

And so we welcome young Jeremy as a new member of Christ's flock and pray that he will prosper after this excellent beginning. I'm sure there's an equitable distribution of work in the Snow household – not like in the case where mother asked father to change a nappy and he said, "I can't just now. I'm busy. I'll do the next one." Three hours later the infant needed a nappy-change again. The husband refused. His wife reproached him, "You said you'd get the next one!" "Ah," he said "I meant the next baby."

One essential piece of advice which should be given to all adults is, "Never underestimate children." They come out with the most miraculously unexpected sayings. Thomas Carlyle never spoke at all until he was two. Then one day he heard his brother crying and asked, "What ails thee, Jock?" Thomas Babington Macaulay was a great reader from a very young age and always spoke in the style of the book he had just read. When he was four and just finished a melodrama, a visitor spilt some hot milk on his arm. She was most apologetic. But little Thomas replied, "Pray do not perturb yourself ma'am: the agony has abated." And, also aged four, Ronald Knox was asked what he did when he couldn't sleep and he replied, "I lie awake and think about the past."

A great national characteristic of the English is to be sentimental about children while neglecting to attend to their best interests. Kierkegaard said that most people's idea of Christianity is a combination of Our Lord's saying about little children and his other saying to the penitent thief on the cross: "And properly considered," said Kierkegaard "this is just a mixture of childishness and crime."

In Charles Dickens, the abuse of children – Oliver Twist, David Copperfield, Tiny Tim – usually involved rather obvious cruelty. In our times this cruelty tends to take the form of both indulgence and neglect. Sometimes from this pulpit I recommend to you suitable spiritual reading. May I today draw your attention to the admirable magazine called *Viz*? In *Viz* there is a regular feature called *Modern Parents* in which these creepy, empty-headed, pampering sentimentalist have a son called – well, I think it's Algernon – who is not merely *allowed* to do exactly as he likes, but in a perfect fit of satanic permissiveness is *compelled* to do as he likes. And this is child-abuse of the worst sort. No landmarks. No boundaries. Ultimately, therefore, no understanding of good and bad.

After asking you to read *Viz* may I ask you also to consult *The Confessions of St Augustine* and particularly the first chapter in which that great man recollects his childhood? He presents no idealised picture of childhood innocence. There is a complete absence of sentimentality. He knew, better even than every real schoolmaster, that children have a nasty, brutish, malicious, spiteful, selfish and distasteful side. Therefore, they must be taught, schooled, instructed and indoctrinated – yes, true doctrines should be put in. Why is it that the totalitarian relativism of the modern world regards "indoctrination" as only a dirty word? Shouldn't we impart what we believe – what Christian civilisation has professed for 2000 years – to be true?

And if we don't impart this faith, then what is it proposed we should feed them on instead? Rather than instruct and inform children, the modern sentimentalists say we should simply *love* them. But giving them eternal truths is actually the best way to love them.

It is our job to give young Jeremy what will really nourish him. We should no more leave him in ignorance of the doctrines upon which his eternal salvation depends than upon a practical acquaintance with the Highway Code or the necessity of washing his hands when he's been to the loo. And at first his learning will take the form of learning by heart. How wicked of the modern educationalists to replace this wholesome expression by the mechanistic *learning by rote*. We learn by heart before we learn by light. As Chesterton said, "I knew pages of Shakespeare's blank verse without a notion of what it meant – and that is the right way to begin to learn anything."

Any parent will recognise at once the routine minor perversities of children. For example that mealtimes are the only times in the day when children will refuse to eat. And any father who ever walked barefoot into his child's bedroom at night hates Lego. It has been offered as a definition of a baby that he is a small person with a loud noise at one end and no sense of responsibility at the other. No wonder that W.C. Fields said, "A man who hates children and animals can't be all bad."

Country folk, farming folk, often have a more realistic perspective on human nature. I think it has to do with living close to the soil. These farmers know whereof we are but dust. I remember when I christened my youngest daughter Lotte up in Yorkshire twenty years ago next week. She made a hell of a racket and I felt rather embarrassed. The children of parsons and schoolteachers are always the worst behaved. But a local farmer, Tom Pick, said, "They've got to scream, Vicar. It's the devil coming out."

And there's some truth in what he said. The old Roman rite of baptism contains an exorcism as the priest says *Exorcisti te daimonio*. And in the Church of England tradition, Thomas Cranmer's first Prayer Book of 1549 is even more enthusiastic than the Roman rite in casting out the devil. Archbishop Cranmer tells the priest at the christening to address the devil in these uncompromising words:

*I command thee unclean spirit that thou come out and depart from this infant...Thou cursed spirit remember thy judgement...wherein thou shalt burn in fire everlasting. And presume not to exercise any tyranny towards this infant whom Christ hath bought with his precious blood...*

One of the ancient rites of baptism says that the priest should give the child a taste of salt. If you did that nowadays, you'd have the health police down on you for exceeding the recommended daily sodium intake. Another says he should breathe into the nostrils of the child. That would likely have him placed on the sex-offenders' list.

And then baptism is called a means of grace. It is a sacrament. So by this water and these prayers God promises to give particular blessings upon this child. Baptism is also the beginning of the child's Christian nurture. From today onwards he is meant to enter the world of Christian life and worship. He is decidedly not meant to delay his next church attendance until the time of his marriage. He is meant to be surrounded

regularly by prayers and sacraments in the congregation. The Prayer Book says, “Ye are to see that this child is brought to the Bishop to be confirmed by him as soon as he can say the Creed, the Lord’s Prayer and the Ten Commandments in the vulgar tongue.” May God bless you Jeremy and nourish you in the truth of the Gospel.