

Homily IV.

St. Basil, Archbishop of Caesarea Cappadocia



Upon the gathering together of the waters.

1. There are towns where the inhabitants, from dawn to eve, feast their eyes on the tricks of innumerable conjurors. They are never tired of hearing dissolute songs which cause much impurity to spring up in their souls, and they are often called happy, because they neglect the cares of business and trades useful to life, and pass the time, which is assigned to them on this earth, in idleness and pleasure. They do not know that a theatre full of impure sights is, for those who sit there, a common school of vice; that these melodious and meretricious songs insinuate themselves into men's souls, and all who hear them, eager to imitate the notes of harpers and pipers, are filled with filthiness. Some others, who are wild after horses, think they are backing their horses in their dreams; they harness their chariots, change their drivers, and even in sleep are not free from the folly of the day. And shall we, whom the Lord, the great worker of marvels, calls to the contemplation of His own works, tire of looking at them, or be slow to hear the words of the Holy Spirit? Shall we not rather stand around the vast and varied workshop of divine creation and, carried back in mind to the times of old, shall we not view all the order of creation? Heaven, poised like a dome, to quote the words of the prophet; earth, this immense mass which rests upon itself; the air around it, of a soft and fluid nature, a true and continual nourishment for all who breathe it, of such tenuity that it yields and opens at the least movement of the body, opposing no resistance to our motions, while, in a moment, it streams back to its place, behind those who cleave it; water, finally, that supplies drink for man, or may be designed for our other needs, and the marvellous gathering together of it into definite places which have been assigned to it: such is the spectacle which the words which I have just read will show you.

2. "And God said, Let the waters under the heaven be gathered together unto one place, and let the dry land appear, and it was so." And the water which was under the heaven gathered together unto one place; "And God called the dry land earth and the gathering together of the waters called He seas." What trouble you have given me in my previous discourses by asking me why the earth was invisible, why all bodies are naturally endued with colour, and why all colour comes under the sense of sight. And, perhaps, my reason did not appear sufficient to you, when I said that the earth, without being naturally invisible, was so to us, because of the mass of water that entirely covered it. Hear then how Scripture explains itself. "Let the waters be gathered together, and let the dry land appear." The veil is lifted and allows the earth, hitherto invisible, to be seen. Perhaps you will ask me new questions. And first, is it not a law of nature that water flows downwards? Why, then, does Scripture refer this to the fiat of the Creator? As long as water is spread over a level surface, it does not flow; it is immovable. But when it finds any slope, immediately the foremost portion falls, then the one that follows takes its place, and that one is itself replaced by a third. Thus incessantly they flow, pressing the one on the other, and the rapidity of their course is in proportion to the mass of water that is being carried, and the declivity down which it is borne. If such is the nature of water, it was supererogatory to command it to gather into one place. It was bound, on account of its natural instability, to fall into the most hollow part of the earth and not to stop until the levelling of its surface. We see how there is nothing so level as the surface of water. Besides, they add, how did the waters receive an order to gather into one place, when we see several seas, separated from each other by the greatest distances? To the first question I reply: Since God's command, you know perfectly well the motion of water; you know that it is unsteady and unstable and falls naturally over declivities and into hollow places. But what was its nature before this command made it take its course? You do not know yourself, and you have heard from no eye-witness. Think, in reality, that a word of God makes the nature, and that this order is for the creature a direction for its future course. There was only one creation of day and night, and since that moment they have incessantly succeeded each other and divided time into equal parts.

3. "Let the waters be gathered together." It was ordered that it should be the natural property of water to flow, and in obedience to this order, the waters are never weary in their course. In speaking thus, I have only in view the flowing property of waters. Some flow of their own accord like springs and rivers, others are collected and stationary. But I speak now of flowing waters. "Let the waters be gathered together unto one place." Have you never thought, when standing near a spring which is sending forth water abundantly, Who makes this water spring from the bowels of the earth? Who forced it up? Where are the store-houses which send it forth? To what place is it hastening? How is it that it is never exhausted here, and never overflows there? All this comes from that first command; it was for the waters a signal for their course.

In all the story of the waters remember this first order, "let the waters be gathered together." To take their assigned places they were obliged to flow, and, once arrived there, to remain in their place and not to go farther. Thus in the language of Ecclesiastes, "All the waters run into the sea; yet the sea is not

full." Waters flow in virtue of God's order, and the sea is enclosed in limits according to this first law, "Let the waters be gathered together unto one place." For fear the water should spread beyond its bed, and in its successive invasions cover one by one all countries, and end by flooding the whole earth, it received the order to gather unto one place. Thus we often see the furious sea raising mighty waves to the heaven, and, when once it has touched the shore, break its impetuosity in foam and retire. "Fear ye not me, saith the Lord....which have placed the sand for the bound of the sea." A grain of sand, the weakest thing possible, curbs the violence of the ocean. For what would prevent the Red Sea from invading the whole of Egypt, which lies lower, and uniting itself to the other sea which bathes its shores, were it not fettered by the fiat of the Creator? And if I say that Egypt is lower than the Red Sea, it is because experience has convinced us of it every time that an attempt has been made to join the sea of Egypt to the Indian Ocean, of which the Red Sea is a part. Thus we have renounced this enterprise, as also have the Egyptian Sesostris, who conceived the idea, and Darius the Mede who afterwards wished to carry it out.

I report this fact to make you understand the full force of the command, "Let the waters be gathered unto one place"; that is to say, let there be no other gathering, and, once gathered, let them not disperse.

4. To say that the waters were gathered in one place indicates that previously they were scattered in many places. The mountains, intersected by deep ravines, accumulated water in their valleys, when from every direction the waters betook themselves to the one gathering place. What vast plains, in their extent resembling wide seas, what valleys, what cavities hollowed in many different ways, at that time full of water, must have been emptied by the command of God! But we must not therefore say, that if the water covered the face of the earth, all the basins which have since received the sea were originally full. Where can the gathering of the waters have come from if the basins were already full? These basins, we reply, were only prepared at the moment when the water had to unite in a single mass. At that time the sea which is beyond Gadeira and the vast ocean, so dreaded by navigators, which surrounds the isle of Britain and western Spain, did not exist. But, all of a sudden, God created this vast space, and the mass of waters flowed in.

Now if our explanation of the creation of the world may appear contrary to experience, (because it is evident that all the waters did not flow together in one place,) many answers may be made, all obvious as soon as they are stated. Perhaps it is even ridiculous to reply to such objections. Ought they to bring forward in opposition ponds and accumulations of rain water, and think that this is enough to upset our reasonings? Evidently the chief and most complete affluence of the waters was what received the name of gathering unto one place. For wells are also gathering places for water, made by the hand of man to receive the moisture diffused in the hollow of the earth. This name of gathering does not mean any chance massing of water, but the greatest and most important one, wherein the element is shewn

collected together. In the same way that fire, in spite of its being divided into minute particles which are sufficient for our needs here, is spread in a mass in the æther; in the same way that air, in spite of a like minute division, has occupied the region round the earth; so also water, in spite of the small amount spread abroad everywhere, only forms one gathering together, that which separates the whole element from the rest. Without doubt the lakes as well those of the northern regions and those that are to be found in Greece, in Macedonia, in Bithynia and in Palestine, are gatherings together of waters; but here it means the greatest of all, that gathering the extent of which equals that of the earth. The first contain a great quantity of water; no one will deny this. Nevertheless no one could reasonably give them the name of seas, not even if they are like the great sea, charged with salt and sand. They instance for example, the Lacus Asphaltitis in Judæa, and the Serbonian lake which extends between Egypt and Palestine in the Arabian desert. These are lakes, and there is only one sea, as those affirm who have travelled round the earth. Although some authorities think the Hyrcanian and Caspian Seas are enclosed in their own boundaries, if we are to believe the geographers, they communicate with each other and together discharge themselves into the Great Sea. It is thus that, according to their account, the Red Sea and that beyond Gadeira only form one. Then why did God call the different masses of water seas? This is the reason; the waters flowed into one place, and their different accumulations, that is to say, the gulfs that the earth embraced in her folds, received from the Lord the name of seas: North Sea, South Sea, Eastern Sea, and Western Sea. The seas have even their own names, the Euxine, the Propontis, the Hellespont, the Ægean, the Ionian, the Sardinian, the Sicilian, the Tyrrhene, and many other names of which an exact enumeration would now be too long, and quite out of place. See why God calls the gathering together of waters seas. But let us return to the point from which the course of my argument has diverted me.

5. And God said: "Let the waters be gathered together unto one place and let the dry land appear." He did not say let the earth appear, so as not to show itself again without form, mud-like, and in combination with the water, nor yet endued with proper form and virtue. At the same time, lest we should attribute the drying of the earth to the sun, the Creator shows it to us dried before the creation of the sun. Let us follow the thought Scripture gives us. Not only the water which was covering the earth flowed off from it, but all that which had filtered into its depths withdrew in obedience to the irresistible order of the sovereign Master. And it was so. This is quite enough to show that the Creator's voice had effect: however, in several editions, there is added "And the water which was under the heavens gathered itself unto one place and the dry land was seen;" words that other interpreters have not given, and which do not appear conformable to Hebrew usage. In fact, after the assertion, "and it was so," it is superfluous to repeat exactly the same thing. In accurate copies these words are marked with an obelus, which is the sign of rejection.

"And God called the dry land earth; and the gathering together of the waters called He seas." Why does Scripture say above that the waters were gathered together unto one place, and that the dry earth appeared? Why does it add here the dry land appeared, and God gave it the name of earth? It is that

dryness is the property which appears to characterize the nature of the subject, whilst the word earth is only its simple name. Just as reason is the distinctive faculty of man, and the word man serves to designate the being gifted with this faculty, so dryness is the special and peculiar quality of the earth. The element essentially dry receives therefore the name of earth, as the animal who has a neigh for a characteristic cry is called a horse. The other elements, like the earth, have received some peculiar property which distinguishes them from the rest, and makes them known for what they are. Thus water has cold for its distinguishing property; air, moisture; fire, heat. But this theory really applies only to the primitive elements of the world. The elements which contribute to the formation of bodies, and come under our senses, show us these qualities in combination, and in the whole of nature our eyes and senses can find nothing which is completely singular, simple and pure. Earth is at the same time dry and cold; water, cold and moist; air, moist and warm; fire, warm and dry. It is by the combination of their qualities that the different elements can mingle. Thanks to a common quality each of them mixes with a neighbouring element, and this natural alliance attaches it to the contrary element. For example, earth, which is at the same time dry and cold, finds in cold a relationship which unites it to water, and by the means of water unites itself to air. Water placed between the two, appears to give each a hand, and, on account of its double quality, allies itself to earth by cold and to air by moisture. Air, in its turn, takes the middle place and plays the part of a mediator between the inimical natures of water and fire, united to the first by moisture, and to the second by heat. Finally fire, of a nature at the same time warm and dry, is linked to air by warmth, and by its dryness reunites itself to the earth. And from this accord and from this mutual mixture of elements, results a circle and an harmonious choir whence each of the elements deserves its name. I have said this in order to explain why God has given to the dry land the name of earth, without however calling the earth dry. It is because dryness is not one of those qualities which the earth acquired afterwards, but one of those which constituted its essence from the beginning. Now that which causes a body to exist, is naturally antecedent to its posterior qualities and has a pre-eminence over them. It is then with reason that God chose the most ancient characteristic of the earth whereby to designate it.

6. "And God saw that it was good." Scripture does not merely wish to say that a pleasing aspect of the sea presented itself to God. It is not with eyes that the Creator views the beauty of His works. He contemplates them in His ineffable wisdom. A fair sight is the sea all bright in a settled calm; fair too, when, ruffled by a light breeze of wind, its surface shows tints of purple and azure,—when, instead of lashing with violence the neighbouring shores, it seems to kiss them with peaceful caresses. However, it is not in this that Scripture makes God find the goodness and charm of the sea. Here it is the purpose of the work which makes the goodness.

In the first place sea water is the source of all the moisture of the earth. It filters through imperceptible conduits, as is proved by the subterranean openings and caves whither its waves penetrate; it is received in oblique and sinuous canals; then, driven out by the wind, it rises to the surface of the earth, and breaks it, having become drinkable and free from its bitterness by this long percolation. Often,

moved by the same cause, it springs even from mines that it has crossed, deriving warmth from them, and rises boiling, and bursts forth of a burning heat, as may be seen in islands and on the sea coast; even inland in certain places, in the neighbourhood of rivers, to compare little things with great, almost the same phenomena occur. To what do these words tend? To prove that the earth is all undermined with invisible conduits, where the water travels everywhere underground from the sources of the sea.

7. Thus, in the eyes of God, the sea is good, because it makes the under current of moisture in the depths of the earth. It is good again, because from all sides it receives the rivers without exceeding its limits. It is good, because it is the origin and source of the waters in the air. Warmed by the rays of the sun, it escapes in vapour, is attracted into the high regions of the air, and is there cooled on account of its rising high above the refraction of the rays from the ground, and, the shade of the clouds adding to this refrigeration, it is changed into rain and fattens the earth. If people are incredulous, let them look at caldrons on the fire, which, though full of water, are often left empty because all the water is boiled and resolved into vapour. Sailors, too, boil even sea water, collecting the vapour in sponges, to quench their thirst in pressing need.

Finally the sea is good in the eyes of God, because it girdles the isles, of which it forms at the same time the rampart and the beauty, because it brings together the most distant parts of the earth, and facilitates the inter-communication of mariners. By this means it gives us the boon of general information, supplies the merchant with his wealth, and easily provides for the necessities of life, allowing the rich to export their superfluities, and blessing the poor with the supply of what they lack.

But whence do I perceive the goodness of the Ocean, as it appeared in the eyes of the Creator? If the Ocean is good and worthy of praise before God, how much more beautiful is the assembly of a Church like this, where the voices of men, of children, and of women, arise in our prayers to God mingling and resounding like the waves which beat upon the shore. This Church also enjoys a profound calm, and malicious spirits cannot trouble it with the breath of heresy. Deserve, then, the approbation of the Lord by remaining faithful to such good guidance, in our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom be glory and power for ever and ever. Amen.