

This morning's Collect begins, *O God, whose blessed Son was manifested that he might destroy the works of the devil.*

Think of the noise of the Somme, the twenty-four thousand daily shells upon Verdun, the tank Battle at Kursk with two million men in deadly struggle. The fight between Our Lord and the works of the devil is like the last battle, Armageddon, being fought out in a delirium in your head, your heart and your soul. It is a dirty fight because the devil is not an officer and a gentleman: he is a cheat and a liar. The *casus belli* is nothing less than Christ's rescue of the mankind from evil and torment.

I must here make a confession. The hardest thing I have to do as a parish priest – harder even than trying to cope with diocesan bureaucracy modern doggerel prayers and trashy new hymn tunes – is to persuade people that evil is real and evil is rampant. To the modern mind, evil is something we suffered before we got electric lights and flush toilets. How can you talk about evil in these glorious days of plasma telly and ubiquitous iphones? Modern society is secular, materialistic and trivial. And the chief religious dogma of modernity is *progress*. But progress is a superstition and a delusion. Progress is not happening.

We think of ourselves as infinitely better than our forefathers. When we wish to revile something as the worst possible, we call it *medieval*. And yet there were more people murdered in the wars and genocides of the 20th century than in all the previous centuries added together. Or am I getting something wrong here? Were Lenin, Stalin, Hitler, Mao and Pol Pot merely fictional characters in a game on *Playstation*? Were the purges, the gulag, the concentration camps, the Cambodian genocide, the two million people slaughtered in the Congo just figments of a Christian priest's diseased imagination – my imagination?

But you don't have to study history or even to look out on your own city. To understand that the devil is still as strong as he always was, you need look no further than into your own heart, your own motives – our selfishness, petty avarice, narrow-souled self-regard, preferring ourselves. But we do not like to contemplate the darkness within. And that is why, comforted by our shiny gadgets and cosy in the central heating, we sing not of arms and the man and of spiritual warfare but of *progress* and *modernising* and above all that most vacuous slogan of all our decayed political parties: *change*. Public life an infantilised, gadgeteered new Babel

In the Bible the devil is often named as Beelzebub. Beelzebub was the devil consulted by King Ahazia at the Philistine city of Ekron. The name means *Lord of the Flies*. Don't imagine that the devil lives an ordered life at the head of his army of lesser devils. The devil is not merely at war with God: because he is a crook and a liar, he is also at war with all the other devils. Hell is called *chaos*. Think pandemonium – the place of all the devils – noise. Heavy metal. And the

devil is ultimately on a self-destruct mission, but he does a hell of a lot of damage in the process.

Of course this is metaphor. But metaphor does not diminish truth – rather it embodies it, pictorialises it, so that we can visualise reality in our imagination. There can be no doubt that there is a power of evil. This is not a mere conjecture: it is a logical deduction. Once we accept that there is at least some goodness, even the possibility of goodness, we are obliged to admit the fact of evil. For evil is simply the alternative to goodness. There is such a thing as genuine moral choice. And the logic of our language compels us to conclude that words about goodness can – and in our experience often are – supplanted by words about badness. So another old name for the devil is Binarius – the second, the alternative, the *privatio boni* – that is the deprivation of goodness.

The devil is the Father of Lies and he knows that the best way to deceive us is not to scare us stiff with horror movie caricature, but to disguise himself so that we think what he stands for is good. The devil is the Ape of God. Instead of love, he offers lust. Not compassion but sentimentality. And the devil is not in some distant hell. He is, as *The Book of Job* says, *going to and fro in the earth and walking up and down in it*. The devil is so expert at imitating goodness that he might well apply for a job in the modern church. I can imagine his letter of application – to be a bishop, perhaps, or the Chief Secretary of the General Synod.

From the Office of His Satanic Majesty to whom it may concern:

You will think it strange that, in response to your advertisement, I am sending you my application for the post of Bishop of Melchester. There has of course been a history of unpleasantness between your enterprise and mine, but I do feel that in these modern ecumenical times we ought to pay more attention to the aims we have in common rather than dwell on those things which traditionally divided us in the bad old days.

I will not evade the matter of sin which always used to be a point of contention between us. You were, if I may say so, particularly insistent about this, declaring firmly that all have sinned and stand in need of forgiveness. I am therefore gratified to see from your new liturgy as set out in your *Common Worship* that you have greatly softened your line.

For example, I note that the outdated concepts found in the (thankfully discarded) *Book of Common Prayer* have been much brought up to date in keeping with the fashions of permissiveness. In liberated modern society, who now would dream of praying such reactionary lines as *Marriage is a remedy against sin and to avoid fornication?* I am so relieved to see that you have got rid of this nonsense and replaced it with a prayer that the couple *be tender with each other's dreams*.

I was always hurt when you used to make the godparents at the christening *Renounce the devil and all his works*. You must admit it's a pretty rude thing to say. Now you have deleted this, I begin to feel so much more at home in church.

Do you remember how you used to stress some of – what shall I call them? – the rather more honest and down-to-earth realities of life? I mean in *The Burial of the Dead* you used to harp on about *worms that destroy this body* and you even referred to mortals as *vile bodies*. Happily, you've removed all this downbeat stuff now as well.

Incidentally, I adore that moment in your new service when the priest says, *Let us offer one another a sign of peace*. And the result is, of course, that all hell breaks out as the congregation fall over themselves in a fit of back-slapping, kissing and cuddling. Pandemonium exactly. Just like my place actually – as some of your people will find out before too long.

I do so admire your modern theological scholarship and general debunking of the Bible itself, particularly the recent report which showed that many bishops and priests do not believe in the Virgin Birth and the Resurrection. Fewer still believe in life after death. And almost none in eternal damnation. They'll be in for a rude awakening!

It has been said that the Devil lacks a sense of charity. I repudiate that assessment. Why, I applauded to the skies the terrific charitable enterprise of the Church Commissioners when they threw away £800million of investments and sold off the fine ancient vicarages.

You ask what particular skills applicants might bring to the job. Well, I see that you are presently locked in two mighty disputes which threaten the very future of the worldwide church: the row over women bishops and that other row about homosexual bishops. Do you foresee any homosexual women bishops, by the way? It is in just such a time as this that you need me to help with the administrative arrangements which will bring these wonderful innovations about.

The devil is in the detail, as they say. And just remember, I am right behind you.

Actually, the devil does not need to apply for a post in the modern church. He has been hard at work in it for a very long time.

