

## Angels

I don't often get a chance to preach on the angels – in fact I think that this is only the second time in 30 years as a priest. I have to admit that I hadn't really ever given a second thought to angels until in 1981 I took a gap year between school and university and went to Ethiopia. On arrival I discovered very quickly that Ethiopians take angels very seriously indeed. Vast numbers of Ethiopians are called Michael, Gabriel and Raphael and pictures of angels adorn their churches and homes. Stories about their local saints invariably involve encounters with angels and Ethiopians who are extraordinarily hospitable to strangers always have at the back of their minds that they may be entertaining not strangers but angels in disguise.

Of course, angels have a central part to play in the Christian story. They are enshrined in the pages of the New Testament. In fact, they almost act as bookends to the Christian story. The Archangel Gabriel appears to Mary at the very beginning and at the end the Archangel Michael wages war against the devil and all his works in the Book of Revelation. Additionally, angels pop up every so often throughout the New Testament at significant moments whether ministering to Jesus at the end of his temptations in the wilderness or sitting outside the empty tomb after Jesus' resurrection.

In Christianity, angels are principally messengers or announcers of news. That's what the word *angeloi* in Greek means. They are messengers from God announcing new directives and revelations from heaven. They are heavenly beings whose main *opus operandi* is worshipping God in heaven. With all that in mind, you would have thought that angels would be uncontroversial in the life of the Church. But if you thought that you would be wrong. Angels posed a problem for the early church. In fact to be precise two problems. The first was how does Christ relate to the angels? How do they relate to one another in the spiritual hierarchy? Were angels as heavenly beings of a higher status than Christ as the Son of God? In response the early Church was adamant that Jesus as the Son of God is more important than angels and in fact angels pay homage to him. This is one of the central themes of the Letter to the Hebrews which firmly puts the angels in their place.

The second problem with the angels was a little more serious for the early Church. In first century Palestine, angels were very popular. There was a plethora of writings in which people had visions of angels and received new revelations from heaven. Most of these early texts were considered delusional, even heretical, and were never incorporated into the New Testament. But they raised an important issue. If Christ is the final revelation of God, you can't keep having more revelations courtesy of the angels. New revelations from angels could eclipse or worse still contradict the message of God in Christ. And of course this is exactly what happened in the seventh century when the Prophet Mohammed had an encounter with the Archangel Gabriel who dictated what seemed to his followers a new revelation of God in the shape of the Koran. So the early Church was right to worry about new angelic revelations. But what to do? The early Church couldn't just airbrush angels out its story. So it adopted another strategy. Angels were played down as messengers of God and instead were played up as heavenly beings whose location is confined to heaven. Heaven is packed full of angels and archangels and that's where they belong in their worship of God. So appearances of angels were increasingly seen as fraudulent and likely to lead people astray.

However, the traditional role of angels as messengers of God still begs a question. How does God get messages through to us today? I suspect if he sent a fully-fledged and winged Archangel Gabriel to communicate with us, most of us would run a mile. Those renaissance pictures of the annunciation where Mary finds herself in close quarters with a huge winged angel have always struck me as a little far-fetched. I suspect that our modern culture is not particularly receptive to angelic epiphanies.

So how does God speak to us today? There are of course, well known, well-trodden lines for God's communication. The first is Scripture. God speaks to us through reading the scriptures, particularly the Gospels, where the words and actions of Jesus challenge and Place us under judgement. As the Letter to the Hebrews puts it:

*The Word of God is alive and active. It is sharper than a two-edged sword. It judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.*

The second well known way that God speaks to us is through prayer, particularly silent prayer where God becomes present to us and allows his spirit and his insights to bubble up into our conscious mind. And the third well-known way God speaks to us is through our conscience, where the Holy Spirit nags us about what is right and what is wrong and forces us to reconsider our words and actions.

But there is another way that God speaks to us and that is through the words of others whether we hear them or read them. Sometimes people tell us things we don't want to hear; sometimes people tell us things we don't know about ourselves or things that we have never considered. Sometimes we read something, perhaps a novel or a piece of poetry, and we get that disclosure moment, when the penny drops. Or we get that moment of anger or denial where a raw nerve has been touched and a truth has been spoken. Our emotional response to those situations tells us that they are important and that we need to pay attention.

Those are moments to take seriously because they are moments when God may be helping us to realign ourselves to his life. That is the purpose of God's messages to us: to encourage us to carry out his will and in the process to help us to grow and develop, to be transformed into our best selves. In a phrase, to prepare ourselves for heaven.

So where does that leave the angels on their great feat day? If they tend not to be the vehicles for God's personal messages, then what are they for? Very simply, they are there to give worship and praise to God in heaven. And when we meet together for worship here in this place this morning, our worship is not just we few gathered together in this beautiful building, listening to wonderful, inspiring music. It is a moment when we join with the angels and archangels and the whole company of heaven. We are transported to and are caught up in the heavenly worship. We experience briefly a glimpse of heaven and are touched by the holiness of God. We have a foretaste of our future and the future of all humanity which is to share the life of God with the angels and archangels as they give unending worship and glory to him.