

Village Sermons on the Baptismal Service  
by John Keble

## SERMON XXVII.

July 21, 1850.

ROMANS vi. 4.

“We are buried with Him by Baptism into death that like as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father so we also should walk in newness of life.”<sup>1</sup>

THE Priest, having the child in his arms and naming it as directed by the godfathers and godmothers, who are appointed by the Church to bring it to him, proceeds at last to the actual Christening, the manner whereof you well know. The words which he repeats we have already considered: that Most Holy Name which is the stay and strength, the hope and refuge of every one of us: the Name of the Trinity, which thenceforth the child is to bear with him through this world, and to take with him into Eternity to be either an Eternal blessing or an infinite aggravation of Eternal punishment. This Name is put upon the child; he is as it were sealed with it; but not by merely saying the words: it is God's Will, that the words should always be accompanied with the act which is called baptizing, in itself so simple, in the mystery and meaning so great. The two together, the words and the act, make up (as the Catechism says) the outward visible Sign or Form in Baptism. It would not be Baptism, were a child washed or dipped in water in silence with only good thoughts: no, nor if he were washed or dipped with the best and most beautiful Prayer: it would not be Baptism, unless the very words which our Saviour appointed were used, “In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.” So on the other hand neither would it be Baptism, were this Most Holy Name ever so solemnly repeated over the child, with the Amen of the whole Church. This would not, I say, be Baptism, unless the child or person at the same time were actually washed or dipped in the water. There have been indeed and are persons in the world, who call themselves Christians, yet make light of this ordinance. What can we say of them, but that they are like Naaman the Syrian who would not believe that his leprosy would be cleansed by washing seven times in the river Jordan? Had he persisted in that scornful way of thinking, his leprosy would never have been cleansed. And so we may well fear, regarding those who go on making light of the actual washing of Baptism, that they are sadly trifling with Christ's way of Salvation. They may seem to themselves wise and knowing; they may think to be more spiritual, further advanced in Gospel grace than others: but even as that mighty man of Syria, Naaman, was better instructed by his own servants, when they remonstrated with him on his rude way of rejecting what God had told him by the prophet; so the most learned and clever of us all, if we at all feel disposed to make light of God's Holy Sacraments, may well learn a lesson from the simplest. Yes, brethren, the poorest, the meanest, the most ignorant in this or any other Christian congregation, who has learnt to behave himself respectfully at Holy Baptism, does by his behaviour give the best rebuke

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<sup>1</sup> Pusey adds here: A second text was added in the margin, quoted at the end of the Sermon Cant. v. 3, “I have washed my feet and how shall I defile them?”

to those who are so ill-instructed as to disbelieve in its virtue. Without speech he seems to say to us, "If the Prophet, the Great Prophet Jesus Christ had required of you some great thing, would you not have done it? how much more when He saith unto you, 'Wash and be clean!'" I cannot help having somewhat of this sort of feeling, when I observe how in our congregations, the simple, quiet, believing worshippers turn reverently towards the Font, when the holy Service of Baptism begins: how they listen with all reverence, how earnestly they watch all that is said and done, either by the Priest or sponsors. It is a part of the Church Service, in which the dutiful children of the Church, the little ones of Jesus Christ, join, as it appears, with most especial affection and dutifulness: and when one sees them, sometimes it may come into one's heart to think, what if one of those should be here, who by any sort of wrong training has been taught to have little faith in Holy Baptism, to think of it as of a mere ordinance, surely, whether he were unbelieving or unlearned, the sight of a whole congregation so devoutly assisting at a child's Baptism may very well move him to have other thoughts. As St. Paul says of one in a like case, he may be convinced of all, "he may be judged of all," he may humble himself in heart, and believe and confess that God is in Holy Baptism of a truth, in a way which he had not before thought of. Thus by the reverent behaviour of those who may seem only babes in Christ, He may correct and convert some of those who, in their seeming wisdom and prudence, have as yet the glory of God's Sacraments hidden from them.

But let people's thoughts and behaviour be what they may, the Holy Sacrament is, as I have said, the same, and the Divine Presence equally attends it. And now let us consider some of the things which were mentioned in the Catechising, as to the manner in which that Sacrament is administered.

The words of the Rubric are, "Naming the child after the sponsors, if they shall certify him that the child may well endure it, he shall dip it in the water discreetly and warily," saying the awful and blessed words. Evidently then the Church prefers that way of baptizing, in which the child is plunged entirely into the water. For which cause also it is directed, that at Baptisms the Font should be *filled* with pure water: that there may be enough to dip the child. Why does the Church prefer this way to the other, supposing it were quite certain that the child may well endure it? First, perhaps, because the word *Baptize* properly means this sort of action, and not merely pouring on a little water, much less sprinkling it. Secondly, because the action of dipping sets forth to the very eye the proper force and meaning of Christian Baptism, how that it is both a Death and Resurrection; the pouring of the water scarcely gives that meaning at all. This is what St. Paul so often alludes to, "buried with Him by Baptism, wherein also we are risen again with Him, through the faith of the operation of God, Who raised Him from the dead." And in the text, "We are buried with Him by Baptism unto death, that like as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we also should walk in newness of life." Yes, we are buried with Him even bodily; buried in the baptizing water for a moment, and in the next moment raised out of it: whereby are shown forth to the very eyes and ears of the bystanders a lively Image of the Death and Resurrection of Christ Crucified, an Image also of the spiritual death and Resurrection of every one of us, the death unto sin, and the new birth unto righteousness. And in this way no doubt, the more part of Christians, in hot countries, have been baptized: the very form and gesture, as well as the words and the water, serving to shew them the nature of the action they were performing, and to remind them, ever after, of their true condition towards God. But with

us in these northern parts, it would plainly be very dangerous, in many cases, to insist on this way of baptism, and in all countries there would be instances in which it would prove inconvenient and next to impossible. And, therefore, He Who will have mercy and not sacrifice, has given us plainly to understand that pouring the water on the child or person, with the proper words, is sufficient. There is a tradition in the Church, that He Himself was baptized in this way, as you may see in the usual pictures of our Lord's Baptism. Therefore the Holy Church in her charity has added, as you know, to the Rubric which recommends dipping, another Rubric which permits us merely to "pour water on the child if it be certified that the child be weak."

And now, the child being taken out of the water, the Priest, before he restores him to the arms of those who are trusted to take care of him, has to make upon him the sign of the Holy Cross. But before we go on to speak of this, let us take time to think earnestly on this great thing, that now this child is really made partaker of a holy Resurrection, answering to our Lord's rising from the grave: nay more: not only answering to Christ's Resurrection, but, in inward and spiritual power, really and truly partaking thereof: so that it is said in Holy Scripture over and over again: "Ye are risen with Christ; ye are risen again with Him; ye are partakers of His Death and Resurrection; now it is not ye that live, but Christ liveth in you. Because, being made members of Christ, you are at once made to share in all that Christ did and suffered for you. You are dead with Him, you are buried with Him, you are risen with Him, you are ascended with Him."

As then our Lord's Blessed Body was changed and glorified at His Resurrection, so did our souls, yea, and our bodies too, begin to be changed and glorified at our Baptism, to be henceforth spiritual as was His glorious Body; but in Him the change was all in a moment, in us it is to go on gradually through all our time of trial, and to be completed only at the last day. The Almighty Spirit of God, Who came to us at the Font, dwelleth in and shall be in us to accomplish this change; and our work is to obey His godly motions, to be workers under Him, in renewing our own souls, and in keeping our bodies chaste and pure, that they also may be renewed hereafter. This is our new life, answering to the Life of our Risen Lord, that as He, being raised from the dead, dieth no more, so we, being raised in Baptism from the death which Adam brought on us, should sin no more. As He during those forty days was only preparing for His Ascension, so we for the short, the very short, time that we have to abide here on earth, should be only preparing for that other and eternal world. What indeed have we else to do, since God has so graciously ordered our concerns, that all our other innocent cares, our love for our friends and kinsmen and the like, may be turned that same way, may be made steps towards heaven? Think then, brethren, day and night of your Baptism. You cannot think of it too much; only take care to think of it in this way, that being so risen with Christ you have but one thing to do, to seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the Right Hand of God.

One thing more, and it shall be something which all may understand. When you think of Baptism, you think of washing; for Baptism, you know, is a washing with water. Now what is the use of washing? Of course, to make one clean. Baptism is ordained by Almighty God to make our souls pure and clean, not by any virtue which it has in itself, but through the most precious Blood of our Only Saviour Christ Jesus, which it pleases Him to apply to our souls in that way. Remember this: you have been, once at least, effectually cleansed: once at least there was a time when our Lord might have said to us

as He said to His Apostles: “now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you.”<sup>2</sup> In whatever degree we have become unfit to have the same word spoken to us now, we know whose fault it must be, and the same consequence of it. Those who are careful to be neat and clean in their houses, their persons, and their clothing, and to keep all belonging to them the same, know how provoking it is, when things which they have been taking trouble with, are wilfully and wantonly stained and sullied again. It is a very great trial of temper. Now by this you may judge how angry our Lord must be, when, having washed us clean in His own most precious Blood, so painfully shed for us on the tormenting Cross, He finds us by our own fault all foul and filthy again. Let us beware that it be not so with us. Remember the King coming in to see the guests, and what became of him whose dress was not what it ought to have been. When temptation comes near, say with the spouse in the song of Solomon, “I have washed my feet, how shall I defile them?”<sup>3</sup> Alas! how many at the last Day will wish that they had borne these things in mind, when it will be too late!

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<sup>2</sup> John 15:3

<sup>3</sup> Song of Solomon 5:3