

Angels

A sermon by Rev John A. Castle given on 25th September 2016 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings **2 Kings 6:8-17, Matthew 19:1-6,10**
(set for the eve of St Michael and All Angels, 19 Sept)
Psalm 103:1-7,19-22

Introduction:

Patricia Heaton, a single parent, was living in Yorkshire with her two small children when her gas boiler broke down. Not only was there no hot water, Patricia was also concerned about the danger of an explosion. That morning, she telephoned numerous plumbers to ask for estimates, but they were all far more than she could afford. She gave none of them her address or phone number. Worried about the danger aspect, with young children in the house, she prayed for help. Within half an hour, there was a plumber on the doorstep. How did he know? She had told nobody. Patricia was too stunned to ask him. She showed him the boiler and while he was mending it, she worried about how she was going to pay him. On his way out, she asked, "How much do I owe you?" "That's all right, love, have it on me," was his surprising reply. Patricia quickly followed him, to thank him, but he had vanished. No car, not a soul in sight, he had disappeared! Patricia thanked God for the way He had so unexpectedly sent the help she needed.¹

I think most of us who believe in prayer would conclude that God had indeed sent someone to help this young lady in her hour of need. And in the book from which this comes, Hope Price gives many other examples of mysterious characters sent by God to help individuals, or groups of people, or to reassure them of his presence and protection. These messengers are called in the Bible *angels* - our word comes from the Greek *angelos*, a messenger.

I would remind you that this church is dedicated not only to St Michael, the Archangel and commander of the angelic armies of God, but to All Angels. This building stands as a witness to an unseen world which is all around us, in which the forces of good are pitted against the forces of evil and will ultimately triumph. So tonight I am going to speak about angels in general, both in the Bible and in the experience of ordinary people today.

What are angels?

The story of Patricia might seem to you an unusual example of meeting an angel. Of course, you might rationalise that this was a human plumber who had somehow heard of the plight of this single mother and stepped in to help. Surely angels wear white, and have haloes and golden wings – not overalls and a toolbag. We can easily be influenced by Christian art over the centuries which has taken elements of biblical accounts of spiritual beings and created an archetypal angel.

But in the Bible angels, when they are seen, are often mistaken for human beings. Take for example the angels who show up at Abraham's tent before the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18:1-2); or the angel that appears to Joshua before the battle of Jericho (Joshua 5:13-19). Joshua initially thinks he is just a human warrior with a sword, until the angel describes himself as "the commander of the army of the LORD", in other words guess who? Michael himself! In Mark's gospel Mary Magdalene and the other women arrive at Jesus' tomb to find "a young man dressed in a white robe" (Mark 16:5-7). Matthew in his gospel hypes this up and describes the appearance of the angel as "like lightning" (Matthew 28:2-4).

¹*Angels* by Hope Price, p35 (Pan Books, 1994)

Angels are part of God's spiritual creation. From Jesus' words that they don't marry² we may infer that they are neither male nor female. Being spiritual beings like God they are normally invisible to human beings, and carry out the work that God gives them to do undetected by people. However, at God's command they are able to appear and disappear to mortals at will³, and can take whatever form is appropriate for the situation. In every case, the human witnesses are clear after the event that they have been contacted by an angel. Mary never thinks that her experience of Gabriel was just a product of her imagination, or that the messenger was merely human. Peter, when rescued from prison by an angel, initially thinks he is dreaming, until the angel disappears and he realises that he is in fact standing in the street (Acts 12:6-11).

Angels live in the presence of God and worship him. In Matthew 18:10 Jesus says that the angels who guard children "continually see the face of my Father in heaven"⁴. But they are also do other things for God. In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) Lazarus's soul is carried by the angels to Abraham's side in heaven. Angels are best known for bringing messages to human beings, the most famous example being the message of Gabriel to Mary, but they also are sent to bring particular help, like the angel who appears to Elijah and gives him food for his journey to Mount Horeb (1 Kings 19:5-7). They have a role in protecting people, such as the two angels who rescue Lot and his daughters from the mob in Sodom (Genesis 19:1-11). Psalm 34:7 says that *the angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him, and delivers them*, and Psalm 91:11-12 speaks of the angels guarding the faithful and bearing them up *so that you will not dash your foot against a stone*.

Today's reading from 2 Kings 6:8-17 illustrates the protection that God's angels give to the prophet Elisha, who is threatened with the Aramaean/Syrian army who have come to arrest him. Elisha's servant can't understand why Elisha is remaining so cool as the city is surrounded by a great army. But Elisha has the eye of faith to see that the enemy army is itself surrounded by God's angelic armies. In response to his prayer, God enables the servant to see the invisible army of angels with their horses and chariots of fire. Elisha's statement to his servant could be a message for us to when we feel overwhelmed by problems or opposition: *"Do not be afraid, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them."*⁵

Angels in the modern world

One *modern* example of the protective work of angels comes from the First World War. In her book *Angels*, Hope Price quotes from several contemporary accounts of the Battle of Mons on 23 and 24 August 1914. Let me read you an extract, taken from an account by two British officers:

*The British expected annihilation, as we were almost helpless, when to our amazement the Germans stood like dazed men, never so much as touched their guns, nor stirred till we had turned round and escaped by some cross roads. One man said he saw 'a troop of angels' between us and the enemy. He has been a changed man ever since. Another man was asked if he had heard the wonderful stories of angels. He said he had SEEN them himself. When he and his company were retreating, they heard the German cavalry tearing after them. They saw a place where they thought a stand might be made, with sure hope of safety; but, before they could reach it, the German cavalry were upon them. They therefore turned round and faced the enemy, expecting nothing but instant death, when to their wonder they saw, between them and the enemy, a whole troop of angels. The German horses turned around terrified and regularly stampeded. The men tugged at their bridles, while the poor beasts tore away in every direction from our men.*⁶

This account is corroborated by another British officer and by an official German version of the event, which mentions the inexplicable behaviour of the horses but not the angels.

² Luke 20:34-36

³ Judges 6:21, 13:20-21

⁴ See also Luke 1:19, Revelation 5:11-12, 7:11-12, Hebrews 12:22

⁵ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. (2001). (2 Ki 6:16). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

⁶ *Angels* by Hope Price, p93 (Pan Books, 1994)

There are less dramatic testimonies of ordinary people experiencing the help of angels. Susannah Tilly from Littleover in Derbyshire had had several miscarriages and with her latest pregnancy had spent twelve weeks in bed resting. One day in 1988 she took a break from resting and went shopping. She described what happened next:

"I felt very shaky on my feet and, as I came out of the butcher's shop, I slipped on some grease on the step and fell. Had I landed on the step, I am certain that would have finished my pregnancy. But, as I fell, I felt very strong hands grab my arms and something which felt like a soft cushion placed under my bottom. I never hit the ground but was firmly stood on my feet again. I looked round to thank whoever had helped me, but no one was there. Suddenly the word angels came into my mind and I was conscious of their presence.

"The next day", Susannah continues, "a member of our church home group came to visit us and I shared with him what had happened. He said that on the evening previous to this incident, when the home group met they had all felt that they should pray especially for me. They sensed that I would be in danger during the following day." It was certainly a dramatic answer to their prayers"

Conclusion

Anecdotes of this kind are likely to convince those who already believe in angels, but are unlikely to convince the sceptic. All I would say is that the appearances of angels in the Bible all make sense within the context of the stories in which they appear, and within the wider sweep of God's purposes. If there is a God, and he does choose to communicate with human beings and get involved in our affairs, it would seem totally plausible from a purely rational point of view that he would have created spiritual beings like himself as well as material creatures like us. The way an event is described in the Bible may well be influenced by the cultural and literary assumptions of the day, but it seems to me entirely unnecessary to try to explain away angels, either in the Bible or in the experience of people since.

I haven't personally seen an angel, but our next door neighbour when I was a curate was one of many people at the Spring Harvest Christian conference who did. The result of the experience was a great sense of God's glory, presence and protection, similar to that which Elisha and his servant experienced in the story from 2 Kings.

Angels are part of the invisible, spiritual dimension to the universe, which for most of the time is invisible to the human eye, but no less real for that. They are servants of Almighty God, carrying out his will. It is not for us to go looking for them or praying to them. But if we submit our lives to God's will and seek his glory and his protection, we can be sure that his angels will surround us. Whatever difficulties or opposition we may face, including opposition from the forces of evil trying to prevent us from doing God's will, the angelic host is on our side. As Elisha said to his servant, those who are with us are more, and stronger, than those who are on the side of the enemy.

Additional note:

In addition to the Bible passages quoted, the following passages are among many that mention angels:

Judges 6:11-24, Judges 13:2-23, Daniel 8:15-19, 9:21-23, 10:4-14, Luke 1:8-20, Acts 27:23-24.