

## THE LONG READ

Here we outline all the important elements around what constitutes the faith, response and duty of our Church in the Netherlands.

# The Anglican Episcopal Free Church of The Netherlands

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# Some Initial Considerations

We begin with some thoughts, which illustrate how, as the Anglican Episcopal Free Church community here in The Netherlands, we consider what constitutes our Christian response and duty, reflected in how we live. They also explore our understanding of being Christian and the place of Christian Initiation: what baptism and confirmation are, especially in the Anglican tradition, as also understood throughout mainstream Christianity, and what it means for each individual. Of course, whatever we cover or not here, the best introduction is to be found in tasting our experience of worship, in hearing and reflecting on the readings, especially the Gospel, and in our prayers as a community during the Eucharist. In the end, all these things are essential to our formation in our Lord Jesus Christ for our continuing Christian journey.

Fundamental to our faith is our certainty that God welcomes us all. The Church is not a club, but a community of those who realise that God welcomes them, and that welcome is for every one of us.

We are Christians and we pray and worship: it is the mainstay of our lives. In the celebration of daily prayer and the sacraments, especially the Eucharist or the Mass, we are strengthened in the continuity of Christian fellowship and faith of our fathers, and with Holy Church of every age into the future since the Great Commission of our Lord.

We believe that we are family to each other, and children of the same heavenly Father. God made us; he loves us, and wills for the flourishing and happiness of us all. As Christians, when we are baptized, we become inextricably bound together in a deep spiritual bond. We live in Christ and he lives in each and all of us.

Community is important; it is an essential expression of ourselves. It is how we support each other to be people of faith, and to serve each other and to serve the world around us.

In our Church we seek to express a sense of community in worship, in caring, in social events and in all we do together.

Caring for one another is a key element in our community life. We all share this responsibility and must rejoice that we can each do our part.

Being a Christian means that we live our lives in relationship with God the Holy Trinity. We seek to deepen our relationship with God the Father, with God the Son (Jesus) and God the Holy Spirit, and to follow in our own lives the way that Jesus taught, under the continual inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

For Christians, Jesus is the One in whom we see God face to face, and through His teaching, and by seeking to follow His example, we grow closer to God.

Central to our relationship is the knowledge that we can trust God. Saint Paul says at the end of Romans 8, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" And this is at the heart of our faith.

We know that "God is for us" because Jesus Christ is wholly God, and wholly human like us. When he became human, he limited himself, and, in his being human, he was the only person of this universe who was perfectly in tune with God: with what God wanted and what God was doing. After his resurrection, he received from the Father the glory he had before. Jesus shows us that nothing can separate us from the love of God.

Jesus proclaimed this truth, and remained true to it, though it led to rejection of His message and even betrayal by one of those who were closest to Him. Remaining true to the proclamation of God's acceptance, Jesus was humiliated and executed in agony, as he laid down His life for His friends.

Jesus' death did not silence Him, nor did it destroy the faithfulness of God to us. Instead, God the Father restored Jesus to life in this world. In so doing was proclaimed that nothing can destroy God's faithfulness to us. The death of Jesus is the ultimate demonstration of God's total loving commitment to us all, and shows us that what we have seen in Jesus' words and actions is God's will for the whole world. His resurrection overwhelmingly tells us of the power of that total loving commitment.

St Paul says in the same passage in Romans that nothing can separate us from this love. This doesn't give us free excuse for doing what we like, believing that we face no judgmental consequences. Once we know that God is "for us", we become alive to the gift that God wants to give us: a share in His own love and freedom and mercy, which shapes our response.

A famous quotation attributed to St. Irenaeus of Lyons is, "The glory of God is people fully alive": a vision of God who gives life.

The glory of God gives life; those who see God receive life. God, who cannot by our nature be seen, wholly grasped or comprehended, allows himself to be seen. God the Son – Jesus Christ – became visible through His incarnation, while God the Father is "seen" through Jesus Christ, wholly grasped and comprehended by all, that he may give life to those who see and receive him through participation in him. God the Holy Ghost is also "seen" because He is Jesus' "vicar" (παράκλητος: John 14:16) on earth, leading the Church until Jesus' return. Participation in God is to see God and enjoy his goodness.

We breathe with God's breath: a part of what it means to say that we receive God's Spirit. The Spirit enables us to live, like Jesus, being fully connected with God. If we really take the message seriously, we will live lives of selfless generosity, always asking how the gifts given us, material, imaginative, intuitive, spiritual or whatever, can be shared in a way that brings other people to life in abundance. This encourages us in turn, to be able to trust the generosity of others and be opened to receive what they have to offer to us.

In generosity, gratitude, and in confidence that even when we fall short, we are assured that we remain loved, able simply to focus on the life, death and resurrection of Our Lord Jesus. This, in a nutshell, is the beginning in our lifelong vocation to Christian living.

# Baptism and Confirmation

It is through baptism that we find certainty in our becoming wholly Christian: welcomed into the family of God.

Baptism is the most important Sacrament of the Church, given by Jesus, an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible gift of God's grace. This simply means that as the water of baptism is poured over us, we are assured that God has changed us forever. The Holy Trinity comes in the heart of the newly baptized, never to recognise separation again from God.

It is a moment of grace and joy. Through baptism, therefore, we become members of the Church, which is the body of Christ on earth. As we are changed, we realize the promises of Christ as God's adopted children. In baptism we know the new life of the Kingdom of God, in which we continue to live and grow. This can tempt us to smugness in our human weakness, or it can truly inspire us to learn the joy and generosity of what St Paul was to discern, "that the universe, everything in heaven and on earth might be brought into unity with Christ" when the "time was ripe" (Eph. 1:10), since he reconciles "all things to himself, making peace through the shedding of his blood on the cross – all things, whether on earth or in heaven" (Col. 1:20).

In the beginning, only those having reached the age of reason were baptised, as was taught by the great teachers of the Church in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. But later, most children were baptised very soon after birth, as life then was the more fragile in a less sophisticated age. In our own days, most baptisms take place within the first couple of years of a child's life, though the Church does baptise many older children and an increasing number of adults who were not baptised as children. There is no right or wrong age to be baptised.

Older children and adults are baptised, and are expected to be confirmed, and immediately receive the Holy Communion (the Blessed Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ under the forms of Bread and Wine) at the Eucharist.

What, in many Western Churches, has come to be called confirmation was originally part of the fuller ceremony of Christian initiation, and only became a separate rite when bishops were no longer able to preside at all baptisms. In the Eastern Churches, the logistical problem was solved rather differently and the full rite of baptismal initiation was retained for everyone, infants, older children and adults. Baptism, triple immersion with the trinitarian formula, is the sign of the effect of the death and resurrection of Christ, bestowing the gift of new life for us. It is followed immediately by confirmation, performed by the priest who anoints the newly baptised with Holy Chrism, oil blessed by the bishop. This 'Chrismation' is, essentially, an extension of the bishop's hands of authority. By admitting the newly baptised to both confirmation and Holy Communion, in a single liturgical action, the ancient rite maintains the wholly positive meaning of Baptism, as new life, sealed and strengthened by the fulness of the gifts of the Holy Spirit to live out one's Baptism, and nourished by the Eucharistic Sacrament.

Churches, such as our own, have long sought to engage with the principles of our ancient sister Churches. Many, faithful to the imperative of ecumenism, have determined to carry this engagement into practice. While, in the interests of practical expediency, we joyfully honour our customary rites, we will however, also, for ecumenical and pastoral reasons, encourage the historic practices of the Eastern Church. It is not only an ecumenical act to restore confirmation to the baptismal ceremony itself, it is to go back to the practice of primitive Christianity. In so doing, and in the interests of best practice and community strengthening, we will also develop in our liturgical usage the principles at the heart of the Easter Vigil. It is at such times (which might include the Pentecost Vigil and the Epiphany Vigil), we

demonstrate our wider Christian embrace, but we also stand witness in our own local fellowship to our unity, all gathering together, as far as we can, in visible, spiritual and powerful baptismal accord on such occasions. Furthermore therefore, when this is done at the great vigils of the year, the problem of the “delegation to the priest” disappears, because these vigils will be occasions of diocese-wide celebration where the bishops preside, together with their priests and people.

One’s own confession of faith might still be made before the Bishop and congregation at a later stage, perhaps at a time of first confession and personally assuming responsibility for one’s own decisions.

## How we understand the nature of The Bible.

The Bible at its inception is a liturgical collection, a library of a number of books, which originally being largely orally transmitted were subsequently set in writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The writers were people of communities sharing experience of faith, inspired over the span of many centuries from well before the coming of Christ, and into the first century after his ascension. For Christians, the Christ-experience made no sense apart from its Old Testament context. What rendered these scriptures “sacred” was that they were repeatedly and carefully read in the synagogues. It must be noted that the Palestinian Jews of the first century were not wholly in agreement on what constituted scripture. The Sadducees, associated with Temple worship, accepted only the Pentateuch. The Temple was destroyed in AD 70, and with the ascendancy of the Pharisees, especially associated with rabbinic synagogue Judaism, greater value was placed on the whole “synagogue Bible”, which included the historical books, the prophets, and writings and also further additions like the Book of Daniel and the Wisdom of Solomon. Thus, it was this enlarged Bible that served as the liturgical form in

communal recitation, singing and reading for the early church, to which was added substantially what we know as the New Testament: the Gospels, the letters, and memories of apostolic experience. Justin Martyr, the first to second century Christian apologist, referred to them as “the memoirs of the apostles” just as he referred to the Hebrew collections as “the writings of the prophets”. Their use within the liturgical assemblies of Christians by the early second century, is what caused them to be canonised by the Council of Nicea in 325 as the authoritative collection of sacred scripture as we recognise them to this day. Their singular purpose, beginning with their liturgical use, is to lead us to Jesus, the incarnate Word of God, and thus they are called "the word of God", as the liturgy itself often speaks of them. In short, the reading of scripture in the Christian assemblies is what made the Bible the Church's book.

The structure of Anglicanism has often been described as being like a three-legged stool. Each of its three legs are essential to its maintenance of stability, and therefore of equal necessity, if clearly not of equal gravity. These represent the three pillars: the holy Bible, holy tradition, and the holy reason of faith experience. It might be otherwise accurate to view them as concentric circles, with holy Scripture at the foundational core of holy Tradition, which is the transmission of the faith, with both of these encompassed by human reason, engendered in personal and Church life experience.

Here is raised an obvious word of caution to be heeded. Richard Hooker (1554 – 1600) originally conceived the image of the three sources of authority, however, when he envisaged scripture, tradition and reason as a “threefold cord not quickly broken”, he understood these as the Anglican way of framing theology, without denying the absolute primacy of the Bible. In short, then, it is proper to say that tradition is to be understood as the Church's interpretation of the fullness of scripture, beyond dismembered texts outside of the fundamental optic of Jesus Christ of the Gospel, and it is reason that makes possible the efficacious reception of revelation.

The words of Scripture that are essentially straightforward and clear, have first claim on our trust and obedience. Reason applies as the comprehending and ordering ability of the human mind, discerning those aspects of our faith that are timeless teaching, and those things which are practices that the church has necessarily adopted as appropriate to particular time, place and material circumstance. In order to help reason in its work, the tradition of the Church is operative in guiding its integrity.

Two examples will serve to illustrate how isolating extracts of the Bible, and drawing conclusions without reference to wider context, is disastrously imprudent.

The book of Ezra describes the Jews having returned to Jerusalem after their 70-year exile. Some of them had married pagan women during the exile and, under Ezra's influence, families were torn apart, that no taint of paganism might soil the Jewish nation. Contrary to these sensibilities, however, the book of Ruth, records the historical assertion, noting the significant record of King David's mixed, or 'impure' ethnicity. His great-grandmother was Moabite and, even though a proselyte whose righteousness surpassed the conventions of her time, he would not have met the standard as set in the Ezra code. Context and circumstance must be accounted and resolved. The second example regards the Letter to the Hebrews, in which the author asserts in clear terms that there is no forgiveness of grave sins committed after baptism (10:26-27). This assertion is contrary to two other New Testament passages, unequivocally foundational to the practice of the Church, of absolution, to be found in John 20:23 and 1 John 2:1 etc. Clearly, the biblical books are to be read, reasoned and explained, all in relation to one another, and not as separate, unrelated units of scripture.

It is also of significance in Anglicanism that the apocryphal, or deuterocanonical, books of the Bible are read in Church, though avoiding their use in order to draw erroneous doctrinal innovations from them. Of course, the general teaching of the Church is still divined within them, since, within the biblical canon, they are

frequently quoted and paraphrased by the writers of the New Testament.

It is not strict historicity of these books that makes them palatable to be read in churches but, rather, their accurate assertion of the true person of Jesus in his perfect divinity and his perfect humanity. In truth, it is probable that some other apocryphal books might be more accurate on some points of historical detail; however, they have been avoided for use in churches, from the time they were written up to the present day, because their doctrinal efficacy in relation to the person of Jesus is at wide variance with the orthodoxy we have universally embraced.

The extent to which the Bible stands at the core of the holy tradition of the Church can most clearly be seen, perhaps, in the four accounts of the Lord's Supper in the New Testament. All of these are, in fact, quotations of four different Eucharistic prayers that had been in use in Churches in the first decades of the Early Church. Furthermore, some canticles of the Old Testament were sung over the centuries, until they eventually made their way into the written scriptures. The transmission of the Christian faith is, in effect, the holy Tradition, linked to its source, not to be equated with transmission of human folklore. They are not only distinct, but may, too, often stand in sharp opposition, against which is warned by both Jesus and Paul.

## Our Church

We are proud to be Christians of the Anglican Episcopal Free Church, though we are always fully embracive of all traditions and wish, together, to develop an ecumenical approach to mutual understanding and support, and to social issues.

1. We are part of the Anglican Free Communion International and we are within the Diocese of Deventer in the Netherlands.
2. We are welcoming to all people, regardless of gender, sexuality, age, race, physical ability or mental health. God's love is for all.

3. We wish to be supportive of all who might feel marginalized or excluded for any reason.

## What is “Anglican” and “Episcopal”?

Anglican: “Anglican” simply means related to, or coming from, England (The whole historical Christian English experience). Anglican churches draw their identity and historical roots from the Church of England, one of the main bodies formed during the Protestant Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. As the Anglican-Episcopal Free Church, our Anglican ethos is steadfast, though without maintaining any identification with the Church of England as a State Church of temporal Realm. We have no concern for its political affiliations through the Monarchy and Parliament, or the role of the Archbishop of Canterbury and hierarchy of Bishops in the Upper House of Parliament. Associations with dominion, empire and colonialism are to be avoided.

Episcopal: Our understanding that any body of Christians to be identified unconditionally with the historic, Biblical institution of the Church, is assured by Apostolic succession. Thus, the question of attestable validity of Holy Orders is the cornerstone of this ecclesiastical edifice. It acknowledges, apart from any other arguments, the historical fact of unbroken apostolic succession, before, through, and beyond the Reformation, to our present time.

Historical connections aside, what it means to be Anglican can be summed up in a single word – Fullness. As Anglicans, we are about the fullness of the faith in several important ways:

## Belief

Anglicans affirm all basic Christian truths, described as broadly those which have been believed everywhere, always, and by all of the wider and historical Church. We have no distinctive doctrines held apart from other Christians of the One, Holy, Catholic and

Apostolic Church. Every local Church, every diocese of the world, with a bishop at its head, is of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, having the fullness of the Church. As Peter was the first among the Apostles, so is the bishop in the local Church. Every bishop is a successor to Peter, and thus, the words of Matthew 16:18-19 are passed to all bishops. A layered cake when cut into pieces retains in every slice all the layers, each containing the full structure of the cake in itself. So it is with each local Church, as it were, a slice of Holy Church.

## Worship

The Eucharist, or Holy Mass, or celebration of the Holy Communion, also called the Lord's Supper, is the real constitution of the Church, from the first century to the present. It is like a "pause" in our space-time, as we share God's timelessness. We are present at the creation of the world, at its redemption, at Jesus' one and only sacrifice on the cross, at his last supper, at his ascension and second coming, as all these are "represented" ("made present") in the celebration of the Eucharist. Therefore, all the other sacraments find their source in the Eucharist, and should be celebrated in connection with it.

When the Reformation happened in England, the reformers then worked to improve upon and correct the institution they had known in the Catholic Church of Rome, which, they believed, had lost its way. Yet they took care not to throw out the baby with the bath water. It means our worship preserves a profound sense of holiness that comes from worshipping in a way that connects us with the ancient church – the way Christians worshipped in ages past. Equally importantly, they retained the apostolic succession of Holy Order in the historic threefold sacred ministry of Priests and Deacons, fully embodied and nurtured in the sacred order and office of Bishops.

# Middle Way

Arising out of the Reformation, Anglicanism retained much of what has been handed down to us, substantially sharing our heritage with the Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and other ancient Churches. However, of profoundly equal significance, we share core principles and beliefs, with many discrete, devout and inspiring Protestant entities.

# Way of Life

Anglicans, then, are above all, simply Christian. What defines us isn't a single set of particular doctrines (set of beliefs). We are defined by a way of life: by praying and living the principles of the ancient, traditional liturgies, as well as of different Books of Common Prayer that were born throughout recent centuries, by worshipping together and receiving the Body and Blood of Christ in regular, frequent Holy Communion, by loving and serving others as Christ loves us. Our embrace of Anglicanism is an ethos or understanding, rooted in Catholic faith and order, best caught and experienced before requiring explanation. Yet it is our comprehensiveness that defines us most. In all ways, we are seeking to incorporate experience, and embody the fullness of the example of Christ.

# Global presence

Churches originating in the Anglican tradition through the historic English Church, pre and post Reformation, form a global church presence and represent the third largest body of Christians in the world. This means we of The Anglican-Episcopal Free Church are connected with other Anglicans around the globe, where faith remains vibrant and these churches continue to grow. The Anglican Free Communion International is not in competition,

though it seeks unequivocally to promote active kindness with accountability only to the open-hearted welcome of God.

## Inclusivity

In the whole of the Anglican Free Communion, of which our Church is a member, the sacraments of matrimony and of holy orders are granted to the faithful, without distinction of gender/sex, just as it is the case with the other sacraments.

This means that we bless same-gender marriages as we bless mixed-gender ones; we ordain women and non-binary persons to be deacons, priests, and bishops, just as we ordain men.

In Genesis, we learn that God created humankind with distinction of sexes. By God's becoming a human being, we are aware that sexual difference is not ontological, otherwise Jesus would have been unable to assume the whole human nature in his person. Therefore, in Christ, "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male and female: for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28). It took the Church a couple of decades to realise the first (nor Jew nor Greek), seventeen centuries to realise the second (nor slave nor free), and we are glad to realise the third (nor male and female).

After a divorce, it is possible to celebrate a second marriage.

## What is the difference?

What is the difference between the Anglican-Episcopal Free Church (within the Anglican Free Communion International), and the Church of England (within the Anglican Communion of Canterbury)? Which one should I join? Why do we need a Dutch Anglican Church, while the Church of England is present in the Netherlands?

Here is a non-exhaustive overview of the main differences:

The Anglican <u>Free</u> Communion	The Anglican Communion of <u>Canterbury</u>
Founded in 1897	Founded in 1867
Is a real Communion, that is, we have full Eucharistic fellowship among our different national Churches.	It is no longer a real Communion, because some national Churches of the 'Global South' have broken the Eucharistic intercommunion with Churches of the 'Global North'.
Not only can we all partake the body and blood of the Saviour at our different altars worldwide, but also, if one of our clergypersons moves from one Church to another, they are received in their respective order.	There is no automatic recognition of clergy from one Church to another, on considerations of gender, sexual orientation, and marital status. Besides, TEC (USA) forbids priests of other Churches to become bishops, and retired bishops of other Churches are not received in their order.
As all of the Churches of our Communion are committed to inclusivity, there is no risk of one member being ostracised in another Church of our Communion, because of their gender.	LGBTQ+ people and clergy from one Church may be ostracised while visiting another Church.
We do not have overlapping jurisdictions. Each nation has its autonomy. Our Churches are national Churches.	There are overlapping jurisdictions (for instance, in Europe). National Churches have jurisdictions over other countries.
Our Churches are, rather, indigenous. Although we welcome both the expats and the people of the land, we focus on being local Churches,	Their Churches in continental Europe, Asia, and some parts of Latin America, focus on expats, while local needs and realities are subdued under the rulings of

incarnate in the realities of each place, and we respond to the local needs.	the 'Mother' Country (UK or USA).
There are Communion by-laws, that ensure the same level of welcome and tolerance in all our Churches.	There are no binding by-laws on their Communion, except the Lambeth Quadrilateral.
The traditional liturgy is explicitly allowed.	In spite of a certain latitude in some parts of the Canterbury Communion, traditional liturgies are restrained.

In Fr Anthony de Mello's book, "The Song of the Bird", there is a story, that is also found in Gurumayi's book, and elsewhere: "When the guru sat down to worship each evening, the ashram cat would get in the way and distract the worshippers. So, he ordered that the cat be tied during evening worship. After the guru died, the cat continued to be tied during evening worship. And when the cat expired, another cat was brought to the ashram so that it could be duly tied during evening worship. Centuries later, learned treatises were written by the guru's scholarly disciples on the liturgical significance of tying up a cat while worship is performed."

In the Anglican Free Communion International, we try to avoid weighing upon the necks of disciples a yoke that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear (Acts 15:10, Matthew 23:3, Luke 11:46).

## So, in particular

The Anglican Free Communion International is part of a worldwide fellowship of Christians rooted in the historic faith, recognising the seven ecumenical councils, and identifying with the Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century in England and beyond. This fellowship enriches and is enriched by its shared understanding and discernment, and we are confident that we have much to offer and much to receive,

by the grace of God. In so doing, we are privileged and bound to celebrate and live our particular calling and spiritual apprehension.

We trace our history, then, back to the early Church and to the Bible itself, to the historic English Church and as Anglicanism first emerged during the religious reformations of the 16th century. Inevitably, there was a fracture with the Pope and the Church of Rome. Certain changes in the worship and practice happened but many things also stayed the same. The Reformers were careful to emphasize that the fundamental beliefs of the Church were the same as what had been believed before. This is why we are not only connected with each other in the present, but also with all other Christian believers, stretching back through history even as far as the disciples of Jesus, as they lived and learned with him.

Our faith and practice builds upon the Bible, Baptism, and the Eucharist (also known as Holy Communion, the Lord's Supper or the Mass) and other important sacraments: confirmation, penance with absolution, holy orders, matrimony, and the anointing of the sick. By reading, studying and praying with the Bible, we are drawn into the story of God's relationship with the world. In particular, through the life of Christ Jesus, we discover the power of God's self-giving love and forgiveness, and are given strength to share the good news of Jesus through the words and actions of our own lives.

Perhaps the greatest glory of our tradition, recognizing its essential being in the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, is the richness and variety of its life. Of course, this can lead to questions but, for the most part, it allows individuals and congregations of our integrity to celebrate their Christian faith in ways most appropriate to themselves. These sometimes in a more casual though dignified way, in others, embracing the more traditional atmosphere. Here, ritual and symbolism take meaningful centre stage, with coloured vestments for the sacred ministers and others taking a formal liturgical role, and on solemn occasions, incense and sanctus bells. Both styles make an important and complementary contribution. We seek total experience, appealing simultaneously to the emotional, intellectual, and aesthetic faculties of humanity. The

liturgy will include a variety of models, or symbols, using formal theological statements, with worship expressing bodily perceptions and gestures like music, incense, the sign of the cross, kneeling or standing, or the visual arts.

## A shape to our belief

Modern society has become obsessed by wealth and fame but many people sense that there is a deeper, spiritual side of life, which material wealth and social status can never fulfil. We believe that this spiritual side of human life is of vital importance to everyone's sense of inner peace and well-being.

We believe that God made the world, and that human beings are created in God's own image. In order to find lasting peace and happiness, therefore, we need to return to the divine source from which we were first conceived. This journey towards God is the heart of our spirituality.

By our reading of the Bible, wholly and essentially in the light of the Gospel, discovering the person of Jesus Christ, we know that God is love, and his love reaches out to embrace each and every one of us. However wonderful and inviting this may sound, we often find that our hearts are torn in two. Part of us wants to seek God, part of us wants to go in search of other things that seem to bring happiness and fulfilment but which can never truly satisfy our desires. This is an inner struggle that we all experience.

If we sincerely desire God, we realise that whenever we turn our backs on him, we set up a barrier. We recognise this barrier to be sin. Our sin does not stop God from loving us, and to show us this truth, God the Father sent his Son, Jesus Christ, into the world to lovingly persuade us back into profound relationship with him, freed from the power of sin and responsive to his never fading commitment.

It was because Jesus died on the cross that we can be forgiven for all of those things that we do wrong. That allows us to know forgiveness, sweeps away the barrier of sin, and enables us to

have new life, in relationship with God. We can speak with God and hear what God says to us each day.

This isn't something that happens once. It is a process that is constantly at work. So, in our journey, we are forever called to meet in support of one another as Church, as imperfect individuals, asking God for forgiveness. As time goes on, we respond to God, shaping us into who he longs for us to be, full of love and compassion.

The love that God pours into our hearts is so great that it spills over into the world around us. It enables us to love others and all his creation, as God does, and to work to overcome the barriers that separate us from each other.

## Questions about faith

How do we know there is a God?

The truthful answer is that we cannot know for certain beyond what we undeniably apprehend as deep, personal and effective experience, revealing discernment of our own complex reality and need beyond the purely material. We cannot prove the existence of God beyond ourselves, though there are many compelling reasons why belief in God is reasonable. The first is that nothing science has discovered explains the existence of the universe. Scientific truth is as partial as any other claim to truth, yet the universe has beauty and order that suggest supremely intelligent, rational "mind" lies behind it all. Just as the existence of what we now call technological intelligence demonstrates that there is an inventor behind it, so the world in all its beautiful complexity, including technology, points to the existence of a Creator, God.

Pure reason, too, allows us to recognise that within the heart of each of us there is a capacity to love and an extraordinary desire to be loved. We point to that and say it indicates that there is a tangible power of love in the world, which many people call God.

We also observe that in every part of the world today and throughout history, there has been an overwhelmingly vast intuitive, sensitive and intelligent throng of believers and worshippers of God. It has been said that in every person there is a God-shaped place that only God can fill. The existence of that desire to pray and to believe and talk with God is clearly a strong argument for God's existence. There are lots of reasons why people believe in God, and it is an enlightening and worthwhile exercise to ask yourself how real God is to you.

How did the Universe really begin?

An answer to this question might depend on whom you ask. A cosmologist might reply that the universe began several thousand million years ago as an unimaginably massive nuclear explosion. A theologian might reply that God created the world, concentrating more on why God created the world, and less on how God created the world.

The "why" question is perhaps more important as it asks us to think about the purpose and meaning of creation. As far as the origin of the world is concerned, the Bible simply says that God created it (Genesis 1:1, John 1:3, Hebrews 11:3). Not all Christians agree over the origin of life. Most however believe that it is best explained by some form of evolutionary theory, and they believe that this process has been effected by God and used by him. The Book of Genesis asserts creation to be good and adds that God was satisfied and pleased with his handiwork. This surely means that the world should be something we respect, actively protect and cherish, and in which we delight.

What is meant by speaking of the Trinity?

The doctrine of the Trinity lies at the heart of Christianity. In essence it claims that God's very being is "relational", that is, God's ontological existence is in loving relationship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is more than just an abstract thought. The three persons are God and Lord, as taken apart, but never three gods.

As God is love, it is out of love that the Father has been giving birth to his Son or Word, and has been breathing out his Spirit. Time-space is a creature of God, and God is not held by it. Therefore, the processes of “birthing” and “breathing” are beyond time-space. These three persons are equal, and one, and timeless. Since all human cognition is partial, and language is limited, it is only by analogies we shape our words, using terms like “God”, “Father”, “Son”, “Word”, “Spirit”, “birthing”, “breathing” etc to express the reality of God, beyond the laws of nature, in the Triunity of God, 1+1+1, always remaining 1.

It makes a crucial difference to the way Christians understand the world and all life.

Since the essence of God is relationship, it indicates that we are also created for relationship: with God, with each other and with the whole universe. It is these relationships that give meaning to our lives, and if they break, then our own lives become broken too. This is why the saving work of Jesus is often called, “atonement”: literally, the *at-one-ment*. We believe that God’s plan in the fullness of time is to unite all things in heaven and on earth in his Son Jesus Christ (Ephesians 1:9-10).

### Who is Jesus?

Christians have always believed that Jesus was not just a good man, but the Son of God. We believe that he was sent into the world by God the Father and by God the Spirit, but also by his own will, and returned again to the heavenly realm. Bearing his human, risen and spiritualised body, he thereby introduced humankind into God’s eternity. Indeed, the whole of Christianity stands or falls on whether Jesus is who he said he is.

No serious academic today believes that Jesus didn’t exist. Historians agree that he was a remarkable teacher, who astonished people 2,000 years ago with exceptional wisdom and amazing works that they found it hard to explain. They also know that he was crucified in the most barbaric way imaginable, and that his followers were convinced that three days later he came back to

life. Many of those disciples were themselves later put to death, refusing to withdraw these claims. Why would they do so unless they were convinced Jesus had been resurrected?

Jesus himself also claimed to be the Son of God: God in human form, sent to save us. CS Lewis summarized the kernel of the obvious question of our response as follows: “He was either mad, bad or God.” He was either living a delusion, living a lie, or he really was God. It is impossible to say that he was just a good teacher, because he claimed to be more than that. If we don’t believe his own claims about himself, why should we believe any of his teaching?

Why did Jesus have to die?

The simple answer might be that Jesus died because he was a preacher of radical ideas, who disturbed the religious and political leaders of his time, exposed their hypocrisy, aroused their jealousy, and so was condemned to death on a cross.

This is only a shadow of the full story. It ignores the fact that Jesus willingly laid down his own life, that no one, of their own volition, could take from him. He died so that we might live. He took humanity’s sin on himself, so that we might be freed from sin.

As the Biblical narrative asserts: “Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God.” (1 Peter 3:18,). We all know that forgiveness can be costly and it was costly for God to forgive us. It cost God his own Son.

We all do things that we know are wrong. Those things stop us from having a proper relationship with God. It is only as we approach God and ask for forgiveness that we can start that new relationship. Forgiveness with no recognition of consequence of one’s sin by the forgiven, is clearly void of purpose. Real forgiveness involves the forgiver and the forgiven who must understand the cost to the forgiver. God forgives out of love, and love shapes justice. Justice must be done for the sake of justice.

Atonement is often expressed as justice, as an aspect of angry wrath; expressing the very nature of God. Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite gives an important insight to counter this in his observations, suggesting that, when the Church and scriptures employ the term “justice”, it is not overly used as simply a legal term, but as relating, rather, to the order of things:

“Almighty God is celebrated as justice, as distributing things suitable to all, both due measure, and beauty, and good order, and arrangement, and marking out all distributions and orders for each, according to that which truly is the most just limit...” (Divine Names, Chapter 8.7).

This Divine Justice, then, is celebrated also even as preservation of the whole, as preserving and guarding the essence and order of each, distinct and pure from the rest; and as being genuine cause of each minding its own business in the whole... And since, without missing the mark of the sacred theology, one might celebrate this preservation as redeeming all things existing, by the goodness which is preservative of all, from falling away from their own proper goods, so far as the nature of each of those who are being preserved admits; wherefore also the Theologians name it redemption, both so far as it does not permit things really being to fall away to nonexistence, and so far as, if anything should have been led astray to discord and disorder, and should suffer any diminution of the perfection of its own proper goods, even this it redeems from passion and listlessness and loss.” (Divine Names, Chapter 8.9)

However, no human being could do anything to redeem us, since all humans are both sinners and limited. Therefore, God the Son, who is limitless, became fully human. Only as such, was he the single human capable of accomplishing God’s justice. Jesus’ redemption of the world is precisely a restoration of it to its original state, while also being a reconciliation of man to God and God to man. God, because He is just, in His mercy sends His only Son to redeem and reconcile the world both to and in Himself, and also to and in ourselves. He leads us on the way of righteousness, teaches us truth, and grants us life eternal. Jesus’s sacrifice for us, alone, makes that redemption and reconciliation possible. Our relationship is restored. As we begin to understand what that means, we become aware of the love which God has for us and for all of his creation.

Why should Church be important?

A popular view of the Church is that it is outdated, irrelevant, perhaps even reactionary.

The Church is, as it were, the environment in which the Kingdom of God is prepared. In the Eucharist we are filled with God's presence, and we bring this presence to the world: we become the "sacrament of the unchurched".

Churches are places where God's love can be found in the warmth of the fellowship and in the dignity and liveliness of the worship. Here people are concerned about the world we live in and sincere in wanting to discover what it means to be a follower of Jesus today. These are not perfect people, but a community of imperfect individuals regularly asking God for forgiveness.

Some might legitimately argue that the world does not need the Church in order to do good, and thus conclude that the Church is irrelevant to today's society. At some moments of history, Christians are an existentially essential motor of progress, as things should be. However, often "the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light" (Luke 16:8), where secular institutions and individuals may behave more ethically than many Christians. Although sometimes Christians and their institutions are bad examples of morality, the Church is not about us, but about God. The Holy Spirit is leading the Church (John 14:16), and the Church must listen to His clear voice (Revelation 3:22).

To meet in church together allows us to learn more about our faith and deepen our commitment to God. It is possible to be a Christian without going to church, though that is, nevertheless, like severely limiting one's own oxygen supply. It is much better to have the support and encouragement of our family of faith.

Are doubts reasonable?

From childhood we are taught that we best learn when we remain inquisitive and ask questions. Doubts can only be dispelled by continuing to ask pertinent questions throughout our lives and in so doing learn more about ourselves and the world we live in.

It is right therefore to ask questions about our faith, what we believe and, indeed, about God himself. It is natural for us all to have doubts at various times in our life and at those times we need to find support in our church communities as we discern a wealth of encouragement in the rich literary styles, techniques and devices of Biblical literature, that we may pray with sacred inspiration, and live in true honesty. There is no honesty until we are honest with ourselves.

We must face our doubts squarely and tackle them sensibly. It does not help to pretend they are not there.

Talking to others is one of the best ways to receive help with our doubts, and the obvious place to find help and support is with our open-hearted fellowship of travellers on our spiritual and life affirming journey. Here, we learn the power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, who continually reaches out to the lost, that all may find inclusion and know the meaning and experience of Divine Love.

*Brian G. Rodford Advent 2022*