

The Reverend Jutta Brueck

**Genesis 28.10-17
Ps 103.19-22
Revelation 12.7-12
John 1.47-51**

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

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 you your life? It seems that the interest in angels comes and goes.

In the 19th Century John Henry Newman preached a sermon [on Michaelmas, which made it into the Times '2000 greatest sermons' 1999] saying that there have been ages when people have made too much of the angels and paid them excessive honour; but there is also the opposite, 'the danger ... of resting in things seen, and forgetting unseen things, and our ignorance about them.'

Although in our own time there is a fair amount of interest in angels, especially in popular spiritual culture - judging from the books that are being published, (eg. 'Angel Therapy', or Anselm Gruen 'Everybody has an angel; angels of grace (50 angels for the year) we also live in an age where we prefer to 'rest in things seen and are not sure about 'unseen things'.

Angels are biblical, as our readings this morning show - they make frequent appearances in both the Old and New Testaments, at times playing important roles, or are present at significant points in the biblical story.

The idea is that angels are good for people and their souls.

So where do they fit into the Christian faith?

Let me give a short overview.

We meet angels as messengers or intermediaries sent by God - the word 'angel' comes from the Greek word 'angellos', which means messenger.

Famous examples 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. Note, that the angels have the appearance of a human being, usually a man, there is no mention of wings or a 'heavenly appearance'.

Then there is the heavenly host, celestial beings, in the heavenly court, praising God. We think of angels as creatures with wings, perhaps because they are spiritual beings who we think must be floating, but our image of creatures with wings comes from the reference to seraphim (Isa 6.2,6), who are said to have wings - and although all angels are spiritual beings, human beings tend to encounter them in the form of a human being.

We don't know what the angels in Jacob's dream looked like, but they are a good example of the function of angels, connecting heaven and earth, and enabling Jacob to perceive 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 - but here he was, having fled home, alone in the uncertainty of the desert, not knowing what lay ahead, a stressful situation, and the dream changes his outlook 'Surely, the Lord is in this place and -I did not know it.' Gen 28.17. Having seen the vision of the ladder and God speaking to him, he is changed and believes in God.

In the NT angels are regularly mentioned and Jesus is surrounded by angels at the most important points of his life, from his birth to his resurrection. This is perhaps not surprising given that in Jesus God has come to live among us - heaven and earth are being connected up in a new way, and you would expect angels as intermediaries between heaven and earth to be there.

In our gospel from John this morning we have this astonishing vision held before Nathanael and the readers of John's gospel ' 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)

Having just heard the story of Jacob's dream, it sounds like the ladder has been replaced by the Son of Man, with Jesus as the link between heaven and earth.

In the book of Revelation, today's second lesson, we have the battle in heaven fought in heaven after the resurrection has taken place. The archangel Michael, who is traditionally the guardian of God's people' - {we meet him in Daniel 10.13} -leads the angels in the final defeat of Satan and his angels who represent evil. But Michael and his army can only do this because of Jesus' death and resurrection - we heard in verse 11 'But they conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and the word of their testimony' - referring to Christians in the early church who lost their lives because of Jesus.

It's important for us to notice that this story is not so much about Michael and his angels, but about Jesus Christ who made the defeat of Satan possible because of his death and resurrection; he gave his life out of love for the world and therefore redeemed it.

It's Jesus whom we look to as our role model and the one who shows us the way to God; he is the one we address in our prayers, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, and yet we have this biblical heritage of heavenly creatures who are surrounding us, strengthening and protecting us.

I grew up with the idea of a guardian angel, and learned to say a prayer every night commending me to my angel and asking him or her to be with me and protect me.

And whilst on a daily basis I am more aware of Jesus' presence with me than that of my guardian angel, I do believe I have met many an angel, especially at times when I am spiritually more attentive, for example on a pilgrimage or a retreat. I'd like to end by telling the story of meeting an angel on my recent retreat.

Most of you will know that I went on retreat last week. I had gone to a Benedictine monastery in Worcestershire which is located in the place of a farm, surrounded by lovely countryside and other farms. The monastic community meet seven times a day for prayer, and I did get up in time to join them for their first prayer of the day at 6 am. By 9 am I had been in chapel 3 times, and so you can imagine I felt very focussed on God. I spent the afternoons exploring the country side, and the ordnance survey map they had bore little relation to reality. Every time I took myself out I got lost, but managed to make my way back okay. As I was beginning to get a sense of the area I tried a slightly more ambitious walk on day 3, but it should only have taken me 1 ½ hours. Well, 2 hours after setting off - by now I should have been back at the monastery for evening prayer, I came to a main road which should have meant I was only 20 minutes away from the monastery - only to discover, that it was the wrong one. The Good News was -there was a pub - and I had a bit of money to buy myself a drink, whilst also asking directions. It turned out, none of the bar staff had heard of Mucknell Abbey, previously Mucknell Farm, neither had the customer who was just buying a drink. The barmaid did look up the monastery phone number for me, and offered me the use of her phone, but as the community was in Chapel, I had a half hour wait before I could phone - so, having had my drink I decided to set off again on the footpath that started opposite the pub, taking me back in the direction where I had come from. And indeed, after 10 minutes I could see the abbey buildings - a number of fields and hedges were separating me from it. To cut the story short, it took me another hour to get round all the hedges and brooklets; needing to ask a farmer for directions, and at ¼ to 7 I turned onto the main road from which the lane to the abbey turned off. I was going to be late for supper, which we ate with the monastic community, and they would wonder what had happened to me, if I wasn't there at 7 pm to enter the refectory with everyone else. It couldn't be helped ...I had

been praying hard as I was walking along, wondering what all this getting lost was about. 50 yards down the road was layby, and I saw a car pull in which could have been one of the monastery cars - perhaps it was a monk who had recognised me, but when I came close I saw it was a stranger. So I walked on and immediately a car stopped by my side - a woman driver, asking where I was going and if I wanted a lift. I told her 'Mucknell Abbey' -she hadn't heard of the place, but I got into the car, saying I'd show her. It was just a small detour for her, and I could show her the place. She very kindly took me down the lane - and I had no doubt that she was the angel that I needed at that moment -I had not expected it! She herself was not a church person, but understood what I was saying. I was enormously touched by her kindness, and exceptionally grateful. It was 10 to 7 - I had plenty of time to be ready for supper by 7.

We find it hard to believe in things we can't see and rationally explain, but I am convinced that the angels are ascending and descending every time we celebrate the Eucharist.

I encourage you to share your angel stories over coffee. Amen.