

LIVING OUT THE LORD'S PRAYER IN ANGLO-SAXON SPIRITUALITY

Introduction

The Lord's Prayer is the only prayer which Jesus taught his disciples, and it has been important to those who follow him ever since. The Anglo-Saxon writer Bede advised that it is key to teaching the Christian faith. He also translated it from Latin into English so everyone could understand it.

Several versions of the Lord's Prayer in Old English have survived for us to discover. The one included below is special. Each line of the original has been expanded to relate it closely to the writer's own experience. It gives us a window into the needs and faith of someone who lived many centuries ago.

Focusing on knowing God

From the beginning, the writer acknowledges his own weakness, praying for help and comfort. He knows God is in heaven and is holy and powerful; he has a sense of the wonder and glory of God and heaven. But he also knows that the truth about God needs to be established in his mind and heart: he needs help to hold onto it; he needs it to become part of his being.

Focusing on our daily needs

The second part of the prayer focuses on physical and spiritual needs, relationships and conflict. The bridge between the two parts of the prayer is made by the request for daily bread. In this version the poet blends the image of an earthly lord providing his warriors with food in return for their loyalty, and the biblical picture of the heavenly Lord who gave the bread of life, his own body, for the life of the world. Thus, the writer sets Christ at the centre of the prayer, as the source of his strength.

The reflection on forgiveness may reflect the frequent violence of Anglo-Saxon life. Forgiveness was not easy for the Anglo-Saxons, when vengeance was built into the legal system and a socially required duty. One Christian Anglo-Saxon king was killed by his followers, because 'he too readily forgave injuries when the offenders asked pardon.'

The writer is realistic about the challenges around him, begging to be protected from the misery which can crush faith, from sorrow, temptation, and evil. Yet he finishes with confidence, full of thanksgiving and praise.

When you have read this very personal take on the Lord's Prayer, you might like to create your own version.

An Old English version of the Lord's Prayer

Our Father who art in heaven.

Father of humankind, help and consolation I pray of you,
holy Lord, you who are in heaven.

Hallowed be your name.

May your name now, saviour Christ,

be hallowed in our minds,
firmly established in our hearts.

Your kingdom come.

May your kingdom come to us, to all people,
Lord of power, righteous Judge,
and may glorious faith in you remain in our hearts,
all the days of our life.

Your will be done on earth as in heaven.

And may your will among us be fulfilled
in the dwellings of the earthly kingdom,
just as your pure will is in the glory of heaven,
joyfully adorned for evermore.

Give us today our daily bread.

Now give us today, Lord of men,
high King of heaven, our bread
which you sent into the world
for the salvation of our souls —
Christ the pure, that is, Lord God.

And forgive us our sins.

Guardian of men, forgive us our offences and sins
and pardon our crimes, the wounds of the body
and the wicked deeds, with which we often anger you,
merciful and almighty God —

As we forgive those who sin against us.

— just as we forgive the crimes which on earth
people often commit against us,
and do not intend to reproach them for their sins,
so that we may merit eternal life.

Lead us not into temptation.

Saviour Christ, do not lead us into misery,
into the pain of sorrow, into temptation,
in case we, hardened against grace through enmity,
become estranged from all your mercies.

But deliver us from evil.

And now especially save us from the evil
of every enemy. Lord of the angels,
true Lord of victories, in our hearts
we readily give you thanks and glory
that you in your mercy and by your mighty power
redeemed us from the captivity of hell's torment.

Amen.

Let it be so.