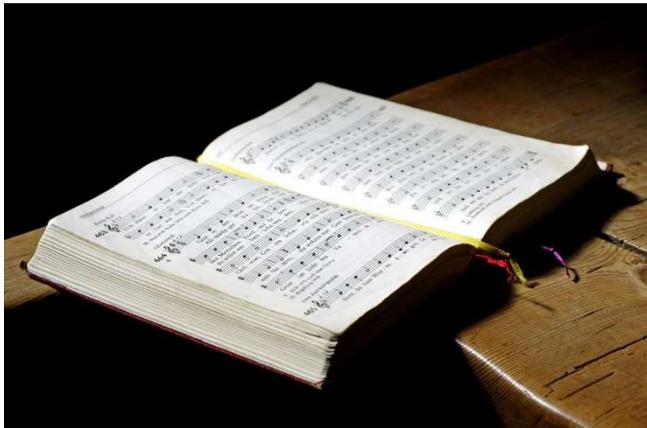


Hymns ain't what they used to be!



Traditional hymns remain meaningful and uplifting, as long as we use common sense, argues Anthony Wintle

A former Lord Chancellor, the late Lord Hailsham, was said to enjoy a good sing, especially of Anglican hymns, yet Lord David Cecil described the average hymn as “a by-word for forced feeble sentiment, flat conventional expression”.

Nevertheless, hymns remain a treasury of devotion, and their words offer themselves for use in moments of spiritual and emotional urgency.

‘Rock of ages, cleft for me,
let me hide myself in thee;’

Yet, some expressions might be questioned. Recently, while singing Bishop Walsham How’s fine children’s hymn *It is a thing most wonderful*, these words stuck in my throat:

‘I cannot tell how he could love
a child so weak and full of sin.’

Really? Do we believe our children are saturated in sin? That leans towards Calvinism. We may need a spiritual rebirth, yet the divine image is not obliterated within us: the light still lightens every man. Jesus said that of such is the kingdom of heaven. These days we should not choose the good bishop’s words to describe children. How can he be forgiven, however, for he also wrote the excellent hymn *For all the saints*.

It is also necessary to use common sense when we sing. I recall an argument with a fellow theological student. We had left chapel after singing Cowper’s hymn *God moves in a mysterious way*, which contains the lines “behind a frowning providence he [God] hides a smiling face”.

“How could someone write that God laughs at our misfortunes!” he exclaimed. “In reality, he is utterly sympathetic and loving.”

“James”, I replied, “that is blamably obtuse; you misunderstand the poet. He means that despite nature’s severity and God’s stern side, the ultimate truth about him is that he smiles benevolently upon us, as a father smiles lovingly at his children.” Unfortunately, I failed to convince him.

One Sunday, after singing Mrs Alexander's hymn *All things bright and beautiful*, which speaks of "the meadows where we play" and "the rushes by the water we gather every day", my organist remarked "It's a long time since I played in the meadow and gathered rushes every day!" Fair comment.

Despite these reservations, I should feel cheated if there were no opportunity to sing, although spare me such atrocities as *This little light of mine, I'm going to let it shine*. Anything but that! Please.

