



**A sermon for the Cathedral Eucharist at Wells
Cathedral, preached on Sunday 27 July 2025 by the
Very Reverend Toby Wright, Dean of Wells.**

Utterly changed into fire

May my words be faithful to the written word and may the written word lead us to the Living Word, Jesus the merciful One. Amen.

Last week, we sat with Mary at the feet of Jesus and were reminded that before we can be good neighbours or show mercy, we must first be rooted in God. Today, in Luke's Gospel, Jesus teaches his disciples how to be rooted in God, to pray—the only prayer, in fact, Jesus explicitly gives us to say.¹ And for Wendy, Honor and Matt - and for any others of you who are exploring or are new to faith - this one is for you.

So, this is Jesus's only prayer explicitly given for us to say. And yet, curiously, we don't see it being used elsewhere in the New Testament. It's not in Acts, not in Paul's letters, not in the pastoral epistles. Why might that be?

Perhaps it's because this prayer isn't just a formula—it's a way of life. It's not simply words to repeat, but a path to walk, a reality to embody.

The Christian convert and French poet Charles Péguy once wrote that a believer is not an idealist, but "*a desperately hungry [person]*." That's where we begin: with hunger. Because true prayer always begins in need—not polished words or perfect posture, but deep longing.² When we sit at the feet of Jesus, we do so as desperately hungry people. And prayer, then, is like a kind of sacred consumption—like manna from heaven. But as with manna, if we hoard it, if we don't let it nourish us and lead us to mercy, it rots inside.³

¹ Found in Luke 11.2-4 and Matthew 6.9-13. It is often thought that John 17 is a theological exposition of the Lord's Prayer. Also the Didache – an early Christian manual - includes a version of the Lord's Prayer in Didache Chapter 8.

² See the story of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15.11-32) as an example of longing in hunger. This picks up the story of the Israelites in the wilderness (Exodus 16) and the siege of Samaria (2 Kings 6.24-29) which is one of the darkest depictions of hunger in the Bible.

³ See Exodus 16.19-20 for an understanding of not hoarding manna, and Romans 12.8 which lists mercy as a gift of the Spirit. Luke 13 speaks of the barren fig tree and the gardener saying give it one more year or cut it

The early Church Fathers were clear: pray the Lord's Prayer three times a day.⁴ Let it shape you, re-form you. Let it become your breath. If you are new to prayer, this is where to start. Péguy says again, "*Our fidelities are citadels: they do in the long run make, constitute, raise a monument to the face of God.*" In other words, the simple faithful repetition of this prayer builds a life that reflects the divine.

Simone Weil believed that the Lord's Prayer contains every possible petition—and that it's impossible to pray it without being changed.⁵ Changed, not just improved. Transformed. To truly pray it is to surrender to a process of interior reformation, where our desires are reordered, our egos softened, and our will aligned with God's.⁶ The transformation it brings is not cosmetic—it reaches into the marrow of who we are and begins to rewire us for 'love, joy, and peace'.⁷

As we pray this prayer we must beware that temptation often disguises itself as comfort⁸: a false sense of security. And the Lord's Prayer shatters that comfort. As Rowan Williams puts it, "*Every bit of the Lord's Prayer is radical. It challenges our assumptions about who we are, who God is, and what the world is like.*"⁹ The Lord's Prayer prays for nothing less than a revolution—within us and in the world. It dares us to envision a kingdom where the hungry are fed, forgiveness flows freely, and God's will—not ours—is done. The prayer unsettles the complacent heart and reorients us towards holy disruption.

When we say, *Give us today our daily bread*, we are asked to come empty-handed, desperate, hungry. And when we say, *Deliver us from evil*, we're not praying just for protection—we're praying for freedom. We're asking to be released from every form of slavery: the ones we know and the ones we don't.

down if it doesn't bear fruit. As Colossians 1.10 says, '...that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please God in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God'. The Sevenfold Spirit gifts of Isaiah 11.1-3 influence the spiritual gift teaching of 1 Corinthians 12 and Revelation 1.4 and 4.5.

⁴ Basil the Great in his Longer Rule (Rule 8) and the Didache (Chapter 8) states, 'Pray this prayer three times each day'

⁵ See Weil's essay *Reflections on the Lord's Prayer* "If we fix our attention on it and wait, it will slowly disclose to us the full range of our desires, all that we should ask of God."

⁶ The Anglican Divine Richard Hooker saw prayer as the earnest and heartfelt opening of the soul to God, whereby the spirit is moulded to God's will. See *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* (Book V).

⁷ We see the Fruits of the Spirit listed in Galatians 5.22-23 'Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control.'

⁸ An idea found in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *The Cost of Discipleship* 1937

⁹ *Living the Lord's Prayer* Rowan Williams and Wendy Beckett 2007

This line echoes the earliest stories of our faith: the Exodus from Egypt, the chains of captivity, the cry of a people longing for liberation.¹⁰ So every time you pray *Deliver us from evil*, remember: you are a free person in Christ. This is not metaphor. This is reality.

Early Christians knew this. They prayed this prayer standing in the *Orans* position—arms stretched wide like a child running to a parent.¹¹ The Ambrosian Rite insisted on praying like this. Why? Because only a free person prays that way. Not bent in shame. Not crouched in fear. Standing tall, like one who knows they are loved.¹²

So when we pray the Lord's prayer, we join with the saints on Mount Zion.¹³ We stand at the foot of the Cross¹⁴. We return to Eden.¹⁵ We enter into the whole mystery of our faith. We reclaim our freedom.¹⁶ And we say this prayer not just for ourselves, but for all those who have not yet begun the journey of faith.

If you are new to this prayer then in many ways the prayer is best approached backwards. We can start at the end and move to the beginning. For the end starts with being free from the grasp of evil and temptation and then transports us through being cleansed from guilt and enabled to forgive others, to trusting in faithful provision, and belief that God will triumph in our lives and in the world bringing justice and mercy here and now. And then we have the realisation of the sacredness of God, before seeing ourselves only then moving

¹⁰ See Exodus 7.3-5; 9.16 and 12.29-30. Pharaoh is often seen as the personification of Evil, as Romans 9.17 states "For the Scripture says to Pharaoh: 'I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.'"

¹¹ We see Old Testament figures standing with lifted hands – such as Moses (Exodus 17.11) and Daniel (9.3). This is also described by the Church Fathers such as Tertullian (160-220AD) and St Augustine. It is also prescribed in the Byzantine Rite, but the Ambrosian is older (4th century AD).

¹² See the image of standing praying before God in Revelation 7.9-10, "After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white..."

¹³ Hebrews 12.22 "But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly,"

¹⁴ Luke 23.49 and Galatians 2.20 "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."

¹⁵ See Genesis 2.10-14 and Revelation 22.1-2 "Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations."

¹⁶ Paragraph inspired by *The Essence of Prayer*, Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh 1986

to a direct relation with God, Abba/Amma the source of all.¹⁷ If we see it backwards, we can maybe understand it better than if we just read it.¹⁸

Most people come to God not through doctrine, but through suffering, need, forgiveness – we might say hunger. And only then in worship and relationship. Reading Jesus's prayer backwards moves from chaos to communion and, for many, starts with lived reality, leading gently towards relationship with God in a journey.

The early ascetics understood the Christian journey in three stages: first, the slave who obeys out of fear; second, the hired worker who seeks reward; and finally, the child who acts from love.

We begin in fear. We move to desire. But we are meant to arrive in love. That's where the Lord's Prayer leads us. To the place where, like the prodigal child, we come rehearsing our unworthiness—only to be interrupted by a loving parent who runs to meet us, who won't even let us finish the speech: "Worthy or not, you're family." That is what the Lord's Prayer proclaims every time we pray it and perhaps that's why it's the way round it is, starting with our direct relationship with God the source of all.¹⁹

So as you pray the one prayer Jesus gave to us, let it shape you, re-form you. Let it become your breath. Let your fidelity to this prayer be a citadel to *'make, constitute, raise a monument to the face of God'* that truly transforms you and the world around you. Martin Luther knew this, writing in 1535, *'I do not cling to these words in prayer but rather turn them into my own words, to kindle a fire in my heart.'* For these words are not a rigid formula, but fuel for a living, breathing conversation with God to bring comfort.²⁰

As I end, let me share a story from the Desert Fathers: Abbot Lot came to Abbot Joseph and said, "Father, to the best of my ability, I keep my little rule, my fast, my prayer, my meditation. I work to cleanse my heart. What more

¹⁷ John Chrysostom Sermon 19 *On the Lord's Prayer* says that beginning with 'Our Father' "exterminates the inequality of human things... For to all hath He given one nobility, having vouchsafed to be called the Father of all alike."

¹⁸ Paragraph inspired by *The Essence of Prayer*, Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh 1986

¹⁹ John Chrysostom taught on this that it shows God wants to be more loved than feared

²⁰ Martin Luther in 1535 to his barber: "How shameful it is, then, to say the least, that a prayer from such a Master be treated so carelessly by so many who thoughtlessly rattle it off. Many undoubtedly pray the Lord's Prayer a thousand times a year. And though they might pray it their way a thousand years, they haven't benefited one little bit from it! To conclude: Together with the name and Word of God, the Lord's Prayer is the greatest martyr on earth. For everyone tortures and abuses it; few joyfully use it correctly for comfort."

should I do?" Abbot Joseph rose, stretched his hands to heaven, and his fingers became like flames of fire. He said, "Why not be utterly changed into fire?"²¹

Friends, this prayer from Jesus is a way of life. It's not simply words to repeat, but a path to walk, a reality to embody: so why not be utterly changed into fire? Amen.

Toby Wright, Dean of Wells

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²¹ *Desert Fathers and Mothers: Early Christian Wisdom Sayings* Christine Valters Painter 2012