Let me begin by expressing my gratitude for the opportunity to share in this celebration of the pivotal role of the Book of Common Prayer in the life of our church, our nation and our world. I very much appreciate the privilege of leading and participating in worship in the modern surroundings of the Cathedral. But it is a real tonic to be able to enjoy Choral Evensong in a wonderful building which, at least to the untrained observer, looks as though it might have been here back in 1662!

When asked how he would go about defending the Bible, the great nineteenth century Baptist preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon replied in these terms: “Defend the Bible?! I’d sooner defend a caged lion. Unleash it and it will defend itself.” It must surely be right to say something rather similar about the Book of Common Prayer, if only, of course, because it is itself so comprehensively soaked in Scripture. “Unleash it and it will defend itself.”

I don’t, therefore, feel the need to **defend** the Book of Common Prayer. But I am sure there is plenty of scope for it to be **unleashed** rather more than it is. That, of course, is the continuing challenge for your Society. To help people overcome their understandable anxieties about this majestic old beast and let it out of its cage. Unleash it, set it free, and it will do its work – and what a wonderful work it is!

Today we celebrate a book intended to enable public prayer and the administration of the sacraments to be said ‘in a tongue understanded of the people’. It may seem a little perverse, therefore, to offer you a text in Latin. But here goes anyway...

I want to remind you of the well-known Latin tag ‘lex orandi, lex credendi’, a phrase which is thought to have originated from Prosper of Aquitaine in the fifth century. It’s about the relationship that exists between the way we worship (the law of prayer, ‘lex orandi’) and what we believe (the law of belief, ‘lex credendi’). Liturgical scholars have differed in their views on which comes first but there can be no doubt that the way we worship profoundly influences and moulds what we believe. It’s important to get our liturgy right!

As Stephen Cottrell, the Bishop of Chelmsford, says, ‘The Church of England has always believed that we learn and express our doctrine through our worship. The Book of Common Prayer, therefore, does not just contain beautiful liturgy, it is the finest expression of what we believe. Through its language our faith is shaped. Without it our faith is diminished.’

Professor Raymond Chapman, one of the Vice Presidents of your Society, puts it like this: ‘While modern services sometimes seem to lack the deep reverence with which we should approach God, the Book of Common Prayer continually honours his awe and majesty while also reminding us that he is a loving Father, close to each of us. It recognises the seriousness of sin and also the assurance of pardon for all who turn to God in faith. We have never really understood the reality of human wickedness, so apparent in the world around us, until we can sincerely say of our sins ‘the remembrance of them is grievous unto us: the burden of them is intolerable’.

‘Lex orandi, lex credendi’ is fine as far as it goes. But I want to leave you with the thought that we need to go a little further.
Today’s second lesson from the second epistle of Paul to the Thessalonians reminds us that merely to believe the right things is not enough. What matters is what we actually go on and do about it. And while the connection between how we worship and what we believe is often unconscious and below the surface, the connection between ‘what we believe’ and ‘what we do about it’ can’t be taken for granted in the same way. It needs our constant attention.

And so, important though it is, let’s not be content just with ‘lex orandi, lex credendi’ but remember also to include how we put it into practice. Let us go on to embrace ‘lex orandi, lex credendi, lex vivendi’. Let us allow our prayer and worship to shape, not only what we believe - but also how we choose to live as the obedient sons and daughters of our loving heavenly Father. ‘Lex orandi, lex credendi, lex vivendi.’ To the praise and glory of the One to whom be ascribed, as is most justly due, all might, majesty, dominion and power, now and forever. Amen.

David Stone