## 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.