

Village Sermons on the Baptismal Service  
by John Keble

## SERMON XXIX.

November 18, 1849.

ST. MARK viii. 38.

“Whosoever therefore shall be ashamed of Me and of My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him also shall the Son of Man be ashamed when He cometh in the glory of His Father with the Holy Angels.”

THE point of time in the Service for Holy Baptism on which we are to think to day, is while the priest holds the new-baptized yet in his arms, and is in the act of signing it with the Sign and Seal of Christ. That Sign and Seal, I need not tell you, is the Cross. We considered about it last week; and of how great use it may be in keeping off Evil spirits and in inviting the help of the good. Now the next point to be considered is, why this mark should be made upon the *forehead* of the child, rather than any where else. We see it always was so; according to that in the Revelations, “Hurt not the earth, neither the sea, nor the trees, till we have sealed the servants of our God in the forehead.”<sup>1</sup> And the beast, the great evil Power on earth, is said in the same Book of Revelations to cause them that worship his image to receive a mark in their right hand or their foreheads. There must then be a special meaning in having the mark in that part of the body; nor is such meaning hard to find. The Service points to it, “We do sign him with the Sign of the Cross, in token that hereafter he shall not be ashamed?” How is it a token that he shall not be ashamed? For this reason especially, because it is made in the forehead. For, if a person were ashamed of Christ, surely the forehead, of all places, is where he would least wish to have Christ’s mark upon him; because the forehead is the most plain to be seen of any part of the body, and any mark set there is, in a manner, more public than any where else. To put the mark of Christ then upon the forehead, before the child can at all know, is as much as to pledge him that, when he does know, he will never be ashamed of Christ’s mark, he will always bear it openly upon him; that he will never be ashamed of it, come upon him what will. We do sign his Forehead, especially, “with the Sign of the Cross, in token that he shall not be ashamed to confess the faith of Christ crucified.”

It should seem then, as though baptized children were in some special manner in danger of being ashamed to confess Christ. Let us consider how this is.

We will suppose a good and simple child, going about for a while in his own simple way. He knowingly encourages no ill thoughts, he is kind and gentle, he speaks the truth, he will not be greedy, he does as he is bid, he tries to mind his prayers, he is the same, in sight and out of sight. How happy is that child! But it is sad to think how sorely he may soon be tried. Before long he may find himself among other children, or even among grown-up people, who have been brought up in very different ways from these, and who, to keep themselves in countenance, will be too likely to laugh at his childlike goodness. They will laugh at him, perhaps, for his strict honesty; he would not for the world take what is not his, without leave. But they have been used to deal freely with

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<sup>1</sup> Revelation 7:3

other men's goods, and help themselves boldly to what they please, when they think they can safely do it. If they see you backward to do the same, they will laugh at you; they will say, you want sense and spirit, you know nothing of life, you are altogether poor and contemptible. Can you bear it all? Will you go on just the same, as strict and exact in your honesty, as if you had never been laughed at for it? Or will it not rather have this effect upon you, that, although you were greatly shocked at first with their talk, you nevertheless cared for it so far as this; that you rather kept your honesty out of sight, you were a little uneasy when you thought it was going to be noticed; and soon you were tempted to relax a little, not to seem so strict and particular and so unlike other people; (for that is how these tempters will talk of you;) and when you have got so far, to hide your honesty for fear of being laughed at, I fear it will be found but a very little step farther, to join those whom you mind so much, in something positively dishonest, or to follow their bad example in ways of your own. Perhaps it is not so much dishonesty, by which the simple young heart is tried, as that most sad and painful temptation of impurity. Too often those who in any manner are losing themselves in this grievous sin, become so like the evil spirit, as to grudge others their goodness and innocence, and they will mock and jeer at them for being ignorant of sin, and afraid to fall into it. For such company there is but one rule; as soon as ever you perceive what they are about, avoid them, come not near them, stop your ears, look another way; you know not what incurable defilement you may bring upon yourself by any willing intercourse with them, though it be but for half an hour. Shut your eyes from seeing of evil, whether it be in books or in the ways of living people; never mind their sneers and their scorning; never mind what they will be sure to say about your want of spirit, your unmanliness, your pitiful ignorance of life. Remember the Lord's mark in your forehead, and be bold and courageous to despise all this, or, if the tempter's agents take another course with you, if they despise and mock you for being respectful to those whom God has set over you, for minding them when they are out of sight, this again is often a sore trial, through the sad frailty of our nature; but it is not a trial in which a well-disposed mind can have any doubt of its duty. Arm yourselves, then also, with the sign of the Cross, *His* sign Who was not ashamed to live thirty years at Nazareth in quiet subjection to the poor Carpenter and his wife, and, having that sign, be bold to disregard those who would taunt you with your precise notions of duty; let them, if they will, mock on, but let no sayings or doings of theirs make you less respectful, loving, and true.

How plain is all this, as we speak and hear of it, how very foolish to be ashamed of keeping either of God's holy Commandments, on account of what a few thoughtless persons may say! yet how few of us, alas! can say that we have been, or even are now, quite above being tempted in that way. Both open ridicule, and secret scorn, are to many most painful to be encountered; many a good resolution has failed before them; many an one, who seemed like a rock, has wavered, from being ashamed of Christ. The very first sin that was committed in this world seems to have been partly occasioned by this. Eve knew perfectly, and answered exactly, what command God had given concerning the Tree of Knowledge. But the Serpent said, in the tone of scornful unbelief, "Ye shall not surely *die*"<sup>2</sup> as if he should say, you "are not quite so foolish as to believe *that*;" and she was so weak that she listened to it. There are too many places, too many companies, where young people who know their duty are tempted much in the same way. Their dread

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<sup>2</sup> Genesis 3:4

of another's ridicule or secret scorn comes dangerously in, to aid their other bad inclinations. This was partly the temptation at the High Priest's door, when St. Peter, young in eagerness if not in years, was tempted to say with oaths and cursings, "I know not the Man."<sup>3</sup> It would not seem to have been merely fear for his own life, but he did not like, so it may appear, to be accounted one of so strange and unaccountable a set, whom nobody could understand well enough, either to pity or respect them. Take care, my young friends, lest you too in some unguarded hour should utter words which come to the same, "I know not the Man, I care not so much for this or that point of the Creed, this or that form of words," and yet in your hearts you know or ought to know that the points of the Creed, the form of sound words, are to be cared for by Christians even unto death. Take care that in none of these respects you so forget the Cross in your foreheads, as to seem to agree with sin and unbelief, for fear of differing with other people. I think it very likely that some, perhaps many of you, may be tried in this way. A time is at hand, in which very holy things will be freely talked of in all manner of companies. Holy Baptism, and those who believe in it, will be more and more a scorn and an offence to the children of this world. Take care that none of you ever be tempted by fear of standing alone, or by fear of being laughed at, to say any thing like, "I know not the Man."

Our time is in some respects a time like that in which the gospel was first preached, when it was "to the Jews a stumbling-block and to the Greeks foolishness." So now Jesus Christ in His Sacraments is a stumbling-block to those who think they know better, and have a more spiritual religion, and He is "foolishness" to the ordinary sort of people, who will not believe their own high calling, nor be told how bad their sins are. At such a time and in such temptations, the Cross in our foreheads, seasonably thought of, may help us very greatly. We were told, when it was marked there, that it marked us not only as Christ's sheep, but also as His soldiers and servants. We are "manfully to fight under our Lord's Banner;" that is what is required in soldiers. What is our Lord's Banner? the Cross, that Sign of the Son of Man in Heaven, which, as many have believed, will be carried before Him when He shall come with His armies at the last Day. Under that Banner, i. e. the Banner of self-denial and of suffering, we are to fight against sin, the world, and the Devil. We are not to have an hour's peace with them; the warfare on which we enter at our Baptism is to continue unto our life's end. And how are we to fight? in one word, "manfully;" we are to be courageous, loyal, persevering, in one word, to quit ourselves like *men*. Bear this in mind, my young friends. You are ready enough in general and glad enough to be reckoned men and treated as men. Not seldom you are seeking and contriving to be so before the proper and natural time, in a great hurry to leave school, to be your own masters, to be dealt with as if you were grown up. Well then, if you want to be men, shew yourselves manly where Christ requires you to do so; i. e. in striving against sin, in never being ashamed of Christ. Nothing so unmanly, as to be put out of countenance, when you are standing up for your King, your Master, or your parent; and still more for Him Who is all these in one, and more than all these, your Saviour. Nothing so truly manful and courageous, as to go on simply and plainly in the way of duty, whether those around us regard and respect us, or no.

We must be manful and we must be faithful; manful to enter on the fight, faithful to continue it unto our lives' end. This indeed is great part of true manliness, not to be

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew 26:74

“like children carried away with every blast of vain doctrine,”<sup>4</sup> but to be ordered and established in the truth of Christ’s holy Gospel. Surely, if you would be men, (as you all wish to be) this spiritual and inward manliness will be all in all to you. Keep to it firmly, yet humbly and devoutly, and all besides will be sure to come right.

Finally, remember, Brethren, that we are *slaves*, given up entirely by Jesus Christ as a living Sacrifice to our Lord; and this is one reason more, why we bear the Sign of the Cross; we are to continue His faithful soldiers *and servants*. Slaves in old time bore their master’s mark in their foreheads; I believe it is so in some countries even now: it is the mark which shews to whom they belong, and by which they are found out if they forsake his service: they no doubt, poor creatures, are often unwilling enough to bear it; but let us with all joy and willingness wear our mark, the Cross of our Saviour. He made Himself a Slave for us, when He took our nature upon Him; as He says in the Book of Psalms, “Mine ears hast Thou opened,”<sup>5</sup> i. e. I have made Myself Thy servant, and Thou hast taken Me to be Thy servant for ever. “Lo, I come to do Thy will, O my God.” Thus did He make Himself a slave for us all, and we were taken by Him to be His slaves, when He had us signed with the sign of the Cross. Let it be all our joy and glory, as it is our only hope, that we are not our own, but His, whether we will or no. We are His servants; let us see to it that we are faithful servants. Our Master is away out of sight: let us take care to be awake, when He returns. For blessed are those servants, whom the Lord when He cometh shall find watching. Therefore the Church, in signing us with the Sign of the Cross, put us in mind of our life’s end, which will be but a short time. The Sign was to make us recollect, that we are pledged to continue Christ’s faithful soldiers and servants unto our life’s end. So be it, O Lord. May we so lead our short lives here that Thou and Thy good Angels may own us to be Thine, seeing Thy mark upon us in the Day of Resurrection.

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<sup>4</sup> Ephesians 4:14

<sup>5</sup> Psalm 40:6