

Talk for Evening Prayer, All Saints' Cottenham with Rampton on Zoom

Angels, 6 December 2020, Alison Wedgbury

Readings: Psalm 148:1-3 and Mark 1:13, 8:38, 12:25, 13:27, 13:32

Tonight, by request, we're looking at angels in Christianity. As in every December in church life, angels are popular. They're on Christmas cards, on the top of Christmas trees, in countless Christmas carols, in Christmas films and adverts, in Lego nativity sets, in school and Junior Church crafts. Christmas angels bring the good news of the birth of Jesus. They fly, they shine, they sing and sometimes, like Gabriel, they have a speaking part. What's the betting that at church nativity plays, outdoor, inside or online, there'll be quite a lot of angels in white robes and wings? And will most of the angels be girls?

Before today, I knew very little about angels but they turn out to be very interesting and like puppies, they're not just for Christmas. In the Bible they are certainly not little girls. Angels feature often across the New Testament, although the biggest concentration is in the Book of the Revelation to John, who may or may not be the same John who wrote the 4th Gospel. Revelation has a series of highly visual and visionary scenes about the end of the old world and beginning of God's new kingdom. It's part of a tradition that reaches back to Isaiah, Ezekiel and Daniel in the Hebrew Bible or what we call the Old Testament. Across the New Testament there are references to angels. All the Gospel writers tell of the experiences of Jesus with angels and Paul's letters often talk about angels. Most versions of the Bible have a fairly even spread of angels between the Old and New Testaments. But the 20th century Bible 'The Message' was quite a surprise. It really piles on references to angels in the Old Testament, over 3 times more than other Bibles, as if the word 'angel' made perfect sense to a modern audience.

So, who are angels in the Bible and what's their purpose? Some of them are fierce and terrifying. Some are benign. They are divine beings who do not need to eat or drink, they do not have sex. The most common understanding of an angel is as a messenger from God, but that's only one task in the Bible. Angels are also watchers, soldiers, spirits or divine beings, protectors, worshipers. All those roles are reflected in the readings for tonight. In Psalm 148 angels sing praises. In the Gospel of Mark, angels take on multiple roles. They protect Jesus in the wilderness. They will be in the Messiah's special forces when he comes again. In life after death humans will become like angels not identified by their sex. Angels are close to God but do not know everything. These concepts of angels come from a long tradition. In the Old Testament the 'Angel of the Lord', in Judges and Psalms and elsewhere, is almost equivalent to God. Then there is a kind of management team of angels who are living beings though not humans, responsible for parts of creation: sun, moon, planets, rain etc. Some of their names are familiar today: Gabriel, Michael, Raphael, Uriel, Sariel and others. In Jewish Antiquity stars also were thought to be living beings in the heavens, so there's a good link between the star that settled over Jesus's birthplace and the angels who also announced the birth.

What do angels in Christianity look like? Our ideas of angels come from a couple of thousand years of words and art. Most early angels in art were definitely male. As for clothing, Christian angels in the first few centuries were mostly military, fighting for Christ. In medieval art, they become more like deacons or clerics in long robes. What do the wings mean? The very early Christians did not want at first to portray Christian angels like Greek and Roman gods and goddesses like Nike, Eros and Thanatos who did have wings. The theologian St John Chrysostom, in the 4th century, explained the wings: 'they manifest a nature's sublimity... not that angels have wings, but...that they leave the (heavenly) heights...to approach human nature'.

It's been a long journey to little girl angels in 21st century nativity plays, complete with gold and silver tinsel! But perhaps that's OK. The theology of angels is that they approach human nature with messages, protection and connection with God. They are neither male nor female, but sometimes speak to both female and male humans of all ages.