

Sharing the Universe with Angels

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A Sermon preached at Evensong in St John's College, Oxford on 1 March 1992. The readings chosen were Isaiah 6: 1–8 and Revelation 22:1–9. The poetry is from Rilke's Duino Elegies, the passage in St Thomas is from Summa Theologiae I q. 61 a. 3.

I am honoured and excited at being invited to preach in College on a theme of my choice. Honoured for obvious reasons—excited because as a Roman Catholic I am used to everything being forbidden unless it is compulsory. It is an exciting change to taste Anglican freedom, and to choose one's texts and one's theme.

So, I have chosen to reflect on angels, basing myself on those intriguing biblical texts we have just heard from the prophet Isaiah and from the book of Revelation. But has the subject of angels been a wise choice? Is there not something irresponsible in preaching on such an abstruse and specialised subject in our day and age? Is this going to be an exercise in Christian day-dreaming and telling fairy tales? It might be said that if angels prove anything, they prove the irrelevance of our faith today. Some will say that this is what you should expect if you invite a Dominican friar to preach; antiquarian theology. Some will say that this is the kind of concern that makes Christianity beautiful but of no real use; well-meaning silliness.

Angels, then, are going to be a divisive subject. Let's take their friends, first. To mention angels today, in a chapel as fine as this during a liturgy as resplendent as yours, might in fact produce no objections, no disbelief. On the contrary. Some of you may feel a secret shiver of pleasure. This is what our religion is really about. This is religion with wonder and mystery and awe in it. Angels should very much be present, and accepted, in this kind of religious world:

Early successes, favourites of fond Creation,
ranges, summits, dawn-red ridges
of all forthbringing — pollen of blossoming godhead,
junctures of light, corridors, stairways, thrones,
chambers of essence, shields of felicity,
tumults of stormily rapturous feeling, and suddenly,
separate, mirrors, drawing up again their outstreamed
beauty into their own faces.

But what of the critics? Not everyone approves of angel talk. They have their challengers from within Christianity too. A distinguished theologian once told me that the medievals talked about angels when we moderns talk about UFOs, unidentified flying objects. He thought that 'angels' were a way of talking about the bits of the universe we could not quite explain, yet.

Another kind of critic takes a more biblical line, having admitted that the Scriptures do contain rather a lot about angels. This kind of believer will admit to having an open mind on the subject. He will quickly add that, of course, in the Bible 'angel' simply tends to mean a messenger. True enough. Angels were those spirits chosen to be instruments announcing and bringing about the relationship that God was creating with men and women, particularly with his chosen people, Israel. The angel, when it was not a roundabout way of saying 'God', could be the personification of God's assistance and involvement. When God chose to act in the created world in a certain way then angels tended to appear.

Both critics seem to me to falsify the evidence, to run against solid Christian experience and knowledge. The first critics, the enthusiasts for UFOs, have shrunk creation to the material. The second set of critics, those who lightly treat of angels as messengers, as spectacular carrier pigeons, have shrunk the spiritual to the functional. To accept angels as fellow creatures is to accept that God's world is richer and more mysterious than we can easily make out. Just as ecology is trying to make us aware that there is more to life than human life, and that existence is interconnected, so angelology is trying to alert us to how we share the universe with other, spiritual creatures. Just as ecology is teaching us to use and not abuse, so angelology is telling us that not every thing is at our disposal. All that there is for God's glory. All that exists is disposed according to God's providential plan. In a way, angels are part of ecology in the sense that we need to learn how to share our common household, the universe, with angels. It is possible, the Bible tells us, to find that we have been entertaining angels without knowing it.

So far, we have seen how angels have their friends and their critics. The New Testament agrees with the friends in continuing to affirm the existence of angels. It also agrees with the critics in its restraint, and in giving the primacy of mediation between God and us to Jesus Christ. Angels can be go-betweens, but only Christ is the mediator.

Can we go further? Can we accept that our faith requires us to be critical friends of the angels? You see, being an uncritical friend of angels has its dangerous side. We live by the truth, and the truth is not

always immediately comforting. Angels, and I mean the good angels not the evil angels we call devils, do in fact have their dangers for us believers. We tend to be less suspicious of them than we are of the demonic. The time of the angels in a secular world can find us off our guard, dazzled. Put behind you those Pre-Raphaelite images of angelic youths, the christmas-tree tinsel angels too. Angels are not tame playthings. They are spirits, they are immortal. In heaven the angels behold the face of God. The Son of man will come in glory, the glory of the Father; accompanied by angels. The angels give us a wide sense of the boundaries of creation. And they should keep us terribly surprised by their manifestations. Believing in angels means that we do not shrink the world and God to manageable size. We are not the measure of everything. Our existence has its limits and to go against them is to invite tragedy, the tragedy of the man or woman who oversteps.

In many ways, ours is an age of compassion, an age of social concern. The role of service, support, practical help is one that many Christians find most important. But could not social work, all the ways we try to make the world a better place, carry the risk of making *us* into God? The self-made person worships his or her own creator. Gradually, those who consider themselves complete, adequate, capable take over the lives of those they regard as diminished and inadequate. Gradually we believe that all is within our grasp, and then what cannot be measured or controlled is written off. The angels are stubborn reminders that there is more to the world, and to existence, than meets the eye or the helping hand. The darker side of angelic existence, the demonic, is also proof that our struggle is against more than flesh and blood touched by evil.

The Scriptures tell us how angels are involved at so many of the great moments in our salvation. The events of the last times. They announce the birth of Jesus to Mary and proclaim it to the shepherds: 'and an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them and they were filled with fear'. The angels surround the resurrection of Christ: 'and behold there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone and sat upon it. His appearance was like lightning, and his raiment white as snow'. The guards, we are told, were so shaken, so frightened of the angel that they were like dead men. The angels will be present at the end of the world. They are there at the last times. At such moments God's Kingdom is breaking into human history to lead it from within to a new life. This new life is the very life of God Himself, the kind of life we could never have generated for ourselves. It comes as sheer gift. The appearance of the angels is part of the surprise, the

extraordinariness of God's love. The angelic choirs keep our singing of God's praises at an exalted level.

Accept then the gift of the spiritual in creation. Welcome the angels into your sense of the common universe we inhabit. Let the angels stop you thinking that we can measure and quantify everything. Believe that there are angels, but do not believe uncritically. Remember that they are ambiguous, deceptively so. The danger lies in the dazzle of their perfection. Without belief in the angels we reduce creation. With the wrong belief in the angels we exclude God, and in particular Jesus Christ. The writer of the *Epistle to the Hebrews* did not underestimate the distorting effects of uncritical belief in angels to the disparagement of Christ. The good angels dazzle us when we believe that they are independent sources of holiness. The angels can be made by us into images of perfection without a real face, without a history, without vulnerability. We then look at images of aloof, untouchable and in the end unbearable holiness. Angels cannot bleed, angels cannot die.

Who, if I cried, would hear me among the angelic orders ? And even if one of them suddenly pressed me against his heart, I should fade in the strength of his stronger existence.

The *Epistle to the Hebrews* tells us of a Saviour very different from the angels. It was essential that Christ should become like us so that he could be a compassionate and trustworthy high priest.

Much of history is loss and gain. In terms of the angels, we have lost the capacity our medieval ancestors had to consider what is human by relating it to against the animal and the angelic. In considering what we have in common with, and how we differ from, animals and angels, we come to understand better what it means to be human. We will then be less likely to want to lose our humanity in the hopeless attempt to be like angels or like animals. We have to be ourselves, we need to dwell in harmony with the rest of creation without losing our specific identity. What follows may sound like a very modern statement, but is in fact a direct quotation from St Thomas Aquinas, a fellow-Dominican, living in the 13th Century:

. . . the angels are part of the universe, in the sense that they do not constitute a universe on their own, but are combined with the physical creation to form one total world . . . The total good of the universe consists in the interrelationship of things; and no part is complete and perfect in isolation from the whole.

It is immensely liberating, part of the Good News, that the angels

are part of God's exchanges with us. To believe in the angels, cut off from God, could become the final touch to a self-perfectionism. Could this not happen to us? It should not, because we are told that angels rejoice over one sinner who repents.

It is our faith that the majesty of the divine, the mystery and wonder of the ineffable, unapproachable God come close to us by way of the risen body of the one who went about bringing the love of God to men and women by a lifetime of preaching, healing, forgiving and a passion unto death. *There*, in him, is the perfection of which angels are only a pale reflection:

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard for his godly fear. Although he was a Son, he learned through what he suffered; and being made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him . . .

Angels cannot love us to the point of death. Through Jesus Christ it is we humans who have been brought close to God, who can worship so intimately the Father in the Spirit. With what power St Luke writes that the face of Stephen, the man marked out for martyrdom, was like that of an angel. In that sort of Christ-centred selfgiving we find the transformation that leads us into the glory of God. We do not become perfect by standing aloof from broken humanity and worshipping angels.

Still, the last word had better go to the angels, in case they have been peeping into Chapel tonight and overhearing my sermon. In the book of Revelation there is a story that sums up all that should be said about the angels, if we want to be their true friends and avoid well-meaning silliness. From our second reading you will recall that at one point an angel appears and gives someone a message from God. The man promptly falls down at the angel's feet to worship him, but he is told, 'You must not do that. I am a servant just like you and like your brothers the prophets and like those who treasure what you have written in this book. It is God that you must worship'.