

Trystan Owain Hughes

Our Father, in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

LIVING THE PRAYER

The everyday challenge of the Lord's Prayer

For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours now and for ever.
Amen

Trystan Owain Hughes

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Contents

Prologue	9
1 Our Father, in heaven	16
2 Hallowed be your name	30
3 Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven	44
4 Give us today our daily bread	58
5 Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.....	72
6 Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil	86
7 For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours now and for ever	99
Epilogue.....	115
Acknowledgements	123
Bibliography	124

Prologue

Gonna change my way of thinking.

Bob Dylan song on the first album recorded after he converted to Christianity

It takes a certain determination to row against the current.

Tom Hiddleston in *High Rise* (2016)

The challenge of prayer

Prayer is not simply an optional extra for followers of Jesus. After all, Jesus prefaces the Lord's Prayer by stating '*when* you pray' (Matthew 6:5) not '*if* you pray'. Yet many of us find prayer difficult in so many ways. How do we find time to pray in the hectic bustle of modern life? How do we find the words to communicate the seemingly inexpressible to the ineffable? How do we find space for the silence to listen? These difficulties, though, seem almost insignificant compared with the complexities of the theology of prayer. How does God answer prayer? When does God answer our petitions? What does it mean when all we hear is silence when we listen for his voice?

I was 18 years old, and a first-year student in university, when I read the uplifting life story of the great Welsh prayer intercessor Rees Howells, who famously spent the first half of the 20th century praying for the people of South Africa and the United Kingdom. With the realisation that my own efforts to pray paled into insignificance by comparison with Howells' labours, I wandered into the office of my university chaplain to ask his advice. Initially, I was sent away to consider whether guilt at neglecting my childhood nightly prayers was at the heart of my struggle. My second visit to the chaplain was even more confusing as I was sent away clutching a book that he

insisted would help me – *The Buddhist’s Guide to Prayer*! Neither visit did my prayer life much good. I quickly realised that it is difficult to obtain satisfactory answers to the big questions about the practice and theology of prayer. After all, even Paul seems to have found prayer mysterious and perplexing (Romans 8:26).

In approaching the puzzle of prayer, though, I came to realise that we already have a blueprint. In the person and words of Jesus we not only witness a life transformed by a prayerful relationship with the Father, but we also have, in the prayer known as the ‘Lord’s Prayer’, a form of words that can underpin our own fallible utterances and inspire our daily lives. The roots of this prayer are in the Hebrew prayer forms of the synagogue, and the prayer is found, with only some slight differences in wording, in both Luke’s Gospel and Matthew’s Gospel, as well as in the *Didache*, the book of church instruction from the early second century.

The positioning of the Lord’s Prayer in Matthew’s Gospel, where the prayer is given in the context of the Sermon on the Mount, is particularly revealing. Jesus precedes the prayer by explaining how *not* to pray. Hypocritical personal piety and meticulous observance of laws are detrimental to true prayer. Rather, prayer, as it is then detailed in the Lord’s Prayer, demands a vital and loving relationship both with God and with others, which stands in stark contrast to the blinkered rules of the Pharisees and the empty ritual of first-century pagans (Matthew 6:5–8). Furthermore, what follows the words of the Lord’s Prayer, where Jesus reminds his followers of the radical nature of God’s providence (Matthew 6:19–34), roots the prayer in the challenge it poses for us – the challenge of opening our hearts and minds to tear down traditional world views and receive wisdom.

Prayer as transformation

This book will explore how the Lord’s Prayer animates us to reassess our conditioning and our world views. We emerge from the womb

like precious metal from a furnace, which can be moulded and shaped with relative ease. We are formed in our early years, and these experiences define us and affect our later life. More subtly, from an early age we are sold a particular world view. We are taught and told how we should act and what we should value. In the contemporary world, this is, more often than not, a world view that glorifies the individual, places wealth and prosperity as the ultimate attainment, and views competition and success as defining our very being. Even many people of faith, who know all too well the verses about possessions and the love of money that follow the Lord's Prayer in Matthew's Gospel (6:19–24), have bought into the lie that greed is absolutely necessary for so-called 'progress', that inequality is essential for the flourishing of society and that 'survival of the fittest' defines our species.

Despite this, we are not, of course, finished products once childhood is over. Precious metals can, at any time, be melted down, refined and reworked. And so it is with our thoughts and world views. Like silver or gold, we can be transformed completely. 'He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver,' asserted the prophet Malachi (3:3). This is something of what repentance means in the Gospels. The Greek word for repentance (*metanoia*) can be interpreted more literally as 'changing one's mind', in the sense of waking up to the shortcomings of our present thoughts and embracing new ways of thinking – 'Repent and believe the good news!' proclaimed Jesus (Mark 1:15). Thus, at the heart of our faith is a wake-up call, for us to reassess the ways of thinking and acting bestowed on us from our familial, cultural and societal backgrounds. The role of the Lord's Prayer is therefore not to keep us in our warm, cosy beds. Instead, it should stir us from our slumber.

Changing ways that are ingrained into our being, however, is certainly not easy to do. Refining and purifying a metal through fire, with the aim of removing contaminants, is a painstaking and difficult process. Likewise, it is painful for us to shed our deep-seated thoughts and views. Such a waking-up process can leave us feeling

insecure and anxious. We are, after all, incarcerated in our ways of thinking and acting, and waking up is rarely a pleasant experience. My two-year-old son has a most agreeable personality – inquisitive, smiling and often laughing. But first thing in the morning, before he’s eaten or properly woken up to the world, he is a completely different character. Funnily enough, he rather reminds me of my wife before her morning coffee! While waking up can be an uncomfortable experience, our faith demands that we do open our eyes to view reality and face the truth. We are called to re-evaluate how we have been conditioned from the cradle and how we have been taught to view the world. We are called to reflect on the person of Jesus and how he would want us to approach the prevailing world view – a world view that champions wealth, consumerism and materialism. ‘No one can serve two masters,’ Jesus asserts in the verses following the Lord’s Prayer. ‘Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other’ (Matthew 6:24).

Before film producer Ari Handel achieved fame for his Academy-Award-winning films *The Wrestler* and *Black Swan*, he studied for a PhD in neuroscience. His research on mental functioning involved teaching a macaque monkey, named Santiago, to play a video game, with sweet-tasting juice as the monkey’s reward. After enjoying the game and the accompanying juice for a number of days, Santiago suddenly refused to play, banging and banging and aborting every trial. The little monkey had realised the whole purpose of the exercise was not for his benefit at all. Rather, he had understood that he was the slave of the scientist. Handel concluded, ‘That realisation made the juice taste bitter, and he didn’t want to do it anymore. He was having no part. And I had a monkey who was on strike.’

Like Santiago, we have been peddled a version of reality that is not for our own good. We largely accept it without question, despite it being very much at odds with our transformative and radical faith. We are told that we are helpless to change the huge inequality between poor and rich in society, as it is the natural order of things. We are told that our own meagre efforts to care for the environment

will do nothing in the large scheme of things. We are told that we can placate ourselves by becoming happy and fulfilled through obtaining more money in our banks, owning more objects, upsizing to bigger houses, or becoming more successful and popular.

The Lord's Prayer helps open our eyes to this myth. Once this happens, our old ways of seeing and acting start to taste bitter. Like Santiago, we will begin to realise that we are slaves to a destructive system of thinking, having been sold a false god that is far removed from the faith that Christ taught us. This realisation can lead us to embrace a new way of thinking and a new way of acting. No longer will we feel detached from each other, from our environment and from God. By our refusing to be servants to individualism, consumerism, material comfort and competition, our servanthood is transformed, so we truly view others as our brothers and sisters and honour all life as valuable in its own right.

The revolution of the Lord's Prayer

Changing our ways of thinking, though, requires nothing less than a revolution. We are called to cast away old behaviours that are detrimental, not only to us as individuals, but also to our communities, society and the world. When Jesus taught his disciples to pray, he was challenging them to use prayer to underpin this transformation. Prayer is often seen as a passive action, but nothing can be further from the truth with this 63-word revolutionary supplication. As it did for the disciples before us, the Lord's Prayer can inspire and encourage us in our journeys away from futile ways of viewing the world and destructive ways of treating it.

In John Carpenter's cult classic film *They Live* (1988), the protagonist discovers a pair of magical sunglasses that allow him to view 'reality'. When he wears the glasses, propaganda and lies are revealed all around. Instead of advertisements, billboards suddenly spell 'Buy' or 'Obey'. Instead of the usual pictures on money, 'This is our God'

is printed on the notes. Like those sunglasses, the Lord's Prayer can help open our eyes to the falsehoods that have been propagated since we were young. It can help clear the fog of modern living to reveal reality and truth. This, after all, is what the Christian faith is all about – opening our eyes to the reality of existence and then working to transform situations. This is the radical call of Christ, who speaks to us in the same way as he spoke to those around him – urging us to follow him, by waking up, shedding our complacency and hypocrisy, and living out our beliefs.

In the Lord's Prayer, we have something that opposes the uncompromisingly individualistic approach of our society. It is communal to its core, and can teach us, feed us, and inspire our thoughts, words and actions towards others. We are roused from our sleep to reject the bread we have been fed since childhood and to live our lives focused on the plight of the other, aware of the far-reaching impact of our actions. As such, the prayer is rooted in eternal truths, being as contemporary and relevant as it was 2,000 years ago. 'This prayer cries out for justice, bread, forgiveness and deliverance,' writes Tom Wright. 'If anyone thinks those are irrelevant in today's world, let them read the newspaper and think again.'

The irony is, of course, that this prayer can still become nothing but a bland poem that we recite without thought, a way of praying that Jesus himself warned against immediately before gifting us his prayer (Matthew 6:7). I saw a cartoon recently where a mother overhears her child saying the Lord's Prayer before bed. She breaks into this prayer time with some words of advice for her young daughter: 'Sweetheart, why not say the whole prayer this time, with none of this *et cetera, et cetera*!' Yet sometimes we may as well be that young girl saying '*et cetera, et cetera*' as we say this prayer mindlessly or with our thoughts elsewhere.

The Lord's Prayer offers too much to allow it to become mere words. In this volume we'll therefore be unpacking each line of the prayer to explore the richness and depth of every phrase. It will be like

unwinding a ball of wool. By doing so, we can study the intricacy of the yarn, and touch and feel something very different from when it was simply a ball. Most wonderful of all, when we unwind wool, it can be knitted into something that is useful and gives joy to others. As we engage with each line of the Lord's Prayer, the words will start to inspire not just our thoughts but also our actions. We will feel the radical depth of what the prayer is saying, and we will be inspired to live the prayer in a practical way in our everyday lives.

In my research for this book, I read numerous volumes on this short prayer. Many of these interpreted its words very differently, but each had something to offer. What this book has to offer is not a summary of the other texts, nor is it a volume to eclipse all others – that would be a tall order in the light of offerings from such eminent thinkers as Karl Barth, William Barclay, Tom Wright and Rowan Williams. Instead, I hope to present some original and thought-provoking insights in a way that is rooted in contemporary culture and issues.

I have deliberately used the version of the Lord's Prayer recited in many church services today. My hope is that, by the end of the book, your view of a prayer you thought you knew so well will have been transformed, and, as a result, you will be inspired in thought and action by these radical, uplifting, profound and enriching 63 words:

*Our Father, in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
 on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins,
 as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation,
 but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours
 now and for ever. Amen*

What are we really saying when we say the Lord's Prayer?

What are we expecting?

Living the Prayer is a fresh perspective on the Lord's Prayer. Rooted in the Bible as well as in contemporary culture, it explores how this prayer can radically challenge and transform our daily lives. Contained in the prayer's 63 words is a fresh and innovative way of viewing, and acting in, the world that is as relevant now as it was 2,000 years ago. The author shows that this revolutionary prayer demands that we don't remain on our knees, but rather that we work towards making God's topsy-turvy, downside-up kingdom an everyday reality.

Trystan Owain Hughes is the Director of Ordinands for the Diocese of Llandaff and priest-in-charge of Christ Church, Roath Park, Cardiff, Wales. Since being ordained, he has become particularly interested in making theology and spirituality relevant to today's church. He is the author of the 2013 BRF Advent book *Real God in the Real World*. Trystan has also been a regular contributor to BBC Radio 2 and BBC Radio 4 and is on the theological commission that assists the bench of Welsh bishops.

'A sensitive, thoughtful and painstaking exposition of the Lord's Prayer... a very fine contribution to a subject which can never be exhausted.' **Elaine Storkey**, author and broadcaster

'A great contribution from an author rooted in practicalities and compassion... Hughes offers us something genuinely fresh and new. A reminder of the radical power of some life-changing words.'
Keith Hebden, Director of the Urban Theology Union



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