# Christian Basics

Four sermons at St Barnabas, Pasadena, May-June 2012. We also gave the congregation handouts with an edited and reformatted version of the text.

## Sermon (1): What is the Gospel?

In six weeks time we’re going to have Bishop Mary Glasspool coming here for a confirmation, and over the next four weeks I’m going to preach four sermons that are preparation for the confirmation. Obviously I’ve got the people who are being confirmed in mind, but several people have said they’d like to have a kind of refresher course in the basic of Christian beliefs because they want to be able to renew their confirmation, and I hope these four sermons over the next four weeks will help everyone in that kind of way. I’ve called the four sermons “What is the Gospel?” “What is the Bible?” “What Do We Believe?” and “What is an Episcopalian?”

There’s going to be more things to think about than I usually try to put in a sermon, but if you can’t grasp it all, don’t worry. After church each week there’ll be a handout you can have with the content of the sermon on it, so you can take it home. And if there are things we talk about that you would like to talk about, then there’ll also be four discussions about the four topics. That will be at 9.00 each Sunday. I imagine we will talk for about three-quarters of an hour – but we’ll see how it goes. The discussions will come a week after the sermon, so the first discussion will be next week. There’ll be coffee and pastries to pick up in the parish hall, then we’ll meet in the quiet room.

So the first topic is, what is the gospel?

If you ask someone what is the essential thing about Christian faith, I suspect they would quite likely say that it’s that God is love, or that it’s about loving God, or that it’s about loving our neighbor. And all those things are central to Christian faith. But the trouble with those answers is that there’s nothing particularly Christian about them. Moslems believe God is love. Jews believe we should love God. Atheists believe we should love our neighbor. Remember the Beatles – “All You Need Is Love”?

So what’s more distinctive about Christian faith? That’s where the word “gospel” comes in. The word “gospel” means “good news” or a “good story.” That’s why Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are called Gospels – they are the good story as Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John tell it. The gospel is the story about Jesus. The story about Jesus is the essential thing about Christian faith. Moslems don’t believe in the story about Jesus. Jews don’t. Atheists don’t. They may believe lots of things that Jesus said, but they don’t accept the Jesus story in the way that Christians do. As far as we are concerned, the story about Jesus is the most important thing in the world. We know that the Jesus story gives us the clue about what life is about and about what God is about. The fact that God is love is essential to Christian faith. The fact that we are called to love God and love our neighbor is essential to Christian faith. But the center of Christian faith is a statement about something God did, a statement like this one from John’s Gospel: God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that whoever believes in him has eternal life.

That’s the center of Christian faith. But the Christian story doesn’t start with Jesus. It starts way back before Jesus’ coming. When John tells the story of Jesus, he doesn’t start with that statement about God giving his Son. John’s Gospel starts with creation. In effect, what he says is this. If you’re going to understand Christian faith, you need to understand the story of Jesus. But if you’re going to understand the story of Jesus, you’ve got to understand what God was doing before Jesus. Jesus is the climax of the story of what God had been doing in the world. You know how if you miss the beginning of a movie, you probably have a hard time understanding what the rest of the movie is about? It’s like that with the Jesus story. So let’s go back to the beginning. Actually maybe the story of what God had been doing is more like a sequence of episodes in a television series. I’m going to think of them as ten episodes.

Episode one, the beginning, is the ultimate beginning, the creation of the world. That’s where John starts in his Gospel story. Back at the ultimate beginning, John says, Jesus was there. God’s creating the world was the beginning of the story that comes to a climax with Jesus. Why begin there? One implication is that God is concerned about the whole world. Yes, God is concerned about our individual lives and he is concerned about the church, but we need to see God’s involvement with us on the broadest canvas. God is concerned for the whole world; he created it. He put humanity in the world to serve the world – that’s how Genesis puts it. Nowadays we’re very aware of the way we spoil the world rather than serving it. We are here to serve it.

When Genesis describes God creating the world in six days, it’s using picture language. It’s saying that creation was as if God was doing a week’s work and then having a day off, like anyone else. We don’t have to take the picture language literally. We don’t have to oppose the idea that the world came into existence over billions of years and that one species evolved from another. If it came into being that way, fine – this process was the one God used in creating the world. The important thing is that God was the creator – the world did not come into being by accident – and that at the end of the process, God could look at the world and enjoy the fact that it was a really good world.

So episode one is “God created.” Episode two is “God started over.” God gave the first human beings vast freedom in the world, but put one limitation on them – “Don’t touch that one tree.” So they made a beeline for that one tree and got themselves into a load of trouble. They affected the relationship between them and God in a way that had implications for everyone who would follow, even for us. Things got worse with their children and grandchildren and God all but abandoned the whole project and destroyed the world, but instead God started over with Noah. The trouble is that the pattern repeated itself.

So that development leads to episode three, “God promised.” God took hold of one family, the family of Abraham, to make them a working model of what it meant to be a people who belonged to God. The idea was that other families would then be drawn to seek this God. It wasn’t entirely the family’s fault that this plan became imperiled because the family had to take refuge in Egypt as the result of a famine. They did become a sizeable people there, the people Israel, but they ended up forced to be servants of the Egyptians.

Episode four therefore is “God rescued.” God freed the Israelites so that they could become his people in their own land, and gave them lots of description of the lifestyle he expected of them in this land. The instructions he gave them covered the kind of way they should worship and the kind of way they should live their community life. The trouble is that the story that follows largely has the same dynamics as the earlier episodes of the story. People just aren’t very good at doing what God says.

So you could then call episode five “God wrestled.” Sometimes God did get people to do what he said. Sometimes he got to the end of his patience and let some terrible disaster happen to them. The worst was when he let Jerusalem be destroyed and allowed many of the people to be taken off into exile. But then he let them come back and they were able to rebuild the city and the temple, and in some ways the subsequent part of the story was the happiest part. They gave up worshiping other gods and making idols and they were much better at doing what God said. Yet they still found themselves under the authority of a sequence of superpowers, who sometimes tried to stop them worshiping God in the way God said.

And that’s the background to Jesus’ coming, episode six, “God sent.” Many Jews recognized that they needed a Messiah, someone who would free them from the authority of the superpower, who would restore them to what they were supposed to be, and Jesus came to be that person. The Jews were a powerless, insignificant people; it was a contradiction of what they were supposed to be. Jesus came to be the agent of restoring them. He thus came to preach good news to the poor. He healed people and threw demons out of them. He reminded them of the kind of lifestyle that one would expect of people who lived in God’s kingdom. Episode six.

The weird thing was that many of them didn’t like what he did and what he said. It was especially the powerful people, people like priests and professors, who didn’t like it, because he was a threat to them. So they were against him, and eventually they turned the ordinary people against him too. It wasn’t difficult to persuade the political authorities to agree with them that Jesus was a danger to the Roman administration. He *was* a threat to the Roman administration. So they all worked together in order to get rid of him. And God let this happen. “God abandoned him,” you could say. When he was being executed, he cried out, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” It’s episode seven.

Why would God abandon Jesus? Why didn’t God rescue him? What God chose to do, and what Jesus agreed to, was to let human beings do their worst, and then win the victory over it. Jesus was the embodiment of God. He was God incarnate. So we killed him. You can’t do anything worse to anyone than kill them. So the inclination to do wrong that had come out back in episode two comes to its climax in episode seven. God lets humanity do its worst by killing Jesus, and then brings him back to life. God lets humanity do its worst in rejecting God, and then says, “You still haven’t put me off, I still love you.” It’s episode eight. God raised.

Episode nine is Pentecost. We shall celebrate it in two weeks’ time. God poured out his spirit, poured out himself, on Jesus’ disciples. Pentecost was a festival when there were people from all over the world in Jerusalem. So God poured himself out in a way that the whole world could see. People could go back home from Jerusalem and tell the world about what God had done. The followers of Jesus themselves started going around the world telling people about it. There was one of those Jewish leaders who had been absolutely opposed to Jesus, a man called Saul, and God smacked him on the jaw until he recognized the truth about Jesus and then applied himself to spreading the gospel story around the world. So that eventually the story reached people like your ancestors and mine.

Episode ten is the episode that is still to come. Maybe we should see episode nine as the cliffhanger at the end of the season and episode ten is the one we wait for in the fall. Jesus is going to come back. Because it’s still not the case that God’s creation purpose has been completed. But it’s going to be completed.

There’s the gospel story. God created. God started over. God promised. God rescued. God wrestled. God sent. God abandoned. God raised. God poured out. God will complete.

## Sermon (2): What is the Bible?

So this is the second of four sermons on some basics of Christian faith, as we look forward to the Confirmation service in a month’s time. Today I’m going to talk about the Bible.

Every week in a service at St Barnabas we read four passages from the Bible. Why do we do that? What is the Bible, and why is it important?

Now it is a fantastic, great coincidence that this week we have had delivered these Bible bookmarks, and in a way all I am going to do is talk about them. We are very grateful to Adele for the idea of the Bible bookmark, an idea we stole from another church. And we’re very grateful to Edette for designing the St Barnabas version. What we intend from now on is that you can all take a bunch of the two bookmarks, the general St Barnabas one and the Bible one, and keep them so you can give them to people. We’ve got lots and there were not expensive to get made, so use them. We intend that there should always be two or three of each in every pew, and we want to make sure that every visitor who comes, we send them off with one of each – so feel free to give them to a visitor. We’ve also got these St Barnabas cards, by the way, to send to visitors when they give us their address. They’re blank on the inside, so you can use them for any purpose such as sending greetings or condolences.

But today we’re thinking about the Bible. Why is it important? Why do we spend so much time reading it in church? In a way the answer comes from what I was saying in the first of these four sermons, last week. I tried to show then that the central, key, distinctive thing about Christian faith is that it’s a gospel, it’s a piece of good news about something God did. God created the world, God got involved with Israel, with the Jewish people, God sent his Son into the world as a Jew to restore the life of the Jewish people and also to make them into a people who would reach out to Gentiles like us.

If the central, key thing about the Christian faith is that it’s a piece of news, then you need the equivalent of the newspaper to tell you about it. And that’s the basic thing that the Bible is – it’s a newspaper, a news book. That’s why it’s more important than what any modern Christian says. The church today or a Christian today can’t tell you about the good news first hand – we are all dependent on the Bible as our source of news. If you look at the side of the bookmark that’s all black, you’ll see it gives you a summary of the Bible story. At the bottom it tells you where to look in the Bible for the answer to some key questions about life.

The fact that the Christian faith is a gospel explains why the Bible is the kind of book it is. Now turn over to the other side of the bookmark, the side that’s like a mosaic, and start at the top. There you’ll see it says “Books of Moses – The Pentateuch” and lower down it says “Old Testament History.” Then if you jump right down to where it says “New Testament,” you’ll see it says “New Testament History.” The Pentateuch and the Old Testament history tell the story of Israel. The New Testament History tells the story of Jesus and of the beginnings of the church. In terms of the number of pages, you have covered over half the Old Testament and over half the New Testament in these books of history, books telling that story, telling us the news.

Last week I said you could think of the Bible story as like the episodes of a television series, and someone asked if I was going to write one. Well, one reason why I can’t is that the Bible has already done it. If you start reading at the beginning, with Genesis, you will find that each of the books is like a episode in a series. They aren’t really separate books – they are episodes. Genesis is episode one, Exodus is episode two, Leviticus is episode three, and so on through Numbers and Deuteronomy and Joshua, Judges, Ruth, Samuel, and Kings. Those twelve books tell the story from creation to the time when the Israelites were taken off into exile in Babylon.

Then an odd thing happens. The next time you turn the page over, into Chronicles, the first person it mentions is Adam. Chronicles retells the entire story from Genesis to Kings and then continues the story into Ezra and Nehemiah, which tells us about how God made it possible for the Israelites to come back home and rebuild Jerusalem, but also about how other Israelites stayed in the place where their ancestors had been taken – which is what the story of Esther is about. So the Old Testament tells its story twice.

When you carry on into the New Testament, something similar happens. You get the story of Jesus told four times, with the book of Acts continuing the story into the time after Pentecost. So the Bible doesn’t just tell its story once. It tells Israel’s story twice, and it tells the story of Jesus four times. Why does it do that? I can think of two reasons.

One is that it is an extremely rich story. It can be told in different ways, all of them true. My son sent me two photos of my granddaughter this week; she had just taken part in a soccer cup final and she won! Now I didn’t say to Steven, it’s okay, I’ve got a photo of Emma, you needn’t ever send me another one. Every photo tells me more about her. You could say that the Bible is a photo album, with shots of Israel and of Jesus from lots of angles.

The other reason is that the different versions of the story are told for different audiences. In the Old Testament, there is one version told for people when they are in exile and they need to acknowledge the way they have rebelled against God, so the story is told that way. The other version belongs to when they need of encouragement, so it tells the story from a more encouraging angle. With the Gospels, they were originally written for different churches – for instance, Matthew was written for a church where many people were Jews who had come to believe in Jesus, while Luke was written for a more Gentile church. So they tell the story in a way that shows its significance for different sorts of people.

There’s one other thing that the history books in the Old Testament and in the New Testament have in common. As well as telling the story of what God has done for his people, they talk about what God expects of his people. In the Old Testament story you get the Ten Commandments and lots of other teaching on the life God expects of his people. In the Gospels you get the Sermon on the Mount and other teaching on the kind of life God expects of his people.

After the histories, in the Old Testament if you look down the bookmark you will see that you then get some books of poetry – Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs. You could say that the history books are about the past, but the poetic books are about the present. Job is about how to cope with suffering. The Psalms are about how to worship and pray. Proverbs is about how to be sensible. Ecclesiastes is about how to doubt. The Song of Songs is about how to love.

Move down the bookmark again and you get the Major Prophets and the Minor Prophets – they are major and minor simply in the sense that some of them are long books and some of them are short books. If the histories are about the past and the poetry is about the present, then the prophets are about the future. Admittedly that could be a misleading thing to say. You know the world was supposed to end yesterday? Well, as far as I know it didn’t. Often people have tried to calculate from the Prophets when the world was going to end, and they have always been wrong. One reason is that for the most the prophets don’t talk about the distant future. They are concerned about their own people’s future, about what is going to happen to them. They are challenging people about their own relationship with God, about the way they try to make images of God, about the way they worship other gods. And they are challenging people about their relationships with other people, about the way they take advantage of poor people and trust in political policies rather than in God. They do talk about the future, but it’s then the future that hangs over the people when they ignore what God says, and the future that will come about when God fulfills his purpose for them.

In the New Testament when you move down the bookmark below the history books, you get Paul’s letters and the general letters and another book of prophecy, the Book of Revelation. Like the Gospels, these letters started off life as messages to particular churches. They took up issues in their life about what people needed to believe and how they ought to be living their life – in this sense they are quite like the prophets. The church as a whole came to realize that even Gospels and letters that were written to particular churches could speak to all the churches, which is how they came to be in the Bible.

There’s one other part of the bookmark that I have said nothing about. In the middle you will see it says “Between the Testaments” and then there is a list of some more books. There are more history books such as Tobit and Judith and Maccabees, and more books of poetry such as Wisdom and Ecclesiasticus. These books used to be called the Apocrypha. Nowadays the politically correct term for them is the Deutero-canonical Writings. Canon is a word for the collection of the Scriptures as a whole. The Old Testament is the main Jewish canon, the Bible the Jewish people accepts. These are a kind of second canon. They are also Jewish books but they were never accepted by the Jewish people as Scripture. In the Episcopal church we sometimes read from them but they don’t have quite the status of the main Bible.

There it is then. The Old Testament Histories, the Poetry Books, the Prophets. The books from between the Testaments. The New Testament Histories, the Letters, the Prophecy in Revelation.

Maybe you’d like to read the Bible for yourself. If you turn back to the all black side of the bookmark, at the top it gives you a quote from the New Testament about how useful the Bible is. If you do want to read it for yourself, I’ve nearly finished writing a series of books about each of the Old Testament books called “The Old Testament for Everyone” and there is a copy of each of these books that have come out so far in the quiet room – though I think some have been borrowed. There’s an equivalent New Testament series called “The New Testament for Everyone” by an English bishop called Tom Wright.

# Sermon (3): What is the Creed?

So this is the third of four sermons as we look forward to the Confirmation next month, and it’s quite a good Sunday to be thinking about the Creed, with it being Pentecost today. The Creed that we say every Sunday is a summary of Christian faith, and it comes in three parts. We say we believe in one God, the Father. Then we say we believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ. Then we say we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord. So today, on Pentecost, we celebrate the pouring out of the Holy Spirit on the disciples, who already knew God the Father and they had been the disciples of Jesus. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Let’s look at the three sections of the Creed, one by one. You might like to turn in the Prayer Book to page 358.

You’ll see that in the introduction of the Creed it calls it the Nicene Creed. That’s because there are actually a number of creeds, a number of summaries of Christian faith. They are all a bit different, sometimes quite a bit different. They aren’t contradictory or anything – they just express Christian faith in different ways. There are two other creeds included in the Prayer Book. The Nicene Creed is one that was agreed at two meetings of the bishops of the church, in a place called Nicea near Istanbul in Turkey, and then at Istanbul itself. Now Kathleen and I are going for a vacation in Turkey in the fall and we plan to go to Istanbul and to Nicea, so we will tell you anything we discover.

But all this happened in the fourth century, more than fifteen hundred years ago, three centuries after Jesus’ day. The reason for having creeds was that there were differences between different Christian groups about what were the key things about Christian faith, so bishops from all over the Christian world of the day met to try to agree on those basics; which they did. Which is itself totally amazing. You can’t imagine it happening now!

So the basic assumption in the creeds is that Christian faith involves believing in the one God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God has three ways of being God. There is only one God; yet God has three ways of being God, and the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are sufficiently separate for them to be able to talk to each other, but they are sufficiently together for it still to be possible for them to be one God. Now if that sounds hard to understand, that’s fine – it *is* hard to understand, and I’m not going to try to explain it. The best picture I know of it is this. It comes from one of the bishops from a bit before the time when the creed as we have it was formulated. He said that Jesus and the Spirit were like the two hands of God by which God worked in the world. Later, people modified the image and thought of Jesus and the Spirit as the two arms of God, by which God reached out to the world and embraced the world. I like both those images. Jesus and the Spirit are like the two hands of God the Father doing his work, or the two arms of God the Father embracing us.

Let’s go back to the beginning of the creed. Every Sunday, we start by saying, “we believe in one God.” Now if you are a Hindu you believe in lots of gods, and there’s a kind of comfort in that belief. There can be different gods with different areas of interest, and there can be different goddesses. You can search around and find a god or a goddess whose character and interests work well for you. No, says the Creed, there’s only one God. Sometimes we talk about different people worshiping different gods, but we don’t really mean that, because there is only one God. We mean different people have different ideas about God. If they are worshiping God, they are all worshiping the same God, because there is only one God.

The one God is a God big enough to be the one God. I said “he” is big enough, because it’s difficult to avoid using the word “he.” We don’t want to say that God is an “it.” God is a person, like us. God thinks and acts, God has feelings and ideas, God talks and listens, God relates to other people as a person. We are persons, we are made in God’s image, in some sense we are like God, so we can relate to God because God is a person. So we use the word “he” about God. But God isn’t a “he” in the sense of being male rather than female. God’s being is just as much like a woman’s being as like a man’s being. Some people like to refer to God as “she,” to make the point

So there’s only one God, but he has three ways of being God. First, he is the Father and the Almighty. That is spelled out in the creed by saying that he is the maker of heaven and earth, the maker of all that is seen and unseen. He’s the Father of Jesus, in the sense that he is the one who is the origin of the life of Jesus. He’s also the father of you and me. He’s also the father of all creation in the sense that all its life comes from him. That’s the point that’s spelled out by saying that he’s the maker of all things in heaven and on earth – in other words, he’s the maker of the whole cosmos, the planets, and the stars. If there is life on other planets, then he created that life as well. He’s the creator of things you can see and things you can’t see. That takes us back to those other gods I mentioned. The creed doesn’t say they don’t exist. It says that they are underlings of the one great God, the one God who is God with a capital G. That’s one point about saying that God is the Almighty Father. He may allow all sorts of things to happen in the world, but in the end he is in control. He doesn’t let the world get finally out of hand. We believe in one God, the Father.

Then, we believe in one Lord Jesus Christ. He’s the only Son of God. There’s something unique about him compared with all the beings that were merely created by God. There have always been people who thought Jesus was simply a really good man, and therefore that he was someone created by God. In the creed we say, “No, he was more than that.” He wasn’t created by God. He was fathered by God. This didn’t happen when he was born as a man. That wasn’t when he came into existence. He has been in existence just as long as God has been in existence. His life derives from the father’s life, but this fathering wasn’t like any other fathering, because it didn’t take place in time. He was eternally begotten from the Father. Through all eternity, God has been the Father who was the source of life, and from all eternity Jesus has shared in this life.

But then when the world came into being, it was created through Jesus. That’s the idea behind the picture of his being one of God’s hands. The creed declares that the world was created through Jesus, then it tells the story of his human life. He came down from heaven to be born of Mary, he was crucified, he rose from the dead, he will come again. It’s the story with all those episodes that we looked at two weeks ago.

Thirdly, we believe in the Holy Spirit. He’s also the Lord. He’s God’s other hand, God’s other arm. He’s the giver of life. He was also involved in creation, giving life to the world. Then he was involved with Israel; he inspired the prophets. Then he was involved in Jesus’ earthly birth – it was by the power of the Holy Spirit that Jesus become incarnate, became a human being. He gives life to us when we are born, and he gives new life to us when we come to know God and to know Jesus. After all, we can’t see God because he is the almighty Lord of heaven and earth and we can’t see Jesus because we don’t live in the right time and place. But the Holy Spirit is the one who makes God’s presence real to us and makes Jesus’ presence real to us. We have genuine contact with God the Father because his Spirit is among us. We have genuine contact with Jesus because his Spirit is among us. In practice we don’t tend to think of Pentecost as quite as important as Christmas and Easter, but Christmas and Easter wouldn’t do us much good without Pentecost. At Pentecost the Spirit was poured out on the disciples, and that meant that God the Father was with them, that Jesus had already come back to them.

After saying that we believe in the Holy Spirit, we declare that we believe in some other key things. We believe in the one holy catholic apostolic church. There’s one church; there are many denominations, but they are all part of one church. It’s a holy church; there are lots of ways in which the church is un-holy, but it is brought into existence by the holy God and it’s special to him in connection with his work in the world. It’s a catholic church; the Roman Catholic Church especially uses the word catholic, but the word applies to the whole church. It affirms that the church is spread through the world, because God cares for the whole world. And it’s an apostolic church. The church is apostolic as it seeks to proclaim and live by the gospel that goes back to the apostles.

There is one church so there is one baptism, so we recognize the baptism of anyone who was baptized in any church. Baptism is a sign of our cleansing and forgiveness.

And finally we know that we have something to look forward to beyond this life. We look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. When we die it’s like going to sleep, and the people who originally drew up the creed have been asleep for nearly two thousand years, sleeping safe and sound with Jesus. But one day they and we are all going to be raised from the dead and enjoy the life of the world to come.

I believe in God. I believe in Jesus. I believe in the Holy Spirit.

## Sermon (4): What Is An Episcopalian?

So this is the last of four sermons on the basics of Christian faith, as we look forward to the confirmation. Today “basics of *Christian* faith” isn’t really the right title, because we are thinking about the basics of being Episcopalian in particular. And in looking at them, we’re not implying that Episcopalians are right about everything and that everybody ought to be like us. We are looking at some things that for better or worse matter to us. Actually none of these things are peculiar to Episcopalians – we share all of them with some other Christian groups. It’s the combination that marks us out.

I guess we ought to start with that word *Episcopal* or *Episcopalian*. Now lots of my friends are Presbyterian and on Wednesday I was in the Congregational Church at Los Robles and Walnut. What do those words mean? If you’re a Presbyterian, then the key people are the presbyters, the ministers – the group of presbyters in your local church and the wider group of presbyters in your area. You don’t have so much link with other Presbyterians in the United States as a whole or in other parts of the world. If you’re a Congregationalist, then it’s the local congregation that matters, even more. The point about the word Episcopal is that it means we have bishops. And that means the local congregation and the individual pastor are less independent than they are with most other denominations. It’s not us that own the church building – the diocese does, even though we have to look after it and we are responsible to put a new floor in so that ladies heels don’t go through it, which the Vestry is paying attention to. It’s not us that decide on our form of worship – the prayer book is issued by the Episcopal Church of the United States as a whole. And if the bishop says “John, it’s not appropriate that you should wear shorts to church, and while you’re at it, you should start wearing a clerical collar,” I’d probably feel I should do what the bishop says. The bishop has authority. We do have some safeguards against being railroaded. We elect our bishops, so we then get the leadership we ask for. We elect people whom we are then prepared to submit to.

It’s not just our bishops in Los Angeles. The Diocese of Los Angeles is part of the Episcopal Church of the United States. The Episcopal Church of the United States is part of the worldwide Anglican Communion. We’d have to think pretty hard before going it alone in relation to the worldwide church. On the other hand, the Anglican Church is not like the Roman Catholic Church in having a central authority that decides things for everyone. We have bishops, but we don’t have a Pope.

So our bishops link us to the church worldwide. They also link us to the church through the centuries. We were confirmed by a bishop. That bishop was ordained by some people who were already bishops, and they were ordained by people who were already bishops, and so on way back. The story goes that this chain goes all the way back to Peter as the first Bishop of Rome. Now nobody can prove that, but the general idea is important – having bishops reminds us that the church extends back centuries, back to the earliest days of the church. The church isn’t something new. It’s something old.

If you’re an Episcopalian, the same thing applies to what you believe and the way you worship. It was five hundred years ago that the Episcopal Church broke off from the Roman Catholic Church. There were political reasons why that happened, like the fact that King Henry VIII wanted to get a divorce and the church wouldn’t give him one, but for many people the problem was that there seemed to be aspects of the Roman Catholic Church that didn’t fit the New Testament, and they wanted to get rid of those aspects of the church. But that didn’t mean they abandoned the creeds or all the prayers. They wanted to get back to the early centuries when Christians were pretty much agreed about the Christian faith. So the Episcopal Church stands for sticking by the way the Christian faith has been over the centuries, identifying with the way things were in the early centuries. It also stands for not being too extreme. The Episcopal Church started off in England, which is why it’s also called the Anglican Church. Naturally here in the American colonies they didn’t want to call it by a name that suggested it was something to do with England, so they called it the Episcopal Church. When it started off in England, it was part of what is called the Reformation. But it wasn’t reformed enough for many people, which was partly why the Puritan Fathers came to the colonies. The Episcopal Church wanted to move away from the Roman Catholic Church, but it didn’t want to go too far. So it came to stand between the Roman Catholic Church and Reformed Churches such as the Presbyterians. And it has always had within it people who are more sympathetic to the Reformed Churches and people who are more sympathetic to the Roman Catholic Church. The Episcopal Church is a broad church. If you can say the Creed, you are welcome.

Talking about the Reformation takes me to the Prayer Book. For me having the Prayer Book is *the* thing I value most about being Episcopal. I notice it when on occasions I go to non-Episcopal services and feel that the service is a bit thin and dependent on the skill of the pastor to make up prayers and so on. And I notice it when on occasions I go to an Episcopal service in another church, say when I am on vacation. And it doesn’t matter so much if the priest isn’t a very good preacher, say, because there are limits to what priests can do to ruin the service if they are using the Prayer Book.

It’s even the case that broadly speaking you will find the same sort of Prayer Book in use wherever you go in the world. It’s different in detail, but it’s basically the same. And one reason is that it’s another reflection of the fact that the Episcopal Church stands for sticking by the way the Christian faith has been over the centuries. When the Episcopal or Anglican Church started five hundred years ago, it didn’t throw away the way the church had been worshiping for a thousand years. It did develop it, but it didn’t try to go back to square one. So lots of the prayers that we use and the basic shape of services goes back fifteen hundred years or more. So when we worship and pray, we aren’t just saying what we as people in the United States or in California feel like saying in 2012. We are joining in worship and prayer that is being offered all over the world and has been being offered for all those centuries. We here in our little church could feel we aren’t very significant. But we are part of a huge company.

The Prayer Book is a big book. It’s over a thousand pages. What’s in it tells you some more important things about the Episcopal Church. The first part of it is services of readings and prayer, and it includes some one-page services that individuals and families can pray at four times of the day – when you wake up and at lunch time and at dinner time and at bed time. When we got married Kathleen and I started using these whenever we are home, and we love them as a way of putting our lives back into the context of God’s life.

The next part is the collects, which are a collection of special prayers for each week and for special occasions, and then the special forms of service for occasions such as Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. They draw our attention to another important feature of the Episcopal Church, which is that our week to week worship follows a kind of Christian calendar. The world outside the church follows a calendar – it comprises New Year, the Superbowl, Valentine’s Day, Mother’s Day, Memorial Day, and so on. The Christian calendar comprises Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Ash Wednesday, Lent, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter, Ascension, and Pentecost. That calendar tells the story of Jesus and helps us live inside that story.

A third of the way through the Prayer Book you come to the service for the Eucharist, with various versions. In the Episcopal Church the Eucharist is the central service. That isn’t true in most churches. For us, it’s important to have that weekly reminder of the fact that Jesus died for us and rose from the dead for us, and for us to have the chance to invite Jesus into our lives again. An important feature of the Eucharist is that involves us doing something with our bodies – we reach out to receive bread and wine, and our receiving physically is an outward expression of the fact that we are welcoming Jesus into our lives again. There are other ways in which the Episcopal Church stresses the physical, the material. We like having special church buildings – we don’t so much care for worshipping in a school room, as some churches do. We like candles and robes and processions and anointing with oil and holy water. They bring our whole persons into our relationship with God.

The middle part of the Prayer Book is dominated by special services for occasions such as marriage, funerals, and ordinations. Then a quarter of the Prayer Book is given over to the Psalms, and more than a hundred pages are given to schemes for reading the Bible in church. Every service we read three passages from the Bible and also say a psalm. Now when we had a rector I used occasionally to take a Sunday off and go and worship somewhere else, and I was struck – actually I was appalled – byt how little they read the Bible. Churches that emphasize the Bible in theory didn’t read from it in practice. Everything was filtered through the pastor. In the Episcopal Church, you can always check the pastor out. You can compare what the preacher says with what the Bible says, and you know who to trust if you find there is a difference.

So there are four things that seem to me important about being Episcopalian. We have bishops who link us to the big church. We appreciate our links to the church over the centuries. We use a Prayer Book for our church worship and maybe for our prayer at home. We value the church’s calendar. We emphasize the Eucharist. We read the Bible a lot. My God make us good Episcopalians, but even more good believers in God the Father and God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.