

When glory touches our lives

'Then an angel of the Lord stood before them'. (Luke 2.9)

Christmas is almost here! Up goes the tree, out comes the crib, the tea towels, the tinsel and angel wings. The nativity family services will attract parents who want to see and even video their tiny offspring dressed up as angels or shepherds. These amateur productions don't always go as planned. In one performance someone had forgotten to bring the baby Jesus. I've seen a donkey which would not do what it was told; Joseph complaining in mid performance that he wanted to be a king; and beautifully dressed little angels crying their eyes out because they don't want to stand at the front. It is all entertaining stuff. Luke's account of the nativity, figures strongly in these performances because there are castings for shepherds, angels and sheep (the latter often given to the congregation who respond with a liturgical 'baa'!)

This *Recorder* sermon is about angels. They are especially busy at the first Christmas not only in Luke's version of the story but in Matthew's as well. Congregations have unfortunately, according to Walter Brueggemann, reduced angels 'to cute little babies or nice little children with wings and sparkling stuff on their backs'. The angels I read about in the Bible are not sweet little cherubs but stern, terrifying super-human figures who leave us quaking in our shoes. Their appearance provokes fear and wonder.

While many older Christians view angels in much the same way as they think of Santa Claus, for people outside the Church, angels exist as fascinating visitors from another world. There are books about them and you can even buy an electronic angel to help you in your car.

Although for many years I did not believe in angels, I believe in them now. I used to regard them as mythological products of the supernatural furniture of the Bible which thinking people like myself should remove. I used to think worship was more about education rather than inspiration, and was primarily directed at the congregation rather than God. My reason was driving out fear and wonder and replacing holiness with cosiness.

I became aware of the presence of angels during a particularly bad patch on my spiritual journey. I have since prayed over a long period of time for God to send a tough guardian angel to a member of our family, and believe that particular prayer has been answered.

Angels are powerful heavenly messengers. They do not have wings but come in dreams, visions, nightmares and inner voices. I am even inclined to think that they can take on human shape. They certainly speak and act through human beings. They come tinged with glory and they leave behind a hint of heaven. They bring holiness to the common place. They do not wait to be invited but come crashing in when least expected. Christmas is ablaze with them. Their joy at the incarnation is such that the world of super-nature cannot contain their excitement.

While shepherds watched their flocks by night
All seated on the ground
The angel of the Lord came down
And glory shone around

Nothing could ever be the same again for those shepherds because glory had touched their lives. Off to Bethlehem they went, brave and reckless enough to believe the sheep would be safe until they returned. Their lives up to that moment had consisted of darkness and sheep. Now it was about light and liberation.

The stable too was a place of surprise. The glory of God revealed there not in a show of angelic strength but in sublime human vulnerability. The shepherds realized that the existing world order had been turned upside down.

Christmas is therefore not a time for pleasantries; it is about a new kind of power. Christmas is not a homely time; it is a holy time. Christmas is not presents; it is about God being present. Christmas is not about purchasing trinkets; it is about experiencing transformation. When glory touches our lives there is a new creation.

My wife and I recently went on a steam train excursion from Bournemouth to Bath. This was our Christmas gift to each another. It was pure nostalgia with servings of stunning food. On our late evening return to Bournemouth Station we rushed to the end of the platform to wait and to see the beautiful class A4 (like the 'Mallard') engine pull away. It

lay 30 yards before us breathing steam and smoke in the gathering gloom. The blast of the whistle was deafening. With a great belching of steam which hid the monster from view, the engine slowly advanced towards us, a single light like an eye piercing the clouds of foggy steam. It was like a Moses moment on the mountain; an Isaiah shaking in the temple, a shepherd epiphany on a hill-side. A tingling went up and down my spine as the solid substance of the engine in power, noise and light emerged from the billowing cloud.

I suppose it is to be expected that an ageing once-upon-a-time engineer like myself should go silly over a train, yet the sight of that locomotive did remind me of the angels and the 'mighty dread' of the shepherds. Christmas tells us that glory can still touch our lives and because God is with us angels are close by.