

## **Michael and All Angels**

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

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What image comes into your mind when I mention angels? An image of a whole multitude of angels, a heavenly host, like the front of the pew sheet? Or maybe you think of angels like the miniature figurines to be found in gift shops in all good provincial towns? Maybe the picture postcard image of Anthony Gormley's stunning Angel of the North standing proud over Gateshead? Or perhaps you have a particular biblical image in mind, like the Christmas card scene of the angel Gabriel appearing to Mary?

Mention angel and most of us will have a 'go-to' image. Just consider what comes to mind for you.

And today I'd like to invite us to pause and ponder that image that comes up for us. What, I wonder, does that image say about how we think about what exists beyond what is visible in our world?

For in all the cases of angels mentioned above – biblical and secular – when we speak of angels we acknowledge that we are speaking of something that does not belong entirely to this world. But return to the examples I began with and we can go further than this.

Think first of that pew sheet image of a whole multitude of angels. And here we're quickly into the realms of poetry and music. Perhaps those angels are in heaven. As the hymns run: 'Come let us join our cheerful songs, with angels round the throne'; 'Ye holy angels bright, who wait at God's right hand', and so on. These are ways of imagining angels that are also ways of imagining what heaven is like. Heaven is, in this image, a place of gathering and community – where we humans won't simply mill around but will be led in joyful worship by the angelic chorus – much like our choir lead us so ably each Sunday morning. Or perhaps the whole multitude of angels is appearing on earth, as witnessed by the shepherds that night in the hills above Bethlehem. Just think of the medieval wooden roofs of many Suffolk churches, covered with beautifully carved and painted angels. There is a whole host of angels around

us, looking over us, the roofs seem to say, if we will have the eyes to see them.

What if we turn to the angel of the gift shop. Here we have the plaster cast model of an angel to put in your windowsill or on your mantelpiece. And we should not be too sniffy about these, because they clearly sell. Why else would they be so ubiquitous unless retailers knew they won't gather dust on the shelves? The image here is rather different from the heavenly host. These angels are protective. They are welcoming. You choose the model of angel you want. What is the hidden spiritual realm from which this kind of angel comes? There is no sense that these angels are obedient to an ultimate God. God, in fact is not in the picture at all. If these angels are from a spiritual realm, it is one filled with these kind angels milling around. They are the comforting face of a universe that is at times rather uncomfortable. I can see the appeal. But, I must say, it is rather different from the vision of angels we find in the Bible.

Or perhaps you thought of that striking sculpture, the Angel of the North. Drive north along the A1 and the appearance just south of Newcastle of its huge mass, its rusty wide arms stretching out across the sky, is a sign you have reached the north-east proper. Why, I wonder, does it speak to people so much? Is it welcoming? Is it overawing? Is it, like some totem pole of an ancient tribe – a marker of 'our land', the 'north'? This is, I'd venture to say, a really successful secular image of an angel that gets us thinking about biblical angels. Like those biblical angels, its open arms are both welcoming and overawing. It causes us to wonder. We recognise that it is beyond our control.

Consider our fourth image and we have what is perhaps the most basic meaning of an angel. The angel Gabriel appears to the young woman, Mary, in her small Judean hilltown, to tell her that she will bear God's son. The angel's purpose is clear. Here he (or she? The Bible is uninterested in the sex of angels) – here he is to pass on a message from God. The angel is – as the Greek *angelos* literally means – a messenger. He comes with a clear purpose, and then leaves.

Look in the Bible and we could go further. Turn to our Old Testament reading and we have the ladder on which angels are ascending and descending between heaven and earth. God is at work in the world – an image that John's gospel picks up to apply to Jesus, the site where heaven and earth truly meet. Or in the New Testament reading – it is the angels who form a great army to fight against the forces of evil, in the final apocalyptic battle through which God creates the new heaven and new earth.

The Bible offers many different images for angels, different understandings of what they do – and this is in to do with the developing understandings in the

Bible of how God relates to the world. But there are a few things that are consistent in the Bible's take on angels. They are not of this world, but neither are they God. They occupy a middle space. They are a sign of the created order being suffused with God; a sign that God is at work in the world. Many serve as messengers from God. Humans can never call up an angel like a divine RAC. No. Angels come to *us* – they are entities that have an existence independent of us, uncontrolled by us. What's more, they are, like the angel Gabriel coming to Mary or the shining men by the empty tomb, means by which God communicates. And, as we would expect with entities that are not of these world, angels can never fully be understood. Like God, there is an air of mystery to the biblical stories of encounters with angels.

But then, of course, you may not have much of an image of angels at all. Perhaps that's because of a robust atheism about all things spiritual. Or perhaps it's because of a struggle – a struggle I would recognise in myself – to own the idea of angels as part of how I imagine, speak about, sing about the world beyond what can be scientifically studied, evidenced, and seen. And if we are in this place – not of atheism but of theism without much place for angels – this is a position too. And this too can be biblical. Good portions of the Bible don't mention angels at all. They speak about the one God, and about the ways in which God relates to the world, without feeling the need to say that God's communication depends on these half-divine, half-human beings. There is good biblical grounding to believe in angels, and good biblical grounding not to believe in angels.

Like Jacob, we are all on a journey. Our journey of faith is one that can at times feel lonely. But, we might choose to imagine, the angels journey with us, supporting us on the way like the angel that ministered to the exhausted prophet Elijah with bread and water. We might imagine them protecting us, like the angel who keeps Daniel safe in the Lions' Den. But above all, we might imagine them communicating with us, always pointing beyond themselves to God who no eye in this life can see, and yet around whom we might imagine the angels forever singing, as we will one day join them: 'Lord, thy glory fills the heaven; / earth is with its fullness stored; / unto thee be glory given, / holy, holy, holy, Lord.'