

Hymn: Hills of the North, rejoice

as published in Ancient and Modern; Hymns and Songs for Refreshing Worship; 2013. No. 39

Editors of *English Praise*, 1975; based on Charles Ernest Oakley (1832–65)
Public Domain

Tune: LITTLE CORNARD: Martin Shaw (1875–1958)
© J Curwen & Sons Ltd.

[Hills of the North Rejoice \(Martin Shaw\) - Choir of Christ Church St Laurence - YouTube](#)

Chris Moorsom

Hills of the North, rejoice,
river and mountain-spring,
hark to the advent voice;
valley and lowland, sing.
Christ comes in righteousness and love,
he brings salvation from above.

Isles of the Southern seas,
sing to the listening earth,
carry on every breeze
hope of a world's new birth:
In Christ shall all be made anew,
his word is sure, his promise true.

Lands of the East, arise,
he is your brightest morn,
greet him with joyous eyes,
praise shall his path adorn:
your seers have longed to know their Lord;
to you he comes, the final word.

Shores of the utmost West,
lands of the setting sun,
welcome the heavenly guest
in whom the dawn has come:
he brings a never-ending light
who triumphed o'er our darkest night.

Shout, as you journey home,
songs be in every mouth,
lo, from the North they come,
from East and West and South:
in Jesus all shall find their rest,
in him the universe be blest

A Global Hymn of Hope

At the time of writing, much of the United Kingdom is in lockdown again because of the Covid-19 pandemic, with the aim of protecting as many people as possible from its potentially destructive effects. Even with the recent announcements of a return to the tiered restrictions, and to a limited freedom for some family groups to meet over Christmas, we are having to adjust to a very different way of life for months to come.

And yet, signs of hope for restoring some kind of normal life are in the air – various vaccines have proved effective thus far, and, though they still have some hurdles to jump, we can look forward to a gradual restoration of our social and working lives, all-be-it in a more cautious form.

So what might we have learned from all this?

First, we are a global community, such that when one community suffers, all are affected. Equally, when one community finds solutions, all can benefit.

Second, in a world deeply scarred by human divisions and conflicts, science is not enough to bring salvation. Indeed, the very way it can be used to heighten these divisions (e.g. online abuse or in use of drones in war zones) shows that our problems are not really due to inadequate scientific endeavour, but to human selfishness and sin. Science itself is a powerful tool, both for healing and for harm.

Third, a positive message of hope needs to look beyond humanity to the ‘ground of our being’, to enable all races and faiths to work together in building our hope on a foundation that is united and rock solid.

I find these key themes in my choice of hymn, though originally written in a very different age from ours. This hymn, based on words by Charles Oakley, celebrates positively that we are indeed a global community: North, South, East and West bring many differing wonders and resources that can be shared by all of humanity, and we are equally vulnerable to the global dangers of viruses and other ills, not least the extreme weather events which are a result of climate change.

The version quoted above has been adapted, so it’s useful to compare this with Oakley’s original, though there’s not space to explore this fully here.¹ What struck me was that there are both gains and losses in these updated versions. Take the final verse: Oakley’s version has (changed words in *italics*).

Shout, *while ye* journey home;
songs be in every mouth;
lo, from the North *we* come,
from East, and West, and South.
City of God, the bond are free,
We come to live and reign in thee!

¹ Have a look at the useful Hymnary website – https://hymnary.org/text/hills_of_the_north_rejoice/compare#

Where the updated version ends with the relationship of 'all' to Jesus, finding their 'rest' in him (a distinctly passive relationship), Oakley's original speaks of the broader social vision, of the 'City of God, and of 'the bond are free' – i.e. all corners of the globe suffer from bondage of one kind or another – to failing economies and poverty, to human trafficking & slavery, to racist bias or violence, to sexism or domestic abuse, to political and judicial fraud, etc. and need the liberty of the city of God.

Oakley, for a brief time a Rector of St. Paul's Covent Garden before his untimely death aged 33, was born (1832) at a time when the slavery abolitionist movement was coming to a head, and the Slavery Abolition Act was passed and came into force in 1834. His hymn reflects a growing knowledge of the sheer diversity and scale of the world, as well as its need of liberty.

While it's fair to critique Oakley's original as being of its time, reflecting a view of much of the world as being 'unvisited, unblest' (v.4) or 'long cold and grey' (v.5), and so requiring some language to be updated ('soon shall your sons be free' (v.4)), it is striking that his final verse has

'Lo, from the North we come, from East and West and South'

'we' not 'they'. The saving love of God revealed in Jesus Christ, and the hope of the new kingdom, centred in the city of God, is needed and promised to us all, inclusively. We are invited to join in this song of liberation, where-ever we live in the world.

As we necessarily update substantial hymns like this one to express our current aspirations, the challenge is to find social, political and religious language that nurtures human diversity while also drawing people together in a fundamental unity, as we strive to advance towards the universal hope of God's kingdom for all of us, North, South, East and West.

Prayer

*God, the creator and sustainer of all life, we pray for all peoples and nations of this one world: by your gracious Spirit, nurture a spirit of hope and harmony across the earth, North, South, East and West. Amidst the diversity of cultures and conditions, enable division and disaster, disease and disquiet, to be transformed into a rainbow of hope, and the discord of human conflict to be resolved into the harmony of your kingdom; where all creation sings your praise, and rejoices in life in all its fullness, revealed in your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen*

Chris Moorsom