Our Father

The Prayer-Book version of the Lord's Prayer does not express what Jesus said and meant: it comes from the Vulgate. And whereas the Greek of St Matthew's gospel (6:9-13) differentiates between God's will being done on earth and in heaven, Latin translates both as 'in'.

Cranmer was steeped in German, and 'which', echoing 'welcher', would not have grated on his ears, as 'which' does on ours. 'Hallowed' is still acceptable, though some other word would be more idiomatic (see further below). But 'trespasses' now conjures up notions of trespassers' being prosecuted; 'transgression' would be better. St Luke's version (11:2-4) has the word ἁμαρτίας (hamartias) which often was used of errors or mistakes. But St Luke then goes on to speak of what a person owes to us. The word ἀφές (aphes) has more the sense of cancelling or remitting debts. This supports St Matthew's version, where, provided we have cancelled the debts owed to us, we can ask God to cancel those we owe him—a theme Jesus re-iterates in the succeeding verses (St Matthew 6:14 and 15), and returns to in his parable of the unforgiving debtor (St Matthew 18:23-35).

The two most misunderstood clauses are those translated “Give us this day our daily bread” and “And lead us not into temptation”.

To deal with the latter first, καὶ μὴ ἐπησεν ὑμῖν (kai me eiseghes) [The word εἰσέγησις (eiseneghes) does not occur in classical Greek; its components suggest a sense of being carried, willy-nilly, into being tried and tested.] ἡμᾶς εἰς πειρασμὸν (kai me eisneghes hemas eis peirasmom), which is the last clause of St Luke's version and to many modern ears suggests chocolates and sex—things that are naughty but nice. That was not what Jesus wanted his followers to be spared. The Greek word πειρασμὸν (peirasmom) has the sense of test. It is a formal trial, almost in our culture an examination. We are to ask not to be put on the spot today, not to have to justify ourselves. That is something we sometimes do have to do; on occasion we may have to give an account of what we have done or failed to have done, or of what we have said, or even of what we have thought. There was a Greek word εὐθύνη (eutune) for the procedure whereby officials were called account for their tenure of office. It was an exacting, and often unpleasant, experience, and that is something we could reasonably ask to be spared today, as a schoolboy might now wish that there would be no exams today.

We understand “bread” in a minimal sense: bread and water, constitute the bare necessities of life, just enough to live on, and no more. But the word Jesus used, ἄρτον (arton), denotes up-market wheat bread in contrast to μάζα (maxa), the much less appetising barley bread. What we would like to have is a piece of cake—a treat—and that is what Jesus told his followers to ask for today. Contrary to the much quoted rule, jam yesterday, jam tomorrow, but never jam today, Jesus is telling us to concentrate on what we want today, and focus our thoughts on what we want today, and not let our enjoyment of today be spoilt by worrying about the past or the future, what excuses we should tender, or what we should wear. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof: no point in adding to it—ask God to make the most of today as it comes.

In the last clause in St Matthew's version ἀλλὰ ἔλθη ἡμᾶς ἀπὸ τοῦ πονηροῦ (alla rhswai hemas apo tou ponerou) 'But deliver us from evil', the word 'evil' could be construed either in a personal sense—the evil one—or an impersonal sense. Translations and scholars are divided over whether ὁ πονηρὸς (tou ponerou) refers to evil in general or the devil in particular. The original Greek, as well as the Latin version, could be either neuter (evil in general) or masculine (the evil one). Jesus
sometimes spoke of a personal embodiment of evil:—“Get thee behind me Satan”—but he may have been speaking metaphorically; there are similar phrases in earlier parts of the Sermon on the Mount, and in St John 17:15 and 2 Thessalonians 3:3, where the term is used to refer to general evil. The “But” is significant. Whereas we are asking not to have our debts demanded of us, and not to be put on the spot, we finally ask to be positively freed from evil. We return to an affirmative note, having asked for bread today, we finish free from evil.

The opening clauses have parallels in Jewish prayers. A meditation by Bishop Rowan Williams (Rt Rev. Lord Williams of Oystermouth) conveys a sense of what is meant by “Hallowed be thy name”. He reflects (BBC 2009-08-06) “Hallowed be thy name” is one of those phrases that’s most strange to us, isn’t it? But I want to see it against the background of the Old Testament’s idea that the name of God is something in itself immensely beautiful and powerful. The name of God is God’s word, God’s presence.

And to ask that God’s name be hallowed, that God’s name be looked upon as holy, is to ask that in the world people will understand the presence of God among them with awe and reverence, and will not use the name or the idea of God as a kind of weapon to put other people down, or as a sort of magic to make themselves feel safe. But rather approach the idea of God, the name of God, the word of God, with the veneration and humility that’s demanded.”

The Prayer as Jesus meant it

We should begin:
Our Father
Who art in Heaven
Holy be thy name.
Thy kingdom come
Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Like Jesus, we should address God as Father, with intimacy, but also great reverence and respect.

We then turn to our own concerns. Give us today And cancel our debts, as we have cancelled the debts of others And do not put us on the spot But free us from evil

and end with the traditional doxology For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory for ever and ever, Amen