

## **Earth's fragile beauties we possess**

Robert Andrew Willis (1947 - )

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Tune: KINGSFOLD, English folk song arr. Vaughan Williams (1872-1958)

Tune, Public Domain, arrangement © Oxford University Press

Earth's fragile beauties we possess  
As pilgrim gifts from God,  
And walk the slow and dangerous way  
His wounded feet have trod.  
Though faith by tragedy is rocked,  
And love with pain is scored,  
We sing the pilgrims' song of hope:  
'Your kingdom come, O Lord!'

Earth's human longings we possess  
By love or grief compelled  
To take and bear the heavy cross  
Christ's wounded hands have held.  
By cloud and fire he leads us on  
Through famine, plague or sword,  
Singing with faith the pilgrims' song:  
'Your kingdom come, O Lord!'

God's own true image we possess  
In innocence first known,  
Now tainted by the hate and spite  
To Christ's own body shown.  
By that same wounded heart of love  
God's image is restored,  
To sing again the pilgrims' song:  
'Your kingdom come, O Lord!'

## **Reflection: Matthew Rushton**

My name is Matthew Rushton and I am the Canon Precentor of Rochester Cathedral. Before I came here I was the Precentor of Canterbury Cathedral. The hymn I have chosen was written by Robert Willis, Dean of Canterbury, and my former boss: 'Earth's fragile beauties we possess as pilgrim gifts from God'.

Pilgrimage is, of course, at the heart of the ministry of Canterbury Cathedral and understanding the life of discipleship as a pilgrimage threads through Dean Willis's poetry in this hymn. It is, equally, however, biblical models of pilgrimage that we are sharing in these words, particularly the wanderings of the people of Israel through the wilderness and the trials and tribulations they suffered before and after the Exodus.

The refrain that ends each verse is that ultimate scriptural prayer, the Lord's Prayer - 'Your kingdom come, O Lord': the prayer that is said by all Christians in all settings, from the first instruction of Christ as to how we are to pray, to the contemporary, global wave of prayer which the current Archbishop of Canterbury encourages us to join from Ascension Day to Pentecost: 'Thy kingdom come'.

When I bless pilgrims who arrive at, leave from or pass through Rochester (on a pilgrimage to Canterbury, the Augustine Camino, or at the end of one of the four one-day pilgrimages to Rochester Cathedral), I always remind them that when they say the Lord's Prayer, somewhere in the world a pilgrim is saying the prayer at exactly the same time. This hymn encapsulates that shared journey, but particularly at times when the road is hard.

In the opening verse we are centred immediately on the Passion of our Lord. We are invited to acknowledge his suffering and the connection between human experience of tragedy and need and the cross of Christ. In *New English Praise*,<sup>1</sup> this hymn is included in the section 'In time of trouble' and in *Ancient & Modern*<sup>2</sup> under 'Sorrow and Lament'. Dean Willis's image of a love that is scored with pain is deeply affecting. But within these lines we have the Christian confidence of 'faith', 'love' and 'hope' marking the path of the weary pilgrim.

The theme of the Passion continues in the second verse. But we also have symbols of the Exodus, the pillars of cloud and fire, and the famine, plague and sword from which the people of God were saved when they were brought out of Egypt, but which they did not leave behind in the years to come. God's faithfulness and deliverance, in the old covenant and the new, inspire the pilgrim to continue their path and to bear the burdens 'by love or grief compelled' even if they are seemingly beyond human endurance.

In all three verses we have the body of Christ on the cross – his 'wounded feet', 'wounded hands', and now 'wounded heart' – the paradox of salvation, that it is the very 'hate and spite' inflicted on the Son of God that is the story of redemption. In Christ, God's image is restored and towards Christ we travel on our way through this earthly life.

The resonance of these powerful words is supported in particular by the well-known tune, to which they fit so well. KINGSFOLD is a bittersweet melody, harmonised by the master of the English folksong, Ralph Vaughan Williams. The timeless, modal lilt of the tune aches with a longing of almost overwhelming sadness, yet raises within us an inner confidence and deeper hope.

The hymn is a lament, for the fragility of the beauties of the earth and the self-destructive marring of God's image in us and in the creation of which we are a part. But by joining the 'pilgrims' song' we are drawn into the chorus of the communion of the saints, following the joyful procession of the people of God in and through all ages, to the heavenly shrine of the kingdom of God, where pilgrims find their rest.

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<sup>1</sup> *New English Praise* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2006), no. 648.

<sup>2</sup> *Ancient & Modern* (London: Hymns Ancient & Modern Ltd., 2013), no. 526.

**Prayer:**

*God of our pilgrimage, bless us as we journey through this world, bring us with joy to the eternal city founded on your righteousness, and give to our earthly dwelling the peace that comes from above; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*