

By Heart: Prayers of the Communion Service

The Downs and Valley Churches, Lent 2026

1. Introduction

Our little group of six village churches have an unbroken chain of Christian worship going back over a thousand years. We planned to celebrate a thousand years of worship at St Mary's Whitchurch, perhaps the first of the churches to be built in the Stour Valley, back in 2022, but Robert Howe, who is the historian of the parish, threw everything into confusion by saying 'I think you're probably 250 years too late!' It is extraordinary to think of our forebears coming into these church buildings and praying faithfully, year by year, century by century.



In many cases the words they used were the same as the ones we still use, though they have sometimes been slightly updated. Many of the familiar prayers in our Communion service especially were adapted from Latin originals or created anew by Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury from 1533 to 1555.

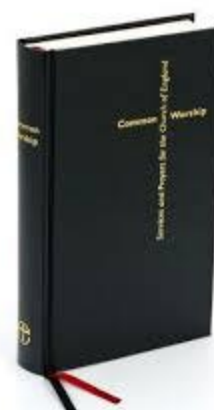
Cranmer produced the *Book of Common Prayer* in two versions, 1549 and 1552, the second more radical than the first but both offering for the first time in history worship and Bible readings in the English language instead of Latin. This was because one of Cranmer's deepest desires was for ordinary people to be able to worship in words which they understood, so that their prayers were genuine communication with God rather than phrases they didn't understand in a language which most of them didn't speak.

This was very controversial at the time, and struggles about worship, particularly the words that should be

used, went on for over a century, being a major factor in the English Civil War in the 1640s.

Cranmer's Prayer Book was the basis of the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer* – which remains the standard for all Church of England liturgy.

After such a long struggle it's perhaps not surprising that there was little appetite for change after 1662 (though a revised Prayer Book was proposed and rejected in 1689). But by the later 19th century the same desire for the use of 'common' language that everyone understood which had motivated Cranmer led to a movement to reform the language (and the format) of worship in the Church of England. Beautiful as Cranmer's 16th century English remains, it was no longer the way people spoke in normal conversation. A long process of revision began, with modern-language services first being used widely from the early 1970s, and culminating in 2000 with the introduction of *Common Worship: Services and Prayers for the Church of England*, which has now been the norm for a quarter of a century.



This Lent we shall be exploring some of the prayers which form part of our Communion services: prayers which most of us know by heart, even if we don't realise that's the case. As we look into these words that trip so easily off the tongue I hope we'll discover a new depth to them, and be able to think how we might use them in our daily prayers too.

The overall progress through Lent follows the pattern of a Communion service, so we start on Ash Wednesday with Thomas Cranmer's great Collect which is traditionally used throughout Lent and focuses on penitence and faith.