

2014-12-28 Sue Diggory

Holy Innocents

Matthew 2 13 – 18

When did you last see an angel?

There were several angels here in church a few days ago when the school came for their Christmas Service – dressed in white and sporting tinsel halos they helped to tell the story of Christ's birth once again!

And there were some in the Village Hall before that when the nursery school had their nativity play.

Christmas wouldn't be Christmas without angels – we see them on Christmas cards, we hear about them in our Christmas readings, and we sing about them in our Christmas carols,

"Hark the herald angels sing..."

"Angels from the realms of glory..."

*"While shepherds watched their flocks by night, all seated on the ground..,
the angel of the Lord came down..."*

*"It came upon the midnight clear, that glorious song of old..,
from angels bending near the earth..."*

"Sing, choirs of angels, sing in exultation..."

"The first noel, the angels did say..."

but I wonder if we really take to heart just how large and influential part they play in the story of Christmas, a story which we are in danger of becoming so familiar with that we fail to see how God's angelic messengers were at work throughout the whole of the story, constantly turning lives up-side down.

In Luke's Gospel, angels and in particular Gabriel are at work from the beginning of his account. Luke begins with old Zechariah in the Temple, on duty as a priest, alone in the sanctuary taking his turn on the rota when suddenly his life is turned upside down with the appearance of an angel.

Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord ... do not be afraid, Zechariah your prayer has been heard ... I am Gabriel, I stand in the presence of the Lord, and I have been sent to speak to you and bring you this good news.

Zechariah was understandably terrified, I know I would be if I suddenly saw a 'real' angel, but Gabriel brings words of comfort and good news that at last Zechariah and Elizabeth are to have a son, John, the one we know as the Baptist, the one sent to prepare the way.

The next angelic appearance is to Mary and once again it is Gabriel who is about to turn her world upside down!

Greetings, favoured one!

The Lord is with you ... do not be afraid ... for nothing is impossible with God

We are so familiar with the story of the annunciation that it is easy to overlook how overwhelmed Mary must have been; a young teenager from the Galilean backwater of Nazareth, not only being visited by an angel, but being told that she will have a baby, that she will become an unmarried mother of a son, but the mother of no ordinary son for *he will be called Son of God!* Yet despite how she must have been feeling Mary's trust in God is so profound that she is able to say to Gabriel,

Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.

I wonder if I would have been that bold if God's messenger had brought the same or even a similar message to me.

Next angels are sent to Joseph and for this we turn to Matthew's account where we are told that an angel appears to Joseph in a dream; to urge him not to be afraid and to help him change his mind and to stand by both Mary and her child.

When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, he took her as his wife.

The angels have now helped set the 'Christmas story' scene and we hear nothing of them until they are sent to the shepherds on the hillside outside Bethlehem and once again their appearance brings fear and terror as the shepherd's world is turned up-side down.

But the angel said to them [the shepherds] 'Do not be afraid ... I am bringing you good news

And we know that the shepherds responded by going to Bethlehem and worshipping the Christ child, and that is where we left the Christmas story on Christmas Day ...

So today we have a bit of a jolt with our Gospel reading; a reading that comes this year even before we have heard the familiar visit by the magi, those mysterious visitors from the east who came baring strange gifts for the Christ child, no this year we must wait for their visit until next week as today's reading begins as they leave the now infant Christ and we hear a tale of murder and innocent slaughter as another angel is sent to guide Joseph once again as he now cares for Mary and her child, a child born into homelessness, and now although still an infant one who has a price on his head and is about to become a refugee in a foreign land.

Now after they [the wise men] had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt and remain there until I tell you.

Once again Joseph is obedient to the angelic message and Jesus is kept in Egypt until it is safe for the Holy Family to return and resume their lives in Israel.

The angel messenger has enabled Joseph and the family to flee but not the baby boys of Bethlehem as the fearful and cruel Herod orders the slaughter of all the infant boys in and around Bethlehem, as he fears any potential rival for his crown. The murder of 30 or so infants would have been of little concern to a man who had already had three of his sons murdered for fear that they would become rivals for the power vested in his role as ruler and king.

This is a difficult story to read, and especially so close to Christmas when we have only just welcomed the Prince of Peace into the world, but perhaps it is a good, if hard reminder to us that it was to a dark and cruel world that Christ was sent to bring his light and the story of the slaughter of the Holy Innocents acts as a constant reminder that the world of first century Palestine was ruled by a ruthless and cruel tyrant, to whom human life was cheap and dispensable, something that down through the centuries and now over 2,000 years later still hasn't changed in many parts of our world, we only have to look to the middle east to see that, as when people are driven as Herod was by fear and greed unpalatable and inhuman decisions are often taken and it is the innocent and powerless who suffer.

So had the angelic messengers finished their role; no, once again there was divine intervention as Joseph receives another message in a dream, this time after the death of Herod with the news that it was safe to return to Israel, and if we read on in Matthew's gospel we will hear of their safe return and the start of life as a family in the little town of Nazareth.

Today as we remember the Holy Innocents of Bethlehem and give thanks for the safety of the Christ child in Egypt because his earthly father listened to the messenger sent by God, let us be prepared to have ears to hear what God is wanted to say to us as we prepare to enter a new year and a new chapter for Holy Trinity, even if we may not have eyes to see his messengers.

Amen

As you enter the new year, may you discover the grace and guidance of God and may you be touched by an angel!