

Village Sermons on the Baptismal Service  
by John Keble

SERMON IX.  
September 9, 1849.

ST. MATTHEW iii. 15.  
“Thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness.”

WHEN a child is to be christened, the Priest, as you know, puts God in remembrance, as it were, of the great mercies, which in old time He had wrought for His chosen people by water. First, in that He delivered the whole world by the ark; next, in His bringing the children of Israel, His people, safely through the Red Sea. These two, even to the outward eyes, even to the eyes of unbelievers, were very great things indeed. They were events, which it was quite impossible for any one to pass by. But there is a third type, greater than either, which to the eye of man was, in comparison, very obscure and insignificant; yet in itself far greater, far more wonderful, far more miraculous and heavenly, than these deliverances of Noah and the children of Israel. This was the Baptism of our blessed Lord; concerning which the collect in our service says, that “by the Baptism of His well-beloved Son Jesus Christ in the river Jordan, Almighty God sanctified water to the mystical washing of sin.”

I say, that our Lord’s Baptism was outwardly and visibly, and according to what the people of that time knew, a far quieter and more ordinary thing than either the flood or the passage of the Red Sea. For what was our Lord’s Baptism, measured by what men’s senses shewed to them? How may we draw the picture of it in our own minds? We may imagine a very still and solitary place, the river Jordan flowing quietly on, and St. John the Baptist, in his well-known dress, the raiment of camel’s hair, the leathern girdle about his loins; and Jesus of Nazareth, in Whom the world saw no great difference from other men (as it is written, “There is no form nor comeliness, and when we shall see Him, there is no beauty that we should desire Him”).<sup>1</sup> Him, I say, we may imagine coming up to the holy Baptist, and offering Himself to be baptized, as multitudes had been before. But St. John, who knew our Lord well to be the Holy Son of Mary, of Whom so great things had been promised, forbade Him at first, in deep humility, saying, “I have need to be baptized of Thee, and comest Thou to me?” Dost Thou, who art so much holier, come to me, who am not worthy to wait upon Thee? Our Lord however goes on, and tells St. John, how necessary it was for Him to be baptized, though He had no sins to be forgiven. “Suffer it to be so now, for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness.” Upon this, St. John gives way, and in deep fear and reverence baptizes his and our Lord. Jesus goes down into the river, and St. John pours some of the water upon Him, as the manner is in baptizing; and then He goes up out of the water; and, whilst He is beginning to pray to His Father on the bank, this great wonder happened, the heavens are opened, and the Holy Spirit descends in a bodily shape like a dove, and lights upon Him, and there is a voice from heaven, “This is My beloved Son, in Whom I am well pleased.”<sup>2</sup> It was an

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 53:2

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 3:17, Mark 1:11, 2 Peter 1:17

unspeakable wonder, even to the outward eye and ear. But it does not appear, that any one besides the Baptist himself was a witness to it. His own account is, that he had received before from Almighty God this notice, "Upon Whom thou shalt see the Spirit descending and remaining upon Him, the Same is He which baptizeth with the Holy Ghost. And I saw, and bare witness, that this is the Son of God." He speaks, as if he himself were the only witness; and if so, only think how very quiet and secret were the doings of God in this great matter. How truly was the saying here fulfilled, "Verily Thou art a God that hidest Thyself, O God of Israel, the Saviour; the Wonderful, the Counsellor, the great God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace!"<sup>3</sup> Behold, He is here, as the son of a poor carpenter, to be washed by another poor man in a lonely river. What is there here outwardly, for the world to be amazed at, and adore? And yet, inwardly, it is so great an event, that the heavens were opened; and we read not, as at other times, that angels came and ministered unto Him; but the heavens were opened, and the Spirit of God descended in a bodily shape like a dove, and abode upon Him; and there was no voice of the heavenly host, singing, "Glory to God in the highest," but the Eternal Father Himself spake from heaven, and said, "This is My beloved Son, in I am well pleased." And thus, as the Psalmist had sung years before, "The Voice of the Lord, which is a glorious Voice, was upon the waters, the great and many waters." The glory of the Lord was seen, and His Voice heard upon the waters of Jordan; but it was only seen and heard by St. John the Baptist. Now the Prayer Book informs us, that this event, so simple in man's account, so full of majesty and wonder to saints and angels, was altogether a token and a pledge of the blessing given to Christians in Holy Baptism. For it says, that "by the Baptism of His well-beloved Son Jesus Christ in the river Jordan, God did sanctify the element of water to the mystical washing away of sin." For to this end was God the Son made Man, and. for this cause did He take to Himself a body in the womb of the blessed Virgin, of her substance, that He might not only offer Himself up as a sacrifice of atonement for our sins, but also might cure our sin and misery by causing us to be partakers of Himself. By His touch, when He was upon earth, He healed diseases, and restored sight to the blind. By His spiritual but real Touch in Holy Communion, He from time to time renders "our sinful bodies clean through His Body, and washes our souls in His precious Blood." And so, by His touching the waters of Jordan, in that solemn and mystical way, when St. John baptized Him, He gave, not to Jordan only, but to all earthly waters generally, His heavenly blessing, so sanctifying them all, that, when duly applied in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, a person, yet heathen and un-regenerate, has his sins so washed away by the power of the Holy Ghost, that God will remember them no more. They are in His sight as if they had never been; as it is written, "I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean;"<sup>4</sup> I mean of course, unless we make void the blessing, and bind our sins on us afresh, by continuing in them, or returning to them. This virtue Christ gave to the waters of this fallen world of ours, when He permitted Himself to be touched by them in His Baptism by St. John. In Jordan, all water was sanctified by the touch of Christ; it has been sanctified, to be a pledge and means of our sanctification; and, that we may know that we have been so favoured, observe what followed on Christ's touching the water. Immediately the heavens were opened, and the Holy Ghost descended upon Him; that we may know, that

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<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 45:15

<sup>4</sup> Ezekiel 36:25

as in Jordan, that day, all water was in a manner sanctified, so in Christ at the same time, all believers were made partakers of the Spirit of adoption. For the Person of our Lord Jesus Christ is, in a manner, all believers in one; all are members of Him, all are branches grafted into Him, the True Vine. So that what was done and suffered by Him is, in its measure, a type and token of something to be done and suffered by each one of them. The Holy Ghost, poured on Him at His Baptism, was a figure and pledge of the same Holy Ghost poured on His apostles at Pentecost, and on each one of us when we receive the Sacrament of Baptism. He wanted no fresh gift of the Spirit, Himself; for He is One God with that Spirit for ever and ever. And God giveth not the Spirit by measure unto Him; but on our behalf He received that Spirit. It came all over His blessed Body, like the oil of gladness mentioned in the Psalms—“like the precious oil upon the head that ran down unto the beard, even unto Aaron’s beard, and came down to the skirts of his clothing.”<sup>5</sup> So was Christ, our Head and Priest, anointed for us, and we, His members, are every one anointed in Him. By His Holy Spirit, received in Baptism, we are made righteous and holy; and, if we die without grieving the Spirit, we shall remain righteous and holy, and so happy with Him for ever. And this, perhaps, was part of our Lord’s meaning, when, on St. John’s being loth to baptize Him, He said, “Suffer it to be so now, for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness.”<sup>6</sup> As if He should say, “you must baptize me; for I, the Head, am in all things to be a type to the members; and this, that is, Holy Baptism, is the way in which it is appointed for them and Me to fulfil all righteousness.” To be baptized with water and the Holy Ghost, and so made members of Christ, was to be the ordained cure for men’s natural unholiness and unrighteousness; therefore it was requisite that Christ Himself should be baptized. For He was to show us in His own Person all things needful to our justification and salvation through Him.

See then, my brethren, what we ought to think of the gift and blessing of our own Baptism. It is so very great, that our Lord condescended to be baptized, for a type and token of it. For John indeed baptized with water, i. e., with water only, but Christ baptizeth with the Holy Ghost. As a token whereof, the Holy Ghost, in our Lord’s Baptism, did not come down immediately as St. John poured the water upon Him, but afterwards, when He had gone out of the water and was praying. But He Himself baptizes, through the ministers of the New Testament, with both at once, with water and the Holy Ghost; as the Apostle plainly teaches, “As many as have been baptized into Christ, have put on Christ.”<sup>7</sup> Of these two things then we, by God’s mercy, are quite sure; we need have no doubt of them at all; viz. that when a little child is brought here and baptized, first it is baptized by Christ Himself; and, secondly, it is baptized with the Holy Ghost. Now of Christ Himself being the Baptizer, I hope to say more another time; but at this time I would ask you a question about the Holy Ghost, wherewith our children are baptized. I would ask you every one, (O that you would but put your minds to it), what if, at the moment of the little child’s Baptism, just as the consecrated water is being poured on his face, you were to look up and see the heavens opened, a great light and glory from God, and His Spirit descending in a bright cloud, in a bodily shape like a dove, and resting upon that little child, as He rested on our Lord presently after His Baptism? What if you could see this? would it not fill you with unspeakable thoughts of the high place

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<sup>5</sup> Psalm 133:2

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 3:15

<sup>7</sup> Galatians 3:27

and dignity to which that child was called, and of God's mercy and grace towards him? Would it not come strong over your mind, how shocking, how intolerable it will be, if this child should fall into grievous sin, and drive away the good Spirit thus graciously taking possession of him? Should you not have thoughts of this kind, if you had seen the Holy Ghost descending like a dove, and abiding on any little child which you have just seen taken from the Font? I am sure you would; you could not help it. Well then, try, as near as you can, to have the same thoughts now. For whether you have them or no, the thing is true. The Holy Spirit has really come down upon the child, though not in a bodily shape like a dove. He has entered into him, and is yet abiding in him. *We* see it not; but that surely makes no difference. The Divine Spirit is dwelling in that infant's soul and body, and God the Father, for Christ's sake, is for the time at least well-pleased with that infant. God hath adopted him, for Christ's sake, to be His well-beloved son. Of all this we are certain by God's word concerning every infant that is baptized; we are certain it was our own case, just after we were baptized. If we had died then, we should have been undoubtedly saved. If now it is not so with us, whose must be the fault?

And even should it prove that, by His continual mercy, we are not lost in wilful sin, but yet retain some reasonable hope of pardon, yet surely it is a serious thought, how very unlike our doings are to what we should expect from one on whom the Holy Ghost had gloriously descended. I have read sometimes of Saints, who, when they were infants, had a bright light shining round them in their cradles. What should you think their parents and nurses expected of them, when they came to grow up? That they should only tell a *few* lies, when the temptation was very strong? only help themselves dishonestly to a *little* at a time, according to what they supposed other people did? only indulge lust and sinful desire, when it came *urgently* upon them? only swear seldom, and less coarsely perhaps than some others? Would this satisfy you, as an account of the behaviour of one who had been miraculously marked out for a saint? I know it would not; neither would you be quite content, were you told that he only kept clear of notorious wilful sin. You would look for more than this; you would say, the glory of God was around this child from his birth; his goodness surely was meant to be more than common; it will be a pity and shame, if we do not find him unusually pure, self-denying, humble, charitable, devout, never forgetting his Saviour, but doing all to His glory. This exalted goodness, I say, you would naturally look for in a child, which had had God's glory around him in his cradle. Well; but we have all had God's glory around us in our cradles. He Who came down visibly on our Lord, He, the very same Spirit, is invisibly among us, and within us. In good truth, then, we ought all of us to be saints. Let us at least be ashamed and confounded to think, how far, immeasurably far, we are at present from that glorious name; how great a work remains for us, and how short a time to do it in. Yet let us not fear to attempt it; for "greater is He that is in us, than he that is in the world."<sup>8</sup> As for temptations, we know they must arise. Jesus Himself, immediately after the descent of the Holy Ghost and the Voice from heaven, was led up into the wilderness to be tempted of the Devil. Temptations will come; and, that we may be armed against them, we must prepare for them as our Lord did, by prayer. His prayer after His Baptism is mentioned, as having much to do with that wonderful descent of the Holy Ghost. "Jesus being baptized and *praying*, the heavens were opened, and the Holy Ghost descended in a

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<sup>8</sup> 1 John 4:4

bodily shape like a dove upon Him; and lo, a voice from heaven.”<sup>9</sup> Therefore we, being baptized, must pray; we must pray every morning and evening on our knees, and all day long in the purpose of our hearts; that the sin which it has washed away may never return and defile our souls again. If we have grieved the Spirit by serious sin, we must pray Him to return, and to grant us, as it were, a second Baptism in tears of penitence. We must pray without ceasing; for the Evil One will not cease to tempt us. Thus having been baptized and praying, we too, like our great Head and Pattern, may hope one day to see the heavens opened, and the Glory of God revealed, and the Voice from heaven owning us for His well-beloved sons, and saying, “Come, ye blessed children of My Father.”<sup>10</sup> O God, grant that these words may be spoken to us through Jesus Christ, Thy well-beloved Son, our only Saviour and Redeemer.

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<sup>9</sup> Matthew 3:17; cf Mark 1:11, Luke 3:22

<sup>10</sup> Matthew 25:34