It is difficult for us to imagine the eve of Saint Bartholomew’s Day 1662. We are locked in our own time, encased within our own experience. The customs and conventions of 2012 make it difficult to sympathise let alone empathise with those who have gone before us. The past is a strange place; they do curious things there. 350 years is not just long ago, it is virtually another world. But to the extent that we are able, let us try to gain a sense of the night before the new Book of Common Prayer was published and to grasp what was at stake for its compilers and advocates, its recipients and its detractors.

That a new Prayer Book was about to be launched was a remarkable thing. The King, Charles II, had recently come to the throne after the monarchy was restored following the twelve years of turbulent republican government. His father King Charles I had been put to death as a tyrant, guilty of declaring war on his own people in an ill-fated attempt to retain absolute power. Charles II was determined to enact revenge on those who had executed his father even as his younger brother Henry and sister Mary died of smallpox, and his brother James married a Roman Catholic. While
the depleted economy was being reconfigured to accommodate a constitutional monarch and a representative parliament, there was a burgeoning empire to administer and the prospect of war with the Dutch.

With all of these pressures demanding his attention, it is remarkable that one of the new King’s first acts was agreeing to commission a new Prayer Book that many hoped would unite a people deeply divided over how God was to be worshipped and what kind of Church ought to be maintained. There was lingering hostility between Puritans, Roman Catholics and those who believed in an Established Church – an entity that would accommodate the spiritual aspirations of the nation. The liturgy the new Prayer Book was superseding had been banned because it represented state-sanctioned religious orthodoxy and because it contained doctrines that some believers neither accepted nor assented to.

If Charles wanted the blood of regicides, advocates of the Established Church demanded vigorous suppression of the Puritans. Sadly most of the bishops forgot nothing and forgave nothing. Whereas Charles was personally disposed towards religious diversity, the Church’s leaders would have nothing of it. In Charles’ realm, religious assemblies of five or more people were prohibited unless they submitted to the order and discipline of the Church of England. The Act of Uniformity would make the use of the *Book of Common Prayer* obligatory from midnight on Thursday 24 August 1662. No public service of worship could be conducted unless it was drawn from the pages of the new Prayer Book. A lot was riding on the volume that would appear on St Bartholomew’s Day.

When copies went on sale, most were loose-leaved sheets produced in folios; the main issue was not the Prayer Book or its contents but the Act of Uniformity. While I find myself lacking in sympathy for the theological agenda and ecclesiological aspirations of the Puritans, I would have shared their utter abhorrence at the Act of Uniformity and its religious presumptions and political pretensions. Initial reactions to the *Book of Common Prayer* did not focus on its contents but on the intolerance of the coercive apparatus in which it was encased. This was a tragedy, not only because the Act of Uniformity was certainly doomed to fail (and it did), but also because the magnitude of the compilers’ achievement was overlooked and perhaps even wilfully ignored by those from whom better might have been expected.

Nearly two thousand clergy, unwilling to submit to the Act of Uniformity on principle, were ejected from their churches and made into virulent
The 1662 Book of Common Prayer: The Prayer Book of a nation

opponents of a Prayer Book that contained so much that was worthy of their study and their support.

When the controversy and the conflict over state-sanctioned religion died down, even the in-principle detractors of an authorised liturgy acknowledged its careful handling of complex doctrine and praised its provision of wise pastoral counsel. Such was its theological substance and liturgical substance, the 1662 Book of Common Prayer was to serve the English Church and the Church of England in Australia for more than 300 years.

What then, 350 years on, can we as the people of God draw from this Prayer Book? Let me mention just seven things very briefly. The first is the importance of common public and private prayer. The second is the value of regular prayer at set times. The third is striking the right balance between, for instance, thanksgiving and intercessions, repentance and praise. The fourth is attentiveness to context and acknowledgement of locality in expressing a Christian presence and declaring a Christian agenda. The fifth is the significance of posture to both prayer and worship. The sixth is the possibility of securing and preserving doctrinal orthodoxy through an authorised liturgy. The seventh is the inculcation of belief and the deepening of faith through worship.

With these legacies in mind, I contend that the Book of Common Prayer belongs not just to the Church of England and to Anglicans but to Western civilisation and its intellectual and public culture. For centuries, the Book of Common Prayer seemed to mediate not only religious life but civil proceedings as well. From my observations of the liturgical reform process that began in England during the 1920s, inadequate attention was given to the wider audience and the broader function of the Book of Common Prayer. Having said that, I concede that the Church was, of course, the most consistent user of the Book of Common Prayer and the most affected by the liturgy; it was not surprising that it looked first to its own needs, albeit in relation to the community it was called to serve. In my view the ‘supplementary’ Prayer Books of 1978 and 1995 managed to preserve several of the essential elements of the mood and the tenor of worship and life that was projected into all of society through the 1662 Prayer Book. Yet, An Australian Prayer Book and A Prayer Book for Australia were primarily liturgies for a church and not prayer books for a nation. They lack the broad sweep and holistic vision of the Book of Common Prayer.
The critical question that we might ask is this: given that the *Book of Common Prayer* has been highly successful in helping to civilise Australia and was incredibly effective in determining the shape of that civilisation, can the *Book of Common Prayer* now be safely abandoned with the salutary words ‘well done good and faithful servant’? I think not. Why? Briefly, because cultures change and institutions mutate; because memories are short and attitudes are shifting; because identity can be lost and self-awareness can diminish; and because we ought to resist and defy anything in public conversation which presumes or implies that the past is irrelevant or anything which forgets that civilised societies are moral achievements but also are works-in-progress. Any person who declares that yesterday is out of sight or thinks they and he or she alone shapes his or her own choices and decisions is ignorant of the presence of cultural legacies that transform all they touch. Any society which announces that it now is what it might yet become is already exuding the signs of decadence and has sowed the first seed of its own demise.

I would not want anyone to think that I am promoting the *Book of Common Prayer* (or its heirs and successors) as a manual for personal fulfilment or a charter for civil society. It was not intended to be either. But to the extent that it places individuals and communities in right relation to each other and to God and to the extent that it offers a compelling account of the fallen sinner and an honest appraisal of the broken family, it addresses questions, identifies issues and with clarity speaks well beyond the narrow confines of the gathered Christian community with an engaging vision of the created order.

When immersed in the *Book of Common Prayer* the reader is constantly reminded that Christianity is not a personal creed for individuals to pursue in private in the confines of their own homes. While Christianity seeks to take the slum out of the individual, it strives to take individuals and whole communities out of slums as well. The *Book of Common Prayer* stresses that Christianity is a radical religion that calls for nothing less than the complete inner transformation of the individual through repentance and faith and a comprehensive renewal of society based on love and compassion. It emphasises that Jesus lived and died to free individuals from slavery to sin and death, and that he commanded his followers to fashion a new community in which the promises of the *Magnificat* (Luke 1:46–55) were physically
realised and the pledges of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:1–12) took concrete form. Not surprisingly, both texts are recited in common prayer.

But inasmuch as the compilers of the *Book of Common Prayer* were more interested in a godly people than a Christian nation, the daily services made plain the conviction that sanctified individuals and the heavenly community of which they were a part would stand as a powerful witness to the power and purpose of God and speak prophetically against a world gripped by selfishness, material greed, oppression and discrimination. The Christian message, as presented in the *Book of Common Prayer*, was never intended to be therapy for dispirited individuals but an invitation for sinners to embrace holiness in their private and public lives. The Church’s mission was not to enhance popular culture or improve the quality of political discourse but to undo existing exploitative power structures and to replace them with relationships shaped by humility and sacrifice after the pattern of Jesus and the practice of the early Church.

In committing itself to upholding the dignity of all women and men and to addressing the plight of every family, the *Book of Common Prayer*’s prayers for all people emphasised that the Church’s collective task is to proclaim the unity of humankind based on Christ’s acts of reconciliation (Ephesians 2:14). As this universality must become a visible reality, the ‘Church militant here in earth’ is called to be a witness to the one-ness of humanity in its own life. As a national entity, the Church of England was called upon to lead the way in showing how this could be achieved by a godly people.

Living in 2012, we are all aware that the worship of our Church has largely shifted from a common liturgy to local custom. You might well take a jaundiced view and call this diversity incoherence. In effect, you might say, we are unable to find an enduring consensus on how to worship, so we worship in our own way and hope it will appeal to those we seek to attract. If you prefer a different style of corporate worship or a different flavour to your personal devotion, you are invited to find a community and to embrace an ethos that better reflects your taste and temperament. But how do we mediate doctrine in such an environment? If we construct and convey a particular theology through worship – and this is unavoidable – is it still possible to hope for Christian people to be of one mind on questions relating to believing, belonging and behaving? Or will we accept, contrary to the *Book of Common Prayer*’s assertions, that each local congregation has the
right to assert its own authority and to arbitrate on questions relating to belief and custom? I leave these questions with you to ponder.

As I get older (I was born six weeks after the Book of Common Prayer’s 300th anniversary), I find that more and more of the old Prayer Book comes to me as wise guidance and sound advice. It invites me to come to terms with sin – ‘the burden of [which] is intolerable; ‘the remembrance of [which] is grievous’ – and to marvel at the grace of a God who does not weigh ‘our merits but pardon[s] our offences’. It gives me so many memorable and compelling turns of phrase that resonate in my mind and being, and holds before me a vision of the coming Kingdom, a ‘world without end’, that lifts up my heart and ‘renew[s] a right spirit within me’. It tells me that the same God who will not be mocked never gives up on me. In the Book of Common Prayer, I have encountered as perhaps nowhere else a profound depiction of God and a fuller description of providence, and this encounter has helped me to grow in godliness. For this, to quote the Book of Common Prayer itself, I give ‘humble and hearty thanks’ for the ‘means of grace and the hope of glory’. It is my prayer that you too might encounter God afresh and anew in the pages of the Book of Common Prayer and be similarly enriched.

A prayer for the Anglican Church

O God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, our only Saviour, the Prince of Peace: give us grace seriously to lay to heart the great dangers we are in by our unhappy divisions; take away all hatred and prejudice, and whatever else may hinder us from godly union and concord; that, as there is but one Body and one Spirit, one hope of our calling, one Lord, one Faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of us all, so we may be all of one heart and of one soul, united in one holy bond of truth and peace, of faith and charity, and may with one mind and one mouth glorify you; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Accession Service, 1662 Book of Common Prayer