



Liturgical Prayer

CRANMER'S TRIED AND TRUE LANGUAGE

Liturgical prayer is ritual verbal praise, confession, thanksgiving, and/or petition that we offer to God, often in the company of other pray-ers.

Liturgy in prayer is as old as the *Shema* (meaning “hear”), a Hebrew summons to confess the nature of God: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is one” (Deut 6:4–5). Moses commanded the Israelites to repeat the *Shema* regularly (6:6–9) in order to fix the call firmly in their hearts. Liturgical prayer can also be found in many of the Psalms that were used in Temple worship. Psalm 67 is a recognizable example with its refrain, “Let the peoples praise thee, O God; let all the peoples praise thee!” Similarly, every verse in the antiphonal Psalm 136 concludes with the response “for his mercy endures forever.” The most famous New Testament liturgy, the *Our Father*, acts as both a specific prayer and a template for how to pray (Matt 6:9–13).

Liturgies from both the Old and New Testaments continued to be used in the early church even as new prayers developed and were codified (Acts 2:42). By AD 1220, the Roman Catholic church was collecting service books from across England to standardize their prayers and practices. The resulting liturgies multiplied until Thomas Cranmer began his reformation revisions.¹

Cranmer was born in 1489 to a wealthy farmer. His keen mind and conservative,² penetrating disposition suited him to the life of an academic. He rose so quickly in the university system and the church that King Henry VIII took notice of him and sent him to the Continent as an envoy. In 1533, Henry recalled Cranmer from his diplomatic duties and reformation studies to consecrate him Archbishop of Canterbury.

At this time Henry had already begun proceedings to force the annulment of his first marriage, since it had not produced a male heir, but the English church had yet to break completely with Rome. Nevertheless, cracks between the English government and Roman authority had widened sufficiently to bother the cautious Cranmer. Consecration as archbishop included swearing an oath of obedience to the pope, and he thought this would conflict with his obedience to the crown, so he made it known that he was taking the oath only as a formality. He would neither oppose the crown, nor limit his pursuit of reformation in the Church of England.³

A formal Act of Supremacy, proclaiming that Henry outranked the pope, was finally issued at the end of 1534. Cranmer took advantage of the political move to begin reforming the services and prayers of the English church. Ten years later, Henry ordered him to write prayers in the English language for the king's armies to recite as they went into battle. These were the first published portions of a new English liturgy.⁴

¹ G. Eric Lane, “Cranmer's Prayer Book and Its Influence,” in *The Reformation of Worship: 1989 Westminster Conference Papers* (Surrey, England, 1990), 17.

² Marcus L. Loane, “Thomas Cranmer,” in *Masters of the English Reformation* (1954; repr. Carlisle, Penn.: Banner of Truth Trust, 2005), 257.

³ *Ibid.*, 232–33.

⁴ Lane, “Cranmer's Prayer Book,” 18.

Cranmer is best known for his lifelong work of filtering, translating, simplifying, and unifying the church service into one work that became known as the *Book of Common Prayer*. From older service books, he rooted out content that was neither Scripture-based nor supported by the early church fathers. He wrote reformed prayers and practices in the vernacular, simplified instructions for worship services so that common people could follow along, and combined a variety of traditions into one.⁵

Ironically, the conservative populace was outraged by this switch to English language services, perhaps because they felt that English was too common, not beautiful enough for worship.⁶ Or perhaps the use of their own language implied greater participation in their faith than could be expected back when religion was performed in Latin.⁷ Furthermore, instead of making a private confession to the priest before the service, people now spoke aloud a unified confession directly to God, asking “Lord have mercy” after the Ten Commandments were read.⁸

In the preface to the 1549 edition of the English service book, Cranmer explained, “Whereas St Paul would have such language spoken to the people in the church, as they might understand and have profit by hearing the same [1 Cor 14:5–12]; the service in this Church of England (these many years) hath been read in Latin to the people, which they understood not; so that they have heard with their ears only; and their hearts, spirit, and mind, have not been edified thereby.”⁹

In 1552, under the authority of Henry’s son, a final version called the *Second Prayer Book of Edward VI* was issued. The book specified both the methods and the words to be used in services of worship, feast days, consecrations, marriages, baptisms, burials, and ordinary days throughout the church calendar. Cranmer wrote many of the prayers himself and translated others from ancient sources. His combination of words and styles from both the Germanic and the Latin roots of English resulted in memorable phrases—“meet, right, and our bounden duty”—that continue to appeal to a wide range of participants. His ability to convey spiritual experience and deep theology with drama and ease for unified recitation has caused these written prayers to flourish for centuries.¹⁰

Anglican and Episcopal traditions continue to employ an edition of the *Book of Common Prayer* similar to Edward’s. Other high church traditions, such as Roman Catholicism and Lutheranism, also enjoy tried and true collections of prayer. Liturgical prayer in low church traditions can be heard in the repetition of Scripture songs and in the “amen,” “yes Jesus,” and “uh-hmm” of call and response preaching.

At its best, liturgical prayer answers our need to pray “thy kingdom come” as something besides a disappointed concession. It broadens our perspective,¹¹ teaching us to pray beyond our small scope. When we cannot find words to pray because of chaos in our world or in our minds, liturgical prayer supplies them. When we mistrust our own abilities to say what we mean or to hear the Lord

⁵ Ibid., 18–20.

⁶ Ibid., 23–25.

⁷ Jasper Ridley, *Thomas Cranmer* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1962), 288.

⁸ Lane, “Cranmer’s Prayer Book,” 18, 21.

⁹ Thomas Cranmer, preface to *The First Book of Edward VI* (1549), quoted in William Reed Huntington, *A Short History of the Book of Common Prayer* (1893), n.p. [cited 24 June 2009]. Online: www.justus.anglican.org/resources/bcp/short_history_BCP.htm.

¹⁰ Lane, “Cranmer’s Prayer Book,” 23–25.

¹¹ Richard J. Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart’s True Home* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 107–108.

speaking back, liturgical prayer provides the tried and true language of our great cloud of witnesses (Heb 12:1). If we are like Cranmer, cautious and careful, perhaps afraid our prayers are trivial and unworthy for lack of knowledge, liturgical prayers offer the comfort of standing the test of time, while expressing profound truths of our own experience.

Cranmer was cautious to the end. Scholars debate whether he was a political chameleon, surviving several very different governments by accommodating the powers that be, or a skilled diplomat, bringing extreme factions of the Reformation and Roman Catholicism together through meticulous scholarship and patient loyalty. His work ended when Mary, Henry's only surviving child with his first wife, came to the throne bent on blotting out all reforms and returning English worship to Rome. Thomas Cranmer was forced to recant his revisions or be burned alive. Caught between his oath of obedience to his sovereign and his beliefs,¹² he renounced his beliefs. But after an agonizing night, he changed his mind. Instead of reading his refutation, he publicly begged God's forgiveness. He was burned at the stake on March 21, 1556, at the age of 66. His prayers of petition survive, and thrive, to this day.¹³

Practice

1. Choose a liturgical prayer to practice. Two prayers from the *Book of Common Prayer* are printed here.¹⁴ They are known as "suffrages" or short intercessory prayers that are usually spoken in a series. You may be aware of similar, often repeated prayers from your church. Some churches, for example, lay out Psalms at the back of their hymnals for antiphonal reading. Other collections of prayers are listed in the Study Further section below.

Rite II: Evening Prayer, Suffrage A

Show us your mercy, O Lord;

And grant us your salvation.

Clothe your ministers with righteousness;

Let your people sing with joy.

Give peace, O Lord, in all the world;

For only in you can we live in safety.

Lord, keep this nation under your care;

And guide us in the way of justice and truth.

Let your way be known upon earth;

Your saving health among all nations.

Let not the needy, O Lord, be forgotten;

Nor the hope of the poor be taken away.

Create in us clean hearts, O God;

And sustain us with your Holy Spirit.

¹² Loane, "Thomas Cranmer," 288–89.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 300.

¹⁴ *The Book of Common Prayer and the Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church Together with The Psalter or Psalms of David: According to the Use of the Episcopal Church* (1789; repr. New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, n.d.), 121–22.

Rite II: Evening Prayer, Suffrage B

That this evening may be holy, good, and peaceful,

We entreat you, O Lord.

That your holy angels may lead us in paths of peace and goodwill,

We entreat you, O Lord.

That we may be pardoned and forgiven for our sins and offenses,

We entreat you, O Lord.

That there may be peace to your Church and to the whole world,

We entreat you, O Lord.

That we may depart this life in your faith and fear, and not be condemned before the great judgment seat of Christ,

We entreat you, O Lord.

That we may be bound together by your Holy Spirit in the communion of all your saints, entrusting one another and all our life to Christ,

We entreat you, O Lord.

2. Read the words of the written prayer to yourself slowly. Do not skim. Especially if you are familiar with the prayer, discipline yourself to listen to it anew. Avoid “heap[ing] up empty phrases” in your mind (Matt 6:7 RSV). If you do not feel like praying or know what to pray, permit the words to speak for you. Allow yourself to own the prayer. Let the words or phrases express the yearnings of your own heart, but do not concern yourself if they seem irrelevant to your immediate needs. Hear the whole truth that you are speaking to God.

3. Mouth the prayer to yourself or whisper it softly. Listen for the words that reach beyond your own requests to the life of the community of which you are a part. Consider others on whose behalf you speak these words of praise, confession, thanksgiving, or petition.

4. Pray the prayer out loud. Keep a deliberate pace. Resist the temptation to race or to over-focus on accurate intonation and correct emphasis. Embrace your stutters and mispronunciations as part of the music you bring before the Lord. Join your voice with those throughout the ages and around the world who have prayed this prayer.

5. Pause in silence as the ring of the prayer settles. Listen to the echoes in the room or in your mind.

6. Repeat the prayer again. This time focus on the Lord before whom you offer these words. Some people avoid such prayers because they suspect that lack of spontaneity means they are faking it before God, treating him as less than the Almighty. If you feel this way, consider your participation in the ritual of other ceremonies (baptism, communion, and weddings, for example). When you choose to adopt the forms of a ceremony as your own, you intentionally join your voice with those of the saints around you and who have gone before you. You consent to a formality that has come

to signal the awesome presence of the Most High. So, too, can liturgical prayer signal the grandeur of the King to whose throne you draw near together.

7. At the “Amen,” pause again to listen.

8. Write down the aspect(s) of the prayer or the praying that spoke for you or your community today or share your insights with a spiritual friend or small group.

9. Notice the words of the prayer returning to you throughout the day or later on when a situation arises to which they pertain.

Sample the Prayer

If repeating this sort of prayer on your own seems laborious, consider visiting a liturgical church to experience the prayer. You might attend an Episcopal, Lutheran, or Catholic church some Sunday morning. Perhaps you could visit such a church while away from your regular practice, on vacation or a business trip. Episcopal churches may offer an early mass in addition to the traditional 11 o'clock service, and Catholic churches often hold a family mass on Saturday afternoons.

Practice Together

Most written prayers are intended for the community of believers. Even when individuals pray alone, they join their voices with those who employ the same words. As with any other group activity, there is comfort and perspective in this unified approach. Indeed, the *Book of Common Prayer* was written first for the purpose of edifying the body of believers. Individual use is only its secondary purpose.

If you are in a group, begin as above, reading the words to yourself and then mouthing or whispering them softly. Pray aloud together, in unison or antiphonally, as the prayer suggests. Listen to the person next to you. Do not concern yourselves with perfect pronunciations, but take a measured pace so you can hear and join with one another. When you finish, listen in silence. Be aware of how God may be responding, what words, phrases, or thoughts are resonating, and how these interact with your group's situation or need. Repeat the prayer, again in unison. This time focus on the Lord to whom you are praying. What aspects of his character or work does the prayer emphasize? Listen in silence for a few moments.

After the silence, you may wish to share with one another what stood out to you as you prayed. Or you may simply move on to the next group activity, resting in the assurance that God has heard your petitions and praises and joins your group as you proceed.

Consider

1. The use of liturgical prayer in church, small groups, or as individuals often generates strong emotions, particularly for those who have prior experience with written prayer or who have received prior teaching about it. What is your history with this sort of prayer? Is it comfortable? Does it feel artificial? If you do have an opinion about it, how did it arise?

2. “High church” refers to churches that are hierarchical in their government and formal in their liturgy, but even churches that shun formality settle into a comfortable rhythm of worship that could be called that particular church’s liturgy. Think about your own church or community of faith. What elements are often seen in its style of prayer?

3. Consider your small group’s style of praying or your own personal approach to prayer. What benefits might you derive from employing written prayers? What are the drawbacks of this level of formality? What are the advantages or disadvantages of repeating familiar phrases? How does the feel or dynamic change when you try liturgical prayer?

Study Further

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