



## **ANGELS**

If you were to stop people going about their Christmas shopping and ask them to list the extras often associated with the Christmas story, they would probably say angels, shepherds, kings. I.e. even in our increasingly secular society, they could give you some kind of an answer.

Because we all know the story, so well. In fact, we know it *too* well – which means we probably don't know it as well as we think!

So over Advent this year, we're going to stop and reflect on why these characters are in the Christmas story at all. To be specific, we're going to look at the extras gathered round that manger and ask ourselves what they say about the One inside of it, and what they say about us.

By way of introduction, let's turn to:

### **Luke 1:26-38**

OK, today we're thinking angels. Now most people have some idea what angels are supposed to look like, and they tend to resemble either the winged babies you see on Hallmark Christmas cards or the fairies some people stick on top of their Christmas trees (what is that about?).

But in the Bible angels are something quite different: beautiful, yes, but also incredibly powerful – and seriously scary. Angels are spirits created by God to do His bidding. But they are also a sign of 3 things, and all 3 of those things tell us something significant about Jesus:

**1) God is speaking.** The very word 'angel' literally means 'messenger', whether in Hebrew (*malakh*) or Greek (*angelos*), as well as in Arabic and Latin.

Which is why, when angels turn up, they're usually saying something – even if they don't say anything at all. E.g. Jacob's vision of angels going up and down a stairway between heaven and earth (Genesis 28), which is God's way of saying, "I'm watching out for you, Jacob."

But what does the appearance of angels tell us about Jesus? That He is the ultimate messenger of God. More than that, that He is the ultimate *message* of God. That's what John says at the beginning of his Gospel account: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God ... the Word became flesh, and made His dwelling among us" (John 1:1, 14).

So if Jesus is God's message to the human race, what is He saying? That God loves us; that God cares about us; that God hasn't given up on us (if you're stuck for something to write in your Christmas cards this year ...). God is so concerned about human beings that He is still willing to talk; still willing to be involved.

Because in Jesus, God is speaking.

To every one of us.

**2) God is acting.** When angels appear, it is to announce a significant turning-point in human history; a game-changer, if you like. E.g. the 3 visitors to Abraham and Sarah, announcing that they are to have a son in their old age; the 'Angel of Death' bringing the 10<sup>th</sup> plague, the death of the firstborn, on the land of Egypt; the Angel of the LORD appearing to David in the place where the Temple is to be built. They are all turning points.

In Luke, the archangel who appears to Mary is? Gabriel. And we assume it's Gabriel who appears to Joseph, too. But what's interesting is that there are 7 archangels referred to in ancient Jewish tradition – why Gabriel? It's because 500 years before, that exact same archangel had appeared to a prophet in Babylon, called Daniel. And that same archangel had told Daniel that a King was coming, the ultimate King of Kings, and that this King would rule for ever and ever and repair this broken world (you can read it for yourselves in Daniel 9). And now that same Gabriel is appearing to Mary and Joseph.

So what is Gabriel saying?

That the Kingdom of God is on its way.

I.e. Jesus is the biggest turning-point in the whole of human history, because in His life and death and resurrection the world begins to be repaired, one person at a time; one marriage at a time; one family; one community. However God does it, this world is being fixed. *We* are being fixed.

Because in Jesus, God is acting. God is at work.

**3) God is here.** Angels, and in particular archangels, are God's servants and are said to dwell in the presence of God Himself. In fact, that's what Gabriel

says to Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist: "I am Gabriel; I stand in the presence of God" (Luke 1:19).

And you can find this angelic association with God all the way through the OT. God is often depicted sitting on the throne of the universe, surrounded by *kh'ruvim* or 'guardian spirits' (e.g. Psalm 99) and *seraphim* or 'fiery spirits' (e.g. Isaiah 6). The point being: when angels make an appearance, it's a sign that God isn't very far away.

And that's why angels turn up en masse around the birth of Jesus. This is no ordinary messenger, no ordinary King; this is God Himself. Which is the point Matthew makes at the beginning of his Gospel account, quoting from the Book of Isaiah: "A virgin shall be with child and give birth to a son, and they shall call His name *Immanuel*,' meaning 'God with us'" (Matthew 1:23).

In Jesus, we can know that God is real, and we can know what God is like – because we can see Him, in the flesh! He's not the way He's depicted in Islam, cut off and removed from the human race.

In Jesus, God is here.

And by the Spirit, He still is.

### **The Ultimate Message**

So, the accumulation of angels around the birth of Jesus says more about God than it does about angels. God is speaking; God is acting; God is here. In Jesus of Nazareth.

But going back to that first point: God is speaking. What do people most need God to say to them, do you think? What do *you* most need God to say to *you*?

"I love you."

"I understand how it feels."

"Let Me help you ... let Me in."

"That needs to change ... and I can do it."

"Don't be afraid ... trust Me."

"Don't give up."

"Follow Me."

May we all come to understand that in Jesus, that is exactly what God has said.

To every single person on the planet.