

Village Sermons on the Baptismal Service

by John Keble

SERMON III.

July 1, 1849.

EPHESIANS iv. 5.

“One Lord, one Faith, one Baptism.”

DO you not perceive, by the very sound of these words, what a great and holy thing Baptism must be: seeing that it is reckoned up with the greatest and holiest Name of all—the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ, and of God the Father of all—and with faith in those Names? as though it were not altogether sufficient for us to have all one Lord, one faith and one God, but we must also have one Baptism.

Plainly we are here given to understand two great truths concerning that holy Sacrament: first, that it is a very solemn thing—one of the most solemn and important that can possibly be: and secondly, that it can come but once; a man can be baptized only once in his life.

Now regarding the solemnity of Baptism I have shewn you from the Rubric in the Prayer Book, at the beginning of the Baptismal Service, what care the Church takes, to make it as public as she can, that all persons may think much of it, in that it is appointed to be, if possible, only on great days. Now I will remind you of some more things of the same kind, which have already been pointed out in the Catechising.

It is convenient that Baptism be administered in the vulgar tongue: i. e. in the English language, not in the Latin which has sometimes been used in the Church: in order that all persons present may be more effectually reminded of their own Baptism. Now see, how certainly this makes every one of us answerable before God for a devout remembrance of his Baptism, as being indeed that good work, whereby he was made a member of Christ, a child of God, and an inheritor of the Kingdom of Heaven. If we lived in Spain or Italy, or France, and did not understand the words of the service when we heard it, then of course we could not out of that Service learn the doctrine of Holy Baptism: but as it is, if we will but attend, we can hardly help learning a great deal: how that we were all conceived and born in sin, that we cannot get out of this miserable condition and enter into the Kingdom of God without being born again of water and the Holy Ghost; that this new birth takes place at Baptism, seeing that before the child is christened we pray to God that he may be

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regenerate, and after he is christened, we thank God that he is regenerate; and that, being once baptized, his great care must be to keep the good thing then given him, daily dying to sin, and rising again unto righteousness. All this and more those who will, may learn for themselves, by merely attending to the service of our Church whenever a child is baptized. And are we not then without excuse, if we think little of our own Baptism? Will not those Christians one day rise tip in judgment against us, who, although they cannot understand the words of the Baptismal service, do yet believe and remember what a great gift they then received, saying to themselves as St. Paul says for us all, ‘If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit?’¹

Observe what the Church next appoints: “There shall be for every male child to be baptized two Godfathers and one Godmother, and for every female one Godfather and two Godmothers.” Now this again is a very solemn circumstance: for the Godfathers and Godmothers are in a manner deputies appointed by the Church to bring the child to Almighty God and beseech Him to receive him: and by coming forward as they do, they not only make themselves answerable for the child, in the manner which is explained at the end of this service, and that, publicly before all men, but they also are a kind of token of the great care which the Church takes to make our Baptism as solemn as possible. It is a great honor done to them, that the Church should permit them to bring her little ones in their arms, and lay them as it were at the feet of the great King, that He may take them up in His Arms: just as it would be a great honor if the queen should trust her young children to any one to be carried any where, and to receive any good thing.

Observe further, that notice is to be given, the parents are to inform the Pastor of the parish over night or in the morning before the service. Because Baptism is a great Sacrament and nothing should be done in it hastily and without preparation: and because the Pastor should have time to enquire about the persons intended to be sponsors, and, if need be, to talk with them or with the parents, since we see and know of our own selves, that, in so holy a service as Baptism, all who take part should at least be trying to be holy; and, as it is greatly to be commended and a very charitable work, when sincere and thoughtful persons, young or old, come forward to present Christ’s little ones at His Font, so it is a great pity for any to come in a light and thoughtless way; much more if they be known neglecters of Church-services and Sacraments; or if unhappily they be notorious evil livers. All this is plain of itself; and so is the motherly care

¹ Galatians 5:25

of the Church in taking that order which she doth, that the sponsors may be such as to honor the Sacrament and do a good part by the babe.

We may notice also, in what part of the service the Sacrament of Baptism is appointed to be administered. It is to come after the second lesson; and the second lesson, as you know, is always taken from the New Testament. And do you not see how suitable it is, that immediately after the written Word of Christ should come the blessing of His Sacramental Word? that such as He has been declared in our hearing by His Holy apostles and prophets, such He should come in our sight by the no less Holy Mysteries which He Himself ordained? even as, when St. Peter first preached to the Jews, they that gladly received his word were baptized: and when he preached again to the gentiles, the Holy Ghost fell upon all them that heard the word.

The Rubric goes on. The sponsors and people are to be ready at the Font, and then the Priest is to come to them: the Font being, as we have before noticed, close to the principal entrance, because Baptism is the entrance into Christ's Spiritual Body: it is the beginning of our Christian life, even as we begin each new day by washing with water. When we turn towards it, as we commonly do at the commencement of the baptismal service, well were it, if in heart we always turned back towards our own Baptism, remembering what a good beginning we then made, and how grievous it will be, if our latter end be not answerable.

Take notice that this Font is to be *filled* with pure water. The Water must be pure, because it is to represent and convey the purest of all beings, the Holy Spirit of God; and it must fill the Font, because God's mercy is overflowing; and because, as the service afterwards shews, it were well if the infant, not being weak or sickly, might be plunged entirely in the water, instead of merely having it poured on him.

All things being thus prepared for the solemn outward baptizing of the child, the Priest begins the office by asking, Hath this child been already baptized or no?—If they answer no, he goes on at once: if yes, he asks some three or four more questions, in order to make sure of its having been rightly made partaker of the Sacrament: of which questions I shall speak presently: but in no case is either the same Priest or any other ever to think of baptizing that child again. Baptism can in no case be repeated: it were a kind of sacrilege, an utter abomination to the Lord. Did you not hear, how solemnly St. Paul told his Ephesian converts, “As there is but one Lord, and one Faith, so there is but one Baptism.” Nor is the reason hard to see. Baptism is a kind of birth, a second birth after the first, a new birth into a new and spiritual life. Therefore it can come to us once only. For as Nicodemus argued with our Saviour, “How can a man be born

when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born?"² And our Lord answered by telling him, not that a man could be born twice in the same kind of birth, but that He was speaking of a different birth, of quite another kind from that which Nicodemus was thinking of. But in the same kind, man cannot be born twice: so far Nicodemus was quite right: and for this reason, that birth is always a beginning of life, and there cannot be two beginnings of the same life. Therefore as a man cannot literally enter the second time into his mother's womb, so neither can a man be born more than once of water and of the Spirit. As we read in the Epistle to the Hebrews, "It is impossible for those who were once enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the world to come, if they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance." They cannot be baptized a second time, if they have once quite lost and forfeited for ever the blessings of their first baptism. The Church therefore in the Nicene Creed acknowledges but "one Baptism for the Remission of sins." Those who fall away after Baptism and repent and amend and are saved at last, are saved, not by a new Baptism, but by the mercy of God awakening, as it were, within them the virtue of their first Baptism which had gone to sleep. You cannot be baptized a second time: if a person tried to be so, it would be either in ignorance, and then I suppose it would just come to nothing—or, if he did it by way of disparaging his former Baptism, surely it would be a great and grievous sin, a sin and dishonour done to a very special grace and Gift of the Holy Ghost,

Nevertheless there are cases, in which the Church is not content with asking whether the child hath been before baptized or no: i. e. if a child is brought to Church and they say it hath been already baptized, still the Priest is to ask three or four questions (unless he was himself the baptizer). He is to ask, By whom was the child baptized? and, Who was present?—that the Church may have regular testimony of its having been done. And then, for fear something of importance might be left out, the Priest is to ask two questions more, "With what matter was this child baptized? and, With what words was this child baptized? Because in the outward part of Baptism, there are two things of consequence, the element or matter, which is the water, to bury the child in, or to be poured or sprinkled upon it: and the form of words, ordained by our Lord Himself, "In the Name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Ghost." If either of these two were wanting, i. e. if the child were washed or dipped in water,

² John 3:4

but not in the Sacred Name: or, again, if the Name were said over it, but no water applied to it; then it would not be baptized: and it is to make sure of its being baptized, that those two questions are asked. When they are sufficiently answered, then, says our Church, we are to make no doubt that the child is lawfully and sufficiently baptized, and ought by no means to be baptized again. He is not half but wholly baptized, if the water have been once applied in the saving Name. Thenceforth it is a Christian; not for a time, but for ever, unless by its own wilful sin it finally cast away that grace. It needs no more christening; only, for its good and for the Church's satisfaction, it must be presented publicly in Church and make its profession before God by its godfathers. But by no means, and in no sense, can it ever be baptized or christened again.

"Once baptized and always baptized," that is a point for us all to muse deeply over. All of us naturally think a good deal of any thing that is done once for all: it seems such a sad thing, should it be wrongly done: we feel beforehand how miserable it will be, should we have bye and bye the feeling that it was all wrong, all ill done, and at the same time that it never can be mended. Think of the great turning point of this our earthly life, such as, choice of business or employment, e. g. when a lad enlists to be a soldier, or is bound apprentice to any trade; and more especially if a person marries; for that of course is the great turning point in respect of this world's happiness or discomfort. *This* is the fearful, anxious thing, that, when we make a choice in such matters, we choose for good and all: it settles one way through life: if we are right, it is well; but if wrong, we must bear it: it can hardly or at all be mended. But what is all the good or evil of this one short space of time here, compared with what depends on the moment of our Baptism? what signifies success or failure in this or that profession, this or that line of life, compared with our keeping or not keeping the grace of regeneration? To baptize is a thing done in a very short time: the water is poured on the child in a moment: the words are said in a very few moments: but to that brief and fleeting moment the soul will look back through all eternity, in joy and thanksgiving, or in bitter shame and remorse. All the children of Adam will look back to the moment of their natural birth, as to that which introduced them to an eternity of joy or despair: but we, his regenerate children, shall have to look back on the moment of our Baptism also, as lifting us to a far higher Heaven, or sinking us into a lower and more miserable Hell.

My brethren, you know, better than I can tell you, how you cherish, how you treasure and value this short life of ours: with what unfeigned horror, for the most part, you shrink from deadly sickness, from fatal and alarming accidents, from everything which you think apt to

shorten your life. You know how eagerly you welcome every plan which at all promises to secure you from death, or those whom you love, though it be but for a short time. Why will you not as truly, as earnestly, treasure and value the baptismal grace of Christ—the Holy Spirit given you at the Font, to abide in you, if not driven away, not a few years, not all your life, but in the whole of your being, in life, in death, in Eternity? If you had a jewel in your keeping, most precious in itself, and of such virtue that, as long as you wore it, it kept you from all serious sickness, should you not prize that jewel very much, and not let it lie about, to be caught up by those who would do you a mischief? Such a jewel, my Brethren, is Baptismal Grace. O watch it well, hold it very dear, never forget it, for it is exceeding precious: and, if once entirely lost, it can never be recovered. Life, this earthly mortal life, is still very dear to us, even in our sickness and old age: people generally cling to it, even when but little of it remains. May not this too teach us something in respect of our Baptismal life in Christ Jesus? Too often and too sadly is that life within us impaired by grievous sin: and not seldom are we tempted to put by all thought of it: to give ourselves up in despair saying, “Let us eat and drink; for to-morrow we die.”³ I beseech you, never for one moment hearken to any such thought. What if you are grievously fallen? By His great mercy your Baptismal life remains, you are not given over by the heavenly Physician; else why are you here, caring at all about your sins? As you value and take care of your life, even when you are on your sick bed, so and much more, for Christ’s sake, I pray you to value and take care of your soul, diseased but not yet dead: take care of it, nurse it well, keep it from evil, cleanse and chasten it with penitence; feed it, if God permit, with Holy Communion. Such methods, taken in earnest, cannot fail in time to effect a complete cure: by virtue of that holiest seal which the Spirit of Christ set on you in Baptism—the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. What if you are weak and fallen? In that Name Christ bids you arise: in that Name He once for all gave you power to obey His bidding: and if you do obey it, in that Name He will bless you for ever.

³ Isaiah 22:13