

**St Albans Abbey**  
**Christmas Day 2020**  
**Luke 2. 1-14**

Today's reading tells us that an angel of the Lord appeared to shepherds.

I wonder when did you last encountered an angel? It might be that you've met one quite recently but not realised it. After all, the word angel in the bible simply means anyone who is a 'messenger'.

Our modern gloss on angels usually portrays them with wings; you only have to wander around looking at the stained-glass windows in our churches and cathedrals to find them flapping around all over the place, hovering in the most unexpected corners. But unless you think that the cherubim and the seraphim are part of the angelic order, you'll find that angels in the bible don't have wings, but usually appear as quite ordinary people.

For example, there's the time when Abraham and Sarah receive three unexpected visitors as they camp under the oak tree at Mamre. They appear to be travellers, to whom they offer hospitality, not realising that the three visitors have come to bring a message from God.

Or cast a critical eye over any Eastern Orthodox icon of John the Baptist and you will find bizarrely he's sprouted wings. John the Baptist an angel? That's because in the bible he is described as an 'angelos', a messenger from God. Yet to those around him, he appeared as an ordinary, if slightly odd, sort of individual, wearing a camel hair coat and eating locusts and honey.

I guess it's the longing for guidance and reassurance which fuels our interest in angels. After all, Billy Graham wrote a book called 'Angels: God's Secret Agents' and you will find them everywhere in the 'Body, Mind and Spirit' section of our bookshops. Just recently I've seen a copy of Kyle Gray's book 'Connecting with the Angels Made Easy; how to see, hear and feed your angels'.

This year I've received a Christmas card with an angel portrayed as a postman, which is a good contemporary interpretation. He or she is someone who comes with a message for us, expressed in word or deed.

One of my angels is the person who leaves a pot plant on my doorstep each Easter and Christmas with a few words of greeting, encouragement and thanks. I don't know who they are (maybe you are here this morning), but their gift always reminds me of God's generosity that is at the core of our faith and is the heartbeat of Christmas.

The assumption is that God's angels will come and give us words of comfort. But God's comfort isn't always the same as ours. In today's gospel an angel or messenger of the Lord appears. No mention of wings, indeed we are told he *stands* in front of them. The shepherds aren't consoled or even excited. We are told they are terrified. It then gets even worse when a heavenly host (literally a heavenly army) also arrives and strikes up with a grand chorus. You'd have thought the St Albans Bach choir has arrived on the Orchard *en masse*.

You see, when we encounter the reality of God it's normally in the ordinary things of life and, like those shepherds, it will both disturb *and* comfort us.

Alexander Schmemmann, a distinguished Orthodox priest and teacher, tells the story of how one of God's angels spoke to him in a strange yet powerful way.

When Schmemmann was a young man living in Paris he was travelling on the Metro one day with his fiancé. They were very much in love and bound up with each other. The train pulled into a station and an elderly and rather plain woman got on. She was dressed in the uniform of the Salvation Army and she came and sat nearby. The young lovers began to whisper to each other in Russian, commenting to each other about the grossness of the old woman. The train came to a halt. The old lady got up to get off the train and as she passed the two young people, she turned to them and said in perfect Russian 'I wasn't always ugly' and got off the train.

For Alexander Schmemmann it was a word from God which transformed his life and the way he treated other people. That woman, that angel - a stranger whom he had never met before and was never to meet again - spoke the word of God to him. For the first time he saw that he had been valuing and judging people by their outward appearance, whereas God sees our hearts. He sees each one of us as we truly are, his own beloved sons and daughters. That brief encounter was a turning point in Alexander Schmemmann's life.

So this Christmas we need to watch out for angels. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews tells us they are all over the place and arrive out of the blue in the most unexpected guises: 'Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it' (Hebs 13.2)

So as I wish you all a very happy Christmas, watch out for angels as you never know where you will meet them.

But perhaps even more important is to pray that we might be angels to those we meet, with a word of encouragement, a gift, a greeting or a smile.

As my old mother used to say: 'Be an angel, dear!'

+Alan St Albans

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