others transgress, as a matter of course, that it is very hard for the most thoughtful of us all to think seriously enough of the hideousness of his own sins: but let us use ourselves, when we confess, to recollect for a little moment what passed in the moment of our Baptism. Who was there: what a solemn promise we made Him: what a heavenly lift He gave us, that we may have power to keep that promise:—what a thing then it was for us wilfully and knowingly to break that promise, and to affront Him to His Face: and that, not once or twice, but as often as we have consented to known sin: hundreds, may be, or thousands of times. Whose heart, alas! would not die down within him, when he thinks of all this, were it not that by the same Baptism he obtained an interest in that Saviour Who is always more ready to forgive, than we to sin; and so we may hope, that by *true* confession even now, by true confession I say, and *sincere* amendment—all may be set right, even with such an one as he has been? But all will depend on our being *quite* in earnest: *very* serious indeed, very much concerned for our souls.

And this so much the more, as there is another difference, a very remarkable one, between our case and their's who came to St. John the Baptist. He spake to them of the axe laid at the root of the trees, ready to be used at any moment against any tree that bore not fruit. Every such tree, he said, would be “hewn down and cast into the fire.” It may be doubtful perhaps, whether St. John in those words did not refer in part to the grievous troubles and judgments, which were just then about to come on the Jewish people: but there is no doubt whatever, that, when the same words are uttered to *us*—when the Scriptures speak to *us* of the fire of judgment, and that “our God is a consuming fire,”—something is meant far more terrible than the destruction of Jerusalem. There is no doubt what the unquenchable fire is, nor who are meant by the chaff which it will burn up, and by the trees that will be cast into it, after they have been hewn down for bearing no good fruit. We sometimes, I daresay, think what a sad thing it must have been to have lived in those times when Jerusalem was finally destroyed; and perhaps

some, who are mothers among you, may have felt horror before now, on hearing or reading of the frightful suffering which came upon mothers and infants in that siege, when the Prophet's saying came true, "The hands of the pitiful tender-hearted women have sodden their own children,"⁵ and, as our Lord said, the barren were blest, and it was woe to them that had children to nurse. But if that history is shocking to you, think, I pray you, this with yourselves, what if the children of your own body, the little ones over whom you have watched day and night, who seem more dear to you than your own life—what if you should see them one day cast into the unquenchable fire, far worse than anything that happened at Jerusalem,—because they cared not enough for their Baptism, because, being tempted by the world, the flesh and the devil, they sinned away the grace which the Great Baptizer had given them? What if some of you mothers should have to witness this horrible end of your children? And what if you should then have to reproach yourselves, that, although you brought them to be christened, you took no real and earnest care to bring them up afterwards in the memory of their christening?

Many such thoughts are brought into a considerate person's mind by the yearly return of St. John Baptist's day: and more so, perhaps, as the world grows older and the axe is more evidently laid at the root of the trees. All seems tending to decay and confusion: except so far as there are any, who are willing like the Baptist to lead holy and mortified lives—to deny themselves for the sake of their Lord and Saviour. As Jerusalem in her latter days, when she was on the edge of the final reprobation and ruin, had the Holy Baptist sent to her for a solemn warning, if haply she would repent in time for our Lord's first coming: so this old worn-out world of ours now perhaps, in her latter days, may be favoured more or less with holy and self-denying examples, "witnesses" as the Scripture says, "clothed in sackcloth"—to warn her of the Judge standing before the door, the Lord of the harvest approaching with His fan in His Hand. Repentance and self-denial prepared the way for the first Advent of our Saviour: and if we would be ready for His second Advent, we must repent and deny ourselves. That is the only way to save ourselves, and it is the likeliest way to do good to the souls of others. Do you not see that, on the whole, he who is most in earnest can do most in winning hearts to God? and how are people to prove themselves in earnest, but by repenting of their sins and by denying themselves for the love of Christ and the Church? Do this, and your Baptism will be a joy to you at the last Day. But if you will not repent, nor deny yourself, it were better for you never to have been baptized, never to have been brought to Christ at all.

⁵ Lamentations 4:10