

Welcome to Casper's christening! There's a name to set you on your way, Casper. Casper: the name of one of the original three wise men. You got in just in time, Casper, before the Synod reckons we must call them, the three intellectually-challenged persons of indeterminate sex. What a singular honour to be called after one of the first witnesses of Our Lord's birth!

What is christening all about and why do we do it? It's a celebration of a new life. It's a thanksgiving by the parents. It's a welcome party as Casper joins us in the family of the church. But it is more than that. Today Casper has been truly made a member of Christ, a child of God and an inheritor of the Kingdom of Heaven. You Casper, have made some huge promises today through your godparents. To start with, you have promised to renounce the devil and all his works, the pomps and vanities of the world and the sinful lusts of the flesh. Then you have promised to believe all the articles of the Christian faith and to keep God's holy will and commandments for the rest of your life. It's quite a lot for a little lad to promise before he's even had his lunch.

Let's see if we can give you a bit of help. What's all this business about renouncing the devil? The sentimental modern attitude doesn't think of children as little devils. But I'll tell you from experience that anyone who thinks children are innocent has either never had any children or else has his head stuck so far into Dr Spock handbook on child-rearing or into the pages of Tuesday's Education supplement to *The Guardian*.

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 arrested as a paedophile.

So first of all the Prayer Book takes the fact of evil seriously and does something about it. Here evil is dealt with, cast out and rendered impotent. The modern world doesn't like to disturb its sentimental reveries with the notion of evil. Nice modern folk like to imagine that evil is only something that used to happen in primitive times like the Middle Ages; or that evil is a sort of joke or cartoon – something belonging in the late night horror films. But evil refuses to go away even in our most fastidious times. Do you doubt it? Visit ground zero. Take a holiday in Madrid or Bali. Or, for something less sensational, take a walk into the middle of any of our cities late on a Friday night and see what depravity passes for human life there.

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 education. 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."

And these words set out our responsibilities for Casper and every child who is christened here. It is our job to teach him Christian truth. Children are not to be raised so that, in the jargon, they can "express themselves." They have no self to express until something is put into them by the way of teaching. They are not here to "make up their own mind". I say again, they are here to be taught Christian truth and it is our job to teach them it. Anything else would be a waste of time. Spiritual reality is not about mere matters of opinion – Augustine thought *this* and Buddha thought *that*: what do you think, Sharon? We are here to receive the words of eternal life. And these words are not mere matters of opinion. They are everlasting truths.

But we must beware the wiles and subtlety of the devil. Let me tell you about the main way in which the devil tries to turn us away from the Christian truth that can save us. One of the devil's favourite ploys is to take a perfectly good word and rubbish it. Such a good word is "indoctrination". It means simply teaching people some doctrine. But it has come to mean something oppressive and to conjure up pictures of the secret police; of some political thug shining a light into your eyes and making you repeat party slogans.

But the real meaning of "indoctrination" means to teach the truth. To do less than teach children Christian truth is to betray the commandment of Christ to "baptise them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost and to teach them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you. And lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world." Our prayers today are with Casper and his family for that the wonderful beginning made here may continue all his days. Amen