

Change for the worse

THE 70 words of the Lord's Prayer are known almost universally among the 280 million people who speak English as their mother tongue.

They are hallowed by faith and time and usage and they have — and have always had — a beauty and a music which fit their purpose.

Also, they are practically as plain today as when they were taken from the Gospel of St. Matthew and incorporated into the English Book of Common Prayer nearly three centuries ago.

This does not mean that the wording of the English Bible and Prayer Book should never again be touched. Revision is necessary from time to time.

A commission of the Church of England in Australia has proposed changes in wording of the major services covered by the Book of Common Prayer.

There is a radical re-write of the Lord's Prayer which will raise many doubts and objections, and a change in the heart of the marriage service which will upset many brides.

Cadence lost

The Australian commission has reduced the 70 words of the St. Matthew version of the Lord's Prayer to 68 words—which in itself is no merit — and in doing so it has lost much of the cadence and reverence of the traditional version.

And, most surprisingly, it has actually added a touch of obscurity.

To the average layman, the line "and lead us not into temptation" is clear, while its proposed replacement, "and do not bring us to the ordeal" is quite puzzling, not to say ugly.

Attempts to alter the Lord's Prayer have not been happy.

An old house

After struggling for years, the greatest Protestant scholars of Britain produced a 57-word version, which is as uninspiring, flat and conversational as the Australian version, but mercifully shorter.

The existing version of the prayer—or something pretty close to it—still has much to commend it.

The late Ben Hecht, a Jew with a religious cast of mind and a profound reverence for English, remarked that the Bible is an old house which belongs to us all, and that we should enter it with care, disturbing it as little as possible.

That is true of the Prayer Book, especially when it borrows directly from the Bible.