

“GETTING THE MESSAGE ACROSS”

1 Peter 1:12

One of the most common features of Christmas cards, Christmas carols and even the Christmas stories in the gospels of Matthew and Luke is not necessarily the baby Jesus. Of course, he's at the centre of the story and the reason for the whole celebration. But if you read through the stories and some of the accompanying stories (the birth of John the Baptist, for example) you'll find an awful lot of appearances by God's messengers, the angels. St Luke, always anxious to get the facts right, to check his sources and then set it down as it happened, writes of angels coming to Zechariah to tell him about John's birth, to Mary to tell her that she was to become the mother of God's Son, to the shepherds on the hillside to tell them that Jesus has been born. And Matthew records the visit of the angel to Joseph to reassure him about Mary's pregnancy and, in some versions, the angel appears in a dream to the Wise Men warning them of Herod's duplicity.

As we've said, they're God's messengers – but not always initially welcome and usually pretty scary beings. If you read through the Bible you'll discover that their usual first line is “Don't be afraid!” It may well be something to do with the way they just seem to appear when people are least expecting them. It may be to do with the way in which they blaze with the glory of God. It may be that those who meet them know something earth-shattering is about to happen.

We're not that clued up about angels, really. There's been plenty of speculation by the finest thinkers on theology, and the futility of such speculation seems to be summed up in the mediaeval debate about how many angels you could get to dance on the head of a pin! Just a couple of weeks ago I was asked by the MOB whether angels have free will or not. (The answer was “I don't know”, by the way!) But although there may not be answers to everything we want to know, we can still find out a bit from the Bible about them.

There's a bit in the book of *Hebrews* in the New Testament suggesting that people may end up hosting angels unaware of what they are, but most of what we read points to the conclusion that these are spectacular beings and you'd have a pretty good idea that they are special. They are, after all, beings that surround God's throne, they are constantly in his presence. So that's going to bestow on them a certain cachet to start with! They're right at the heart of the universe, in the very nerve centre of God's operations.

No doubt it's the fact that they spend so much time so close to God himself that means that his glory seems to rub off on them. When they appeared to the shepherds, we are told that “*the glory of the Lord shone*

around them". The writer of that *Letter to the Hebrews*, from which I just quoted, mentions some lines from the *Psalms* in which angels, God's messengers, are likened to the "*winds ...flames of fire*". They are pretty impressive – and, as we read in many places in both the Old and New Testaments – pretty scary on first sight. Of course, as you get to know them, they get a bit less frightening and many people who claim to have encountered angels today (and it's actually quite a lot) find them quite comforting.

Now, just reflect on this for a moment: they are heavenly beings who spend all their time close to God; they reflect God's awesome glory; they are sent at God's personal request to take his news to men and women; they can rush across the world like the wind and arrive with the roar of a flame and the glow of the throne-room of God; they're an integral part of the greatest story ever told – the story of God's plan of salvation for all men and women. And yet there's a surprising little comment tucked away in one of the letters towards the end of the New Testament.

In his first letter, *Peter* writes to the new Christian community in Asia Minor (today's Turkey) about the mercy, grace and salvation of God. He writes of the new birth that we can experience as believers in Jesus. He waxes lyrical about the power of God and joy of those who are kept secure by him. He writes, "*you believe in Jesus Christ and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.*" That's what the Christmas story is all about – this amazing offer of salvation and security for this life and the eternal life into which it leads. Jesus came into our world to make that all possible.

Peter enthuses about all this for a few more sentences and then he writes in *1Peter 1:12*, "*Even angels long to look into these things*". Can you imagine that? These beings who have seen such amazing things from the throne room of God, who are constantly serving the Creator and Lord of the universe, these timeless, powerful, majestic, awesome creatures actually are so bowled over by God's plan of salvation that they want to know more about it. They are the messengers, alright, but they can't necessarily understand, appreciate or experience the message. There was an article in the newspapers a couple of weeks ago about a deputy head teacher who had been disciplined for sending what the article called "saucy messages" to one of the staff at the school where they both taught. The messages were conveyed by a pupil who clearly had no idea what they were all about – and was certainly not about to experience it. A bit like the angels, who bring the good news, but don't really understand it all fully.

Now, if these heavenly beings who have seen so much and know God so well are intrigued and excited by the story of God's salvation, how much more should we be! You've heard the story again this evening.

You've sung it in carols here and elsewhere, this year and for years past. You've seen the pictures on Christmas cards and in the great classics of the art world. You've spoken to people who themselves have discovered the real purpose behind it all. And yet you remain strangely unmoved by it. It's just another story, maybe. It's just another bit of mumbo-jumbo. It doesn't really concern you. It's not really that exciting. Listen! The angels themselves are desperate to find out more. Doesn't that suggest that it might be worth considering?

Perhaps this Christmas you could get one up on the angels and look into it all. After all, it's all set out in the Bible, this plan of God's. He created the world good. Humankind messed it up through the abuse of their freewill. God wanted to provide some kind of escape from the consequences of that and sent Jesus to show us the way out – to be the way out. And as we respond in faith to God's gracious gift of a way out, we get to experience life in all its fullness now and an eternity with God still to come. Christmas is all about the key step in that plan, the sending of Jesus. I reckon it must be worth having a look at. And, like I say, when you find out just how wonderful it is and how it can affect your life, then you'll have at least one thing the angels haven't got. They were "*heralds of creation's story and proclaimed Messiah's birth*" (as we're about to sing), but you can ***experience*** all that it means. If you're interested in following it up, have a word with me over the mince pies after the service.