

# Village Sermons on the Baptismal Service by John Keble

## SERMON I. June 17, 1849.

ACTS xix. 5.

“They were baptized in the Name of the Lord Jesus.”

YOU know that there are in our Prayer Book, besides the regular morning and evening services, appointed for the use of the whole Church every day throughout the year:—I say you know that besides these there are certain services, sometimes called occasional, because they are only needed on certain special occasions. Such as the Offices for Holy Baptism and Holy Communion, for the Visitation of the Sick, the Burial of the Dead, and others. For as the Church by her morning and evening prayer does as it were sanctify and offer to God through Christ all our ordinary course of life, so she is careful, like a good and perfect Mother, to sanctify and offer up also, on our behalf, all the chief events and changes of every Christian man’s life, his birth, his growth and nourishment, his coming to man’s estate, his marriage, his sickness, his death. Our birth she sanctifies by giving us Holy Baptism; our growth and nourishment by Holy Communion; our coming of age, by Confirmation; our marriage, by the office of Holy Matrimony; our sickness, by the Visitation office; our death by the office of Burial. Thus from beginning to end, our gracious Mother the Church waits upon us all; and these, the occasional Services in the Prayer Book, are the means whereby she waits upon us.

Not a sore, not a sickness in our life, but she is there to heal it: not a hope, not a blessing, but she is there to make it doubly blessed. Oh! happy and comfortable indeed are they, who go on in this faith from their cradles to their graves: accounting it their greatest privilege, that Christ died to receive them, newly-born, in His Arms: their chief help, that whatever happens to them for joy or for sorrow, He still holds their hands; and their best and only hope, that, whenever they die, He will be at hand, enabling them to offer their death as well as their life in sacrifice to Him. I am sure, my beloved Brethren, it must do us much good, if we can get into a way of thinking deeply and steadily on these things: remembering all our life long, that, whatever happens to us, the Church our Mother is at hand to turn it into a great blessing. Therefore I intend, please God, to go on from time to time in a course of regularly explaining some of the occasional Services of the

Church; and of course I begin with Baptism, because Baptism is the beginning, the first thing whereby each one of us has to do with the Church of God.

Now we all know in a general way, out of the Catechism, what Holy Baptism is.

We know in the first place, that it is a Sacrament ordained by Christ in His Church: that is to say, that it has in it something inward and something outward; the water which we see, and the grace of God which we do not see: both appointed by Jesus Christ Himself, Who did also appoint the words which should go along with the water in order to give the grace, viz. that the Person baptizing should say, "In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost."

All this we know well, whether we have thought much of it or no. We have been used to see children so baptized: we know that we were so baptized ourselves, and we should account it a very wrong and inexcusable thing, if we knew of any person omitting to have his children so baptized. Because Baptism is the regular way out of the world into the Church, out of Satan's kingdom into the Kingdom of God; and any one wilfully neglecting it, wilfully leaves himself, or those belonging to him, in the world and out of the Church, in the power of Satan and not in the family of God. And therefore as Baptism is a blessing, whereof the world hath not the like, so neglect of Baptism, and unthankfulness for it, is one of the most grievous sins which a Christian can be guilty of. All this, as I said, we all of us know in a way. Let us now see what special care Holy Church has taken in our Prayer Book to put us in mind of all this, and warn us against making light of it.

First, if you will look in the Rubric i. e. in the directions of the Church, set before the Baptismal Service, you will see that we the Clergy are to admonish you, that Baptism should not be administered out upon Sundays and Holydays, when the most number of people come together. For being so great an act, it ought to be transacted in the most solemn manner possible. When a king or queen is crowned, you know, the day is set beforehand, and all the chief people in the country are gathered together. All the nobles and great men of the land are made witnesses of what is done. So when persons are married, it is not a thing to be done in secret, but publicly in the face of the Church. They are to come into the Church with their friends and neighbours, after notice publicly given.

Now Baptism is in some respects a coronation and a marriage. The child of the very meanest beggar, though he be brought to the Font in rags, and have no home to be carried to afterwards, yet is he then and there most truly crowned a great king. For it is written, "He hath made us kings and

priests unto God and His Father.”<sup>1</sup> Every Christian is a king, for he is a member of Christ the Great King; and therefore every Baptism is a Coronation, more solemn and glorious in the sight of God than the crowning of the greatest Emperor on earth: and as the princes and nobles of the land make haste to be present when a king is crowned, so the Holy Angels and the Saints reigning in Heaven are no doubt present unseen by us, whenever a little child is Christened. Again, every Baptism is a marriage, because in it by a wonderful working the Holy and Almighty Spirit of God unites the baptized person to the mystical Body of our Lord, making *him* a member of Christ, who was before but a child and limb of Adam, in all his natural uncleanness. Christ Himself teaches us to say that Baptism makes such an one “bone of His Bone and flesh, of His Flesh.”<sup>2</sup> Therefore it is a marriage and more than a marriage, being indeed that of which earthly marriage is but a figure: and being a marriage it is best to be public as a marriage solemnly contracted and proclaimed before proper witnesses, and blessed by the Lord in the hearing of men and Angels.

For such reasons as these, it is convenient that Baptisms should generally be celebrated, not at home but in Church; and not on ordinary days but on Sundays and those Holy days when the most people come together. From that time forward there can be no doubt of the person or child so received being a Christian,—and all the congregation, being made witnesses of it, are bound thenceforward to treat him as a Christian: to pray for him, and shew all brotherly love towards him. So that neither he himself nor any one else may any more doubt of his being a Christian, than of his being a man born naturally into the world. And every one present at his Baptism will be a witness against him hereafter, that, if he go wrong, it is not because he never received God’s grace, but because through wilful sin he received it in vain.

Our Church mentions also another reason why Baptism should be as public as possible: viz. that every man there present should be reminded of his own Baptism. I am sure we must all feel how great need we have of being so reminded. Although Baptism is the greatest of blessings and makes the greatest difference to us all, yet we are apt to pass days and weeks with very little thought of it, because it was provided for us without our knowledge or trouble, and because we see that almost all whom we know of are baptized. And yet the Angels, who are all around us invisibly, know that God in giving us Baptism gave us the greatest of all favours, a favour which He has bestowed on very few of the children of Adam: for the most part, by very far, never even heard of the Name of Christ. We ought therefore to make very

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<sup>1</sup> Revelation 1:6

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 2:23; cf Ephesians 5:30

much of the opportunities which God gives us of being present at Baptism and joining in the prayers and thanksgivings there. When there is a pause, as the manner is, after the second Lesson, and you see the Minister go towards the Font, and the nurses with the children waiting to meet him there, and hear him ask of each one of them, "hath this child been already baptized or no?" then think with yourself, "so it was with me one day: I was carried to the Font in like manner. I was met there by God's Minister, and God by him adopted me before the Congregation to be His own child. Alas! how little have I thought of it since! how unthankful have I been for that unspeakable gift! nay, have I not gone near to cast it away for ever by wilful grievous sin?" Again, when you see the congregation all turning towards the Font, and watching and listening as they are apt to do at a Baptism, think with yourself, "Even so do guardian angels, as many of them as here present in God's House, though to us invisible: even so they in this moment are turning in their heavenly watchfulness the very same way; they are waiting in all reverence for the Holy Ghost to come down and set His seal upon this child, that they may begin to take the little one into their especial charge: and did they not, so many years ago, wait in like manner on the christening of me unworthy? did they not take me also into their charge? and I alas! how have I requited their care? May I not fear that at this very moment they may be regarding me with a kind of disappointment, and hoping that this child now to be baptized may prove far other than I have been?"

My brethren, if such thoughts as these ever come into your mind when you are present at a christening, do not, I beseech you, let them pass quickly away: try to carry them home with you, and to renew them very often. For instance, when you see young and innocent children, and take notice of their happy ways, say sometimes to yourself; "Ah, they have a right to be happy, for they have received the Unspeakable Gift and have not yet cast it away. Christ's wonderworking Touch renewed the original Image of God in their souls, and they have not yet effaced it by wilful grievous sin, nor done anything to stamp there the image of the evil one instead. Well, then, may they be happy and joyous: but as for me, I know that in proportion to my sins I ought to go on with humble fear and trembling: and then (blessed be His Name) my lamp, kindled in Holy Baptism, will not have quite burned out when the Bridegroom cometh: then Baptismal grace will revive and flourish in me, and death and judgment will find me still a member of Christ, a child of God, and an Inheritor of the Kingdom of Heaven."

These, my Brethren, and such as these are the thoughts to do us good when we are present at others' Baptism, to remember, as we join in prayer for them, that the very same prayers were once said in Church for us: as we listen to the answers, made by their Sponsors, that the very same

engagements were made for us also: as we hear the Priest say the solemn words, and see him pour the water upon them, that over us also the water was poured, and the Thrice Holy Name pronounced:—and what if it should prove all in vain? What if this little simple child, whose Baptism we have been now attending, should rise up with us in the Judgment, and condemn us for not repenting now at least, now that God by this means has brought it all before our mind?

By this, you may partly understand how much good it might do us all, if we permitted the Baptism of others to remind us of our own Baptism: and therefore how like a Mother's love it is, that our holy Church takes order for one being so reminded as often as possible: directing not only the place of Baptism, that it should be in the Church, but the time also, that it should be when most come together.

As for the grace given to the infants baptized, that is as well provided for, be the Baptism never so private: in a Church with only the Sponsors, or, as you know often happens in sickness or alarm, in a private room. The Spiritual grace, we trust, is the same; but the profit of the example to others is likely to be greater, the more are present. The Church for such purposes is, "Whosoever two or three are gathered together in Christ's Name."<sup>3</sup> The priest, the nurse, and the infant, are three gathered in Christ's Name and in obedience to His Will. Doubt ye not therefore, but earnestly believe that a child so offered receives the fulness of baptismal blessings: only, as I said, the more witnesses are by, to be reminded of their own Baptism, the better.

Thus have you heard concerning the Church's care in ordaining that Baptism should be as public as possible. Let us see to it, brethren, that her motherly tenderness be not thrown away upon us. Let us not be careless unthankful children of such a wise and loving Parent. So often as we see others baptized, and hear what is promised in their name, surely we are without excuse, if we ever let a day pass without thanking God for our own Baptism and examining ourselves how we have kept our vows.

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew 18:20