

Village Sermons on the Baptismal Service by John Keble

SERMON V.
July 15, 1849.

EZEKIEL xxxvi. 25.

“Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean.”

AS meat is by nature necessary to cure hunger, and drink to allay thirst, and sleep to remove the weariness of watching, and fire and clothing to keep off the cold, and shelter to protect us from ill weather, so is Holy Baptism necessary, by the rules of God’s heavenly kingdom, to allay and cure, to keep off and remove, the sin and misery in which we were born. So the Priest proceeds to tell us at the beginning of the Baptismal Service. He tells us first of our misery: “all men are conceived and born in sin:” and then he tells us of the remedy which the merciful God has provided. “None can enter into the kingdom of God, except he be regenerate and born anew of water and of the Holy Ghost;” as if he should say, Were we left as we are by nature, all would be lost; but the good God has provided a remedy: besides the kingdom and power of Satan under which we are by nature, there is the kingdom and power of God, in which is entire happiness, perfect peace, complete deliverance: and how are we to enter into that kingdom? The King Himself hath told us very plainly. Our Saviour Christ told Nicodemus; it was one of the first lessons He taught, after He began to teach and tell of His Own approaching kingdom. “Verily, verily, I say unto you, except a man be born again, born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot see,” i. e. he cannot enjoy, cannot enter into “the kingdom of God.” Baptism therefore is necessary in both its parts: as our Church teaches also in the Catechism, it is “generally necessary to salvation:” so necessary that, when it may be had, no one may reasonably hope to be saved without it. We cannot be saved without being in Christ’s kingdom: and Baptism is the way into the kingdom. We cannot live the heavenly life, except we be members of Christ: and Baptism makes us members of Christ. We cannot be in the Church without going through the door: and Christ, given in Baptism, is the Door. We cannot please God whilst we are in the flesh, i. e. in our natural state, all fallen and corrupt: but the Holy Spirit, entering into us at Baptism, takes us out of our natural state, mends our fallen and corrupt nature, so that we are no longer in the flesh but in the Spirit, and may please God if we will. All this our Lord

teaches, and the Church after Him, in saying that “none can enter into the kingdom of God, except he be regenerate and born anew of water and of the Holy Ghost.” When you hear the Priest say these words, you are to listen, as if it were the Voice of our Lord Jesus Christ Himself. For indeed it is His Voice. His minister speaks but by His commission and by the power which He gives him, and the words which he speaks are our Saviour’s own Words: “Except a man be born again, born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.”¹

Do you not hear how very plain the words are? He says, Holy Baptism is necessary generally, necessary in both its parts: there is no coming into the kingdom of God without it. The water must be there, and the Holy Ghost must be there. He names the one as expressly as He does the other. He joined them together; it is not for us to part them. What He then told Nicodemus secretly, in that retired room by night, He hath since proclaimed in the light and upon the house-tops, bidding His apostles go and make disciples of all nations by baptizing them in the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. He taught it by the same apostles, inviting all who cared for their souls to “repent and be baptized, every one in the Name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins,” and so they should receive the gift of the Holy Ghost. It is Christ’s own Truth, plainly taught in the Scriptures and faithfully delivered to us in the Creeds and offices of the Church, that there is “one Baptism for the remission of sins,” the way into the kingdom of Heaven, viz. to be “regenerate and born anew of water and of the Holy Ghost.”

I say it over and over again, because, although we all know it as a thing to be said, we are apt to pass it over a great deal too easily and unthinkingly, as a matter of course, a thing done for us, a thing practically gone and past, with which we have now little to do, but to be thankful when we think of it. With respect indeed to the outward part, Baptism by water, persons are commonly ready enough to allow that it is necessary. If a child is ill, they make haste to go for the minister; they are grieved and shocked at the thought of the child’s passing out of the world unbaptized: and it is very right, and we ought to be very thankful that Christians should be so minded in regard of Holy Baptism. But then ought we not to consider far more deeply than we commonly do, *why* we take all this care for the child, and how deeply we are concerned in it ourselves? “What is the sense and meaning of sending for the Clergyman in a great hurry, perhaps in the middle of the night, to baptize a sick infant? Is it not in order to the good of the child’s soul, for fear it should die in its original

¹ John 3:3, 5

sin, and lose the blessing prepared by Christ for His members? Of course, that is the reason, and a very great and deep reason it is. But what if the person, who is thus anxious for his child or it may be for his neighbour's child, should be all the while neglecting his own soul? What if, while he is really anxious that Jesus Christ should come and take the sick infant in His Arms and bless it and make it His Own before it die, he have no anxiety, no wish at all for the same Jesus to be with him, to bless him and keep him in the Kingdom of Heaven when it shall be his own time to be sick and to die? Must not this be a sorrowful and a wonderful sight to the blessed spirits and souls of the righteous, so far as they know what is done on earth? Must it not amaze our guardian angels and fill them with something like a holy anger, to see persons so very thoughtless, so very negligent of their own immortal souls, even in the very act of waiting on other men's souls? May we not fancy them whispering in our ears; "you are going, or sending to the man of God in behalf of this little child, that it may not die un-baptized: would it not be well if you said a word to him on your own behalf also, lest you should die impenitent? Consider: that sinful nature which will make it so great a calamity if the infant should die as it is—that same nature is in you also: the grace of your Baptism did not cure it entirely, it only put it in a way to be cured: if you have not made much of that unspeakable gift, if you have since been grieving and vexing that holy Spirit, how can you be at all easy about yourself?" Surely, my brethren, if we would listen to the good counsels and friendly whisperings of the blessed angels around us, we should sometimes be aware of such thoughts and misgivings as these; and, as we feel uneasy if any little child belonging to us is left unbaptized, so should we long to confess our own sins, which may have brought us perhaps into a worse than unbaptized condition. We should feel no comfort, until by true confession we had made our peace with God, and received from Him absolution and remission of our sins.

We must be regenerate and born anew; how great, how thorough a change do these words signify! They lead us to think of an entirely altered state of things: we expect to see what was seen in vision by the Prophet and Apostle St. John; a new Heaven and a new earth; the first Heaven and the first earth having clean passed away. We expect to see the old things departed, and all things become new. As Heaven is altogether unlike this earth; as the life of a child, born into the air and light of day, is utterly unlike the life of the same child so long as he was shut up in the womb; so ought the life of a Christian to be unlike that which the same person would lead, if he were still in his heathen state. This is what we should expect, if we considered our Lord's words only in their natural meaning; if we did

not look out upon the world around us and see what passes there. And whereas, the Lord saith by His Prophet in the text, “I will sprinkle clean water upon you and ye shall be clean;”² would not one naturally look to see great purity, great cleanness of heart and life, in the Christian people to whom that promise is made? We should expect them to appear, to our eyes at least, undefiled, without spot or blemish, as a flock of sheep just going up from the washing. But alas! my brethren, how do things really appear to us! We dare not deny it; it is a sad truth: sin’ is even now so reigning and prevailing among us; the cares of the world and the lusts of the flesh have so great dominion over us; that to speak of being delivered by Baptism appears to many a hard and impossible doctrine. They say in their hearts, “such and such an one cannot have been born anew and made a member of Christ: I cannot have been so myself; there must be some mistake; for if we have been new-born, how should our temptations continue so strong, and our goodness so very very weak?” And so they come to think little of the grace which God has given them; and, thinking little of His grace, they think little of their own sins; and are in a way to go down to the grave without even seriously abhorring and forsaking them. This is a fearful and dangerous snare. It is, I fear, the ruin of millions. I pray, that you all, my brethren, may have grace to be kept from it: and you will be kept from it, if you simply and lovingly believe God, that it was even as He had said, that when He was pleased by His minister to sprinkle the clean water upon you, you were indeed made clean. Believe this in earnest; and consider with yourself what a thing it is to have been once clean, so clean in God’s sight from the deadly stain of your birth-sin, that if you had then been taken from the world you would surely have been taken into Paradise,—and then by your own sloth or wilfulness to have brought yourself back in any degree to the foul and miserable uncleanness of your first condition.

There is, in the 16th chapter of Ezekiel, an account in most deep and touching words, of the Lord’s mercy shewn to Jerusalem, how she forfeited it by her sin and uncleanness, whereby she made herself far worse than the heathen; how, notwithstanding, in the latter days He would make a new covenant with her, receiving her again to be His own, when she should remember her ways and be ashamed. Doubtless, in so speaking to Jerusalem the Holy Ghost is speaking to every soul amongst us, who hath unhappily fallen away from baptismal grace.

First, there is our sad lost condition through Adam’s sin; “Thou wast cast out in the open field to the loathing of thy person in the day that

² Ezekiel 36:25

thou wast born.” Next, there is God’s free mercy, electing us to the Heavenly life. “When I passed by and saw thee polluted in thine own blood,” the blood which came to thee from Adam, corrupted with sin, “I said unto thee when thou wast in thy blood, live.” Then it speaks of Holy Baptism, “I swear unto thee and entered into a covenant with thee, saith the Lord God; and thou becamest Mine; then washed I thee with water; yea, I thoroughly washed away thy blood from thee, and I anointed thee with oil.” O well and happy were it for us, my brethren, if our history stopped there: but alas! too truly may we know our own sin in what follows, even as we may know God’s goodness in what has gone before. “Thou didst trust in thine own beauty,” saith the Lord to Jerusalem, “and playedst the harlot. Sodom hath not done as thou hast done—neither hath Samaria committed half thy sins.” The sins of the heathen and unregenerate are not to be compared with the sins of Christians: because the love shown to Christians is so much greater than that shown to the heathen and unregenerate. But great as our sin is in falling away after Baptism, it is not so great as His Love. For mark what is said to Jerusalem, after all her backslidings and treachery, “I will remember My covenant with thee in the days of thy youth, and I will establish unto thee an everlasting covenant: that thou mayest remember and be confounded and never open thy mouth any more because of thy shame, when I am pacified towards thee for all that thou hast done, saith the Lord God.”³

Let us all take particular notice, what was the beginning of the sad fall, which we have just been recollecting. Jerusalem trusted in her own beauty. That was what gave her tempters such advantage of her. On the other hand, the sign of her recovery is, if she be confounded, and never open her mouth any more because of her shame. So if any of us, my brethren, get into a way of thinking ourselves good enough; if we begin to take liberties, and scorn the advice and warnings of those whom Christ sends with messages to our souls; what can happen, but that we too shall be led astray? we shall break our vows and forfeit our baptismal innocence. If on the other hand any is so happy as to retain that innocence to the end, it will be by walking daily before God in reverence and godly fear—fear of sin, and reverence of Christ’s Inward Presence. He who is once thoroughly washed does not therefore think he has no more need of ablution: on the contrary, if he loves to be clean, he will carefully renew his washing from time to time; so the thoughtful Christian, once purified, will nevertheless be every day purifying himself, as Christ is pure. By daily self-examination and prayer, confession and penitency, he will bring

³ Ezekiel 16:60

his sins late and early to be washed away in his Saviour's Blood. He will do his best to return to his baptismal purity every morning and evening of his life: his regular washings and cleansings will remind him of it. Instead of vainly trusting to have all done for him, he will think thus with himself: "When I was a child in my original corruption, I had clean water sprinkled upon me and I was clean; now if I do not wash myself continually, I shall lose all the benefit of that first sprinkling: I shall lose it by my own fault! and I wonder who will pity or befriend me? Such an one therefore will keep his conscience tender, he will be very much on his guard against what are called lesser faults, pardonable sins, as they are called. For he will sadly feel that every such fault, every idle word and imagination will go some way, more or less, in polluting his soul, and making his Baptism void. Therefore he will watch, mistrusting himself; he will lose no time in ridding his soul's garments of the faintest speck of what he knows is hateful to his God. He will never neglect nor slur over his prayers, because he has settled it in his heart to believe that he cannot go on for a moment without God's special grace. He will think, say, do all, with the deepest reverential fear of the Great God dwelling within him. He will pray to know more and more of the Blessed Son's infinite condescension in coming so very near to him, and to be more and more afraid of dishonouring Him by wilful sin. Taught by St. Paul, he will say to himself continually, "shall I take the members of Christ and make them the members of an harlot? Shall I steal with the Hand of Christ, tell lies with the tongue of Christ, look proudly with the eyes of Christ? God forbid." May we find grace and help thus to remember our Baptism in all things: so shall we never lose the blessing of it, and if we seek that grace in sincerity, we surely shall find it.