

The Reverend Jutta Brueck

Genesis 28.10-17

John 1.47-51

'Surely, the Lord is in this place and I did not know it.' Gen.28.16

Today, we celebrate the Feast of St Michael and All Angels – a good opportunity to think about angels: **what do we make of them?**

Do you believe in angels? If you do, in what way? Have you met any?

Are they important in your life **or**- Do you think of them in the same way you think of fairy tales, not really anything to do with your life?

Google 'Angels' - 'Angels are everywhere in today's society. They are depicted frequently in television shows, movies and books. They are pinned to our lapels and hang from our rear-view mirrors.

(<https://www.allaboutspirituality.org/angels>). There are lots of books about Angels – general and Christian spirituality. [(eg. 'Angel Therapy', or Anselm Gruen 'Everybody has an angel; angels of grace (50 angels for the year))];

Perhaps like me, you grew up with the idea of having a guardian angel; or, you, too, talk about 'angels in disguise! – As with many things to do with faith – people believe all sorts of weird and wonderful things without having thought about where it comes from.

Let's have a look at what the Bible says about angels!

Our readings this morning, of course, have angels in them, and if we take a closer look we realise that angels make frequent appearances in both the Old and New Testaments, and they usually play an important role. If we look closely, we also notice that angels tend to be present at significant points in the biblical story, and we get the idea that angels are good for people and their souls.

So where do they fit into the Christian faith?

Let me give a short overview.

The word 'angel' comes from the Greek word 'angellos', which means messenger.

Therefore, angels in the bible are often messengers or intermediaries sent by God.

Famous examples in the OT are the three visitors who come to Abraham & Sarah, or in the book of Daniel, where an angel joins the three friends in the fiery furnace.

In the NT they play a huge part in the run-up to Jesus' birth: the angel Gabriel coming to Mary to ask her to bear God's son; the angel coming to Joseph to say that Mary is really pregnant from the Holy Spirit; the angel coming to the wise men in the night to tell them not to go back to Herod.

Note, that in these stories the angels have the appearance of a human being, usually a man - there is no mention of wings or a 'heavenly appearance'.

The idea that angels have wings comes from the book of Isaiah, where the seraphim have wings; they are by the throne of God.

Because, we think of angels as spiritual beings who must be floating, it's easy to imagine them with wings.

Therefore, one thing to notice this morning is that although angels are spiritual beings, we human beings tend to encounter them in the form of a human being.

So what is going on in our first reading from Genesis – in which Jacob sees a 'ladder set up on the earth, the top is reaching to heaven; and the angels of God are ascending and descending' – walking up and down the ladder.

We don't know what the angels in Jacob's dream looked like, but they are a good example of the most important function of angels: **they connect heaven and earth!** Really important for Jacob –this dream enables Jacob to know the presence of God.

Until this point, Jacob had not been interested in God – he was far too pre-occupied with himself and his own ego, having cheated his brother Esau out of his birth right. So here he was, having fled home, alone in the uncertainty of the desert, not knowing what lay ahead, a really stressful situation, and the dream changes his outlook completely: ‘Surely, the Lord is in this place and -I did not know it.’ Gen 28.17.

Seeing the vision of the ladder, connecting heaven and earth, hearing God speaking to him, Jacob is changed and believes in God.

So, if angels connect heaven and earth – then it is, of course not surprising that we find a lot of angels in the New Testament – to announce Jesus’ birth, and to be with Jesus at the most important points of his life, from his birth to his resurrection.

Because Jesus has come to connect heaven and earth in a new way. !

In our gospel from John we have this amazing vision given to Nathanael: ‘Very truly, I tell you, you will see the heavens opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.’ (John 1.51)

Jesus is the ladder that connects heaven and earth! But, that doesn’t mean that angels have been put out of a job.

We humans need all the help we can get because – like Jacob – we are often so pre-occupied with our earthly lives and struggles and self-importance that we miss God’s presence most of the time.

‘God is always present, only our attention is varied’ (Canon Matt Vernon) – and a lot of the time we miss God’s presence all together!

And when we struggle to know God’s presence, it is often another person who reminds us of God, or points us to God or helps to open our eyes to God’s presence.

God uses people to *‘be the eyes with which he looks Compassion on this world.... to be the hands, with which God blesses all the world.* (St Theresa of Avila)

And that brings me on to 'angels in disguise': If God is present with us all the time, of course, God wants to give us messengers who help us notice. So, when we talk about 'angels in disguise' that makes a lot of sense? Have any of you met an angel in disguise? Who meets them regularly? And knows it?

Again, we need to have our eyes and spiritual antennae open to see them, but they are all around us.

Two of my angels – and I think I can say 'our angels' in disguise – gifts from God in our midst, sent by God to us, Revd Lis and Canon Chris – I can say with confidence that for the years I have known them here – and that is only four – they have been messengers of God, pointing us to Jesus, as well as being Christ's hand and feet and eyes and voice among us.

Today we say thank you for Canon Chris and his sixty years in ministry – starting out as a church army officer, and then 14 years later, at Michaelmas, the feast of St Michael and all angels, as an ordained minister, to serve the church with his many gifts, latterly here at St Thomas and this part of Suffolk. My favourite picture of Canon Chris, here at St Thomas, engaged in angelic activity, is him on Holy Saturday, decorating the Easter Candle in time for the Easter Vigil. My second favourite picture is in said Easter Vigil preventing my vestments from going up in flames while trying to light the Easter candle in windy conditions. That is in addition to the many times he is here, leading worship, preaching, among us with a listening ear, quietly supporting people. Thank you.

Today we say thank you and prepare to say farewell to our beloved Lis, who grew up in Ipswich and with this Church, who went to London, and then returned in 1986 with Ken, both of them generously and lovingly contributing to this Church. And then Lis realised her call to ordained ministry here in this Church, when she was ordained deacon in 1991 and priest among the first women, in 1994.

Some of you have known Lis for all those years, have seen her develop and grow, been alongside her in the joyful years and as well as the challenging years that followed Ken's stroke. Some of you have first met her as a priest here at St Thomas and been blessed by her loving and prayerful ministry.

I am one of the more recent additions to this congregation and have been tremendously blessed by Lis' presence, support, wisdom and friendship.

And so, if we return to our theme of angels, as messengers and as those who connect heaven and earth, perhaps it is right for us to say: 'you are an angel' as you have pointed many of us to God, or you have been just what we needed as the time. Clearly, you were sent by God.

On this feast of St Michael and All Angels, as we give thanks for Reverend Lis and Canon Chris' presence in our midst and their ministry – their service of God, our eyes of our hearts are opened to God's presence with us. The eyes of our hearts are opened to know that God comes to us and it is for **us** to notice.

Today, we are invited to think of those who help us be connected to heaven – who give us hope and increase our faith.

I haven't even had time to talk about guardian angels, who were so important in my upbringing and life, they come to mind as we turn to pray for Lis and Chris:

As we give thanks for you and your ministry today, may God's angels be close to you, protect you, connect you to heaven -and Lis, with your new beginnings – may there be many angels to greet you wherever you go. Amen.