

# Village Sermons on the Baptismal Service by John Keble

## SERMON IV.

July 8, 1849.

PSALM li. 6.

“Behold, I was shapen in wickedness and in sin hath my mother conceived me.”

THE first foundation and groundwork of the doctrine of Baptism, and that on which all the rest of it depends, is the doctrine of original sin. What original sin is, you will find explained in one of the XXXIX Articles of our Church which are printed at the end of the Prayer Book. The ninth Article says, “original sin is the fault and corruption of every man naturally engendered of the offspring of Adam—whereby man is very far gone from original righteousness, and is of his own nature inclined to evil, so that the flesh lusteth always contrary to the Spirit.” That is to say, that in every child born into this world, however wise and good his parents, and however earnestly they pray to God for him, there is still something very bad, from the very first moment of that child’s being, affecting both his soul and body. For so David says in the text, “I was shapen in wickedness, and in sin hath my mother conceived me.” David was shapen and conceived like other men: his father Jesse was a good man: and, if David was shapen and conceived in wickedness, so must have been all other men. So it was in David’s time as it is now; so it has been in all times; so it will be to the end. Only one of the children of Adam, that we are told of, was conceived without sin; and that one was our Lord and Saviour, the Child of Adam by the mother’s side: but He was not naturally conceived, but in some miraculous and unspeakable way, by the power of the Holy Ghost. All the rest, as soon as we were born and before, were the worse for this original sin, this taint within us, very bad, very displeasing to Almighty God, and quite sure, like a bad seed, to ripen into all sorts of mischief, if only it were left to itself.

To some this may seem a hard saying, when they look at a little child, whether it be their own or another’s, and see how sweet and innocent it looks; as sweet and as innocent, to all outward appearance, before it is christened as after. It may sound strange in their ears, that the Priest should look at the simple babe, lying so quietly in its nurse’s arms, and pronounce it to be in a wretched and sinful state. For so he undoubtedly does, my brethren, when, having been told that it is yet unbaptized, he begins to speak

to the people and say, “Dearly beloved, forasmuch as all men are conceived and born in sin:” so going on to rehearse the doctrine of Baptism. Unthinking persons might wonder at this: but after all, why need it appear to them so much out of the way? They would at once own how true it was, if one were to take up a child out of its cradle and say, “this child does indeed look for the present most fair and healthful; yet depend upon it, this child, like all other children, must one day die; nay, and he will die very soon, if you do not provide him with the food and medicine which are necessary for him. You might think it odd, if a man took such pains to teach you what you knew very well before; but at least you would not doubt the truth of it; for you have long since known that we are all mortal, all subject to pain and sickness: and this babe among the rest. Look at the most miserable helpless person you know, him who is most entirely worn out with age and disease, and fancy him what you know he once was, an infant in his mother’s or nurse’s arms; can you be sure, that he too was not just as fine and promising and happy a little creature as any that you most admire now? You are aware that it is very possible; therefore you would readily allow that any child, of which you are now proud, may one day be as the most deformed and decayed of your acquaintance.

Now why have I said all this about sickness and the change which it and old age and the wear and tear of life make in children? In order that you might better know, how to think on what the Prayer Book teaches of original sin. For sin is in many respects like sickness; and original sin is like a natural taint, a bad constitution which the child inherits from its father and mother. Adam and Eve, by their unhappy disobedience, brought the complaint upon themselves, and God in His wise and just judgments, secret to us, permitted it to be conveyed on to all their posterity: just as many sicknesses, sometimes the result of sin, are known to run in the blood of such and such families. As I said then about bodily sickness and affliction, so now I say about sin, which is the sickness of the soul. If it seems hard to you to say of the babe at the Font, “this infant is in original sin, he is subject to the wrath of God,” imagine to yourself the worst criminal that ever lived. Imagine Judas Iscariot, who betrayed our Lord, and for whom, our Lord said, good were it, if he had not been born: and consider that he was once as harmless as any other little babe, and very likely looked so; and it may be his mother little thought of his proving so wicked. Therefore their sweet childish innocence is no proof that there is not something very evil lying hid in their nature. Does not the Bible tell us so plainly? “They are all gone out of the way; they are altogether become abominable, there is none good, no not one.”<sup>1</sup> “All have sinned and

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 3:12

come short of the glory of God.’<sup>2</sup> “The Heavens are not pure in His Sight: how much less man that is a worm!” And then see how we turn out, if God leave us to ourselves. See how children go on, if they are turned loose into the world without education, and just permitted to go their own way. They bear a full crop of sin and vice of all kinds, as surely as a neglected piece of ground bears no good fruit, but only thorns and thistles. Why should not the ground as well bear wheat and barley, grapes and apples? It is cursed: cursed for the sin of man: that is the only account that can be given of the matter. So these hearts and bodies of ours, having the heavy curse and mark of that first transgression upon them, are naturally inclined to evil, and, left to ourselves, every imagination of our thoughts would be only evil continually. It is a sad thing, but there is no disputing it. The best way is to leave off wondering, why or how such a burden should be laid upon us, and thankfully and gladly to accept the sure and certain remedy which God has provided—Jesus Christ crucified, taught in His Gospel, given in His Sacraments, present evermore in His Church.

And indeed you do all accept Him, and I am most thankful that you do, in one very chief matter, the matter of which we are speaking: you all make a point of bringing your young children to be christened in good time. I only wish you thought as much of this Sacrament of Food as you do of the Sacrament of birth. It will be well with us, when we are all as careful to come ourselves worthily and bring our children to the table of the Lord, as we are to secure the benediction of His heavenly washing. In the mean time it is no small mercy, that here at least, among us, the enemy has not been able to make Baptism little thought of. In some other places, especially in large towns, I fear it is far otherwise: I fear that thousands are born, bred, and sent out into the wicked world with the foul stain of their original sin upon them; no holy name pronounced over them; no cross on their foreheads to drive away the evil one. Whatever becomes of you, and wherever you go, never, I beseech you, be partakers of this sin: never be at all slack, nor encourage others to be slack, about Holy Baptism. Never defer it without cause: some have done so to their great grief. Let those who belong to the family make it a matter of earnest prayer, both before and after an infant is born, that he may live to be baptized: and when he has been so, let them remember it in earnest thanksgiving. It would be well if we all made a point of acknowledging God’s great goodness in having us baptized, at least as often as we join in the general thanksgiving, and praise Him for giving us the means of grace. For of all the means of grace Baptism is the first: and it is the way to all the rest. But neither, on the other hand, may we ever safely forget that, although the guilt of our birth-sin was blotted out in our Baptism,

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<sup>2</sup> Romans 3:23

yet the sin itself remains like a spark from hell-fire within us, which may be fanned into a flame, and the devil is always trying to fan it. The lust of the flesh—evil desire—abideth ever in them which are regenerate, and is not entirely subject to the law of God. Good Christians are aware of it, and are always trying to tread it out by holy discipline, prayer, and self-denial: they are never satisfied, until every thought be reduced to the obedience of Christ; i. e. they never in this world feel as if their work was done: the hidden spark, they are too well aware, is still lurking within them: sin is there; and their very soul shudders at the thought, “what if some day or other it should be mortal sin? and surely it will be so, if I become careless in prayer, if I do not cherish the grace given me in Baptism.” Or it may be likened to an inveterate ulcer, by God’s mercy in process of cure, yet still imperfectly cured: subdued, but not entirely healed: if not attended to, it will soon begin to grow worse, and will spread afresh, no one can say how far. Or again, the remnant of birth-sin in the heart, may be fitly compared to the root of an obstinate weed, which lingers in the ground, when most of the plant has been cut out. You must keep on noticing, vexing, persecuting it, as constantly as ever you can, if you would make sure of its never growing to a head in your ground again. Remember all this for yourself, and remember it for your children also, and for others who are under your care. Be always owning God’s mercy in having you and them baptized: be always using the grace then given to destroy the remnant of evil then left within you. So shall it be found, when you come to die and rise again, that the spark, the root, the infection of Adam’s sin, has quite wasted away from your heart and your body. So will there be good hope, that the baptismal days of yourself and your children will be feasts and good days to you for ever. And if places known on earth are recollected on high, the Font in which you were baptized will be to you as a bright spot, not fading, but more and more gladdening to think of, as you go deeper on in Eternity.