

Michaelmas – St Michael and All Angels
Genesis 28, 10-17; Hebrews 1, 5-end; John 1, 47-end.

I must admit – I've no first-hand knowledge of angels. Despite today's feast honouring them, despite my eleven years responsible for a church dedicated to St Michael the Archangel, sadly I have never seen, heard, or sensed the presence of an angel.

Yet *maybe* that's not quite the whole truth. The Bible tells us that in welcoming strangers we may sometimes unknowingly welcome angels. And I suspect it's not only strangers that can be a blend of the human and the angelic. I've certainly known several people like that, and probably failed to recognize others. But at this festival it's mostly the beyond-human angels that we celebrate: those who have the privilege of worshipping God in God's actual, heavenly presence, and of sometimes being sent to appear on earth with a task, or with a message to convey. In fact the words for 'angel', both *mal'akh* in the Hebrew scriptures and *angelos* in the New Testament Greek, mean messenger or someone sent. Sometimes angels are also said to carry petitions from humans to God – Jacob's dream shows two-way traffic on the ladder, down and up.

That was about the extent of my angel knowledge, so I started looking up scripture quotes and learned references. It's a truly vast subject, but it quickly became clear that the whole idea of who or what angels are has had a long evolution over the course of history. In traditions of polytheism there may be no clear distinction between angels and the many minor and local gods. Was it an angel or a deity who guarded this sacred spring, who lived on that holy mountain, who offered protection from disease? Probably the rise of monotheism demoted those deities to mere angels, while something of the sacredness lived on, with an obscure saint's name to Christianize it.

At the other end of the scale, there's sometimes a blurred line between angels and God. A being called The Angel of the Lord occasionally appears in the Old Testament, with terrifying, awe-inspiring presence. It can be unclear whether it might actually be an appearance God himself. And that account in Genesis of Abraham, sitting by his tent in the heat of the day, in the shade of the oaks of Mamre: suddenly he sees *three men* nearby, and he runs to greet them, bowing to the ground, addressing them as 'my Lord', and asking the honour of giving them water and food. After promising the miraculous birth of a son to the extremely aged Sarah and Abraham, the 'three men' move on, but the narrator describes their spokesman as 'the LORD' – using the word specifically reserved for God.

Another Jacob story, another night out under the stars. This time it's not a dream, but an alarming reality. In the darkness a man comes and wrestles with Jacob. The fight goes on till dawn, with Jacob still not vanquished. His hip put out of joint, he still wouldn't let the man go till he'd given him his blessing. Then Jacob named that place Peni'el, meaning 'the face of God' because he had seen *God* face to face and yet his life was preserved. Jacob himself acquitted another name – Isra'el – meaning 'one who strives with God', the name he bequeathed to the nation. The 'el' in these is an ancient name for God, as also in Micha'el, 'Who is like God?'

In most experiences of angels, their appearance closely resembles what people have come to expect – from their culture, from pictures they've seen. Often it's within a dream. This raises the question of how much of the encounter is directly from God, and how much arises from what's maybe a deep wisdom, or illusion, within themselves. Or can those ever be totally separated?

Many people have a sense of a guardian angel who protects them. But the real protection – that deep security within oneself even in outward peril – that surely the presence of God. The angel is the messenger, the bearer; the gift is of God. In the later strands of the OT, in the Apocrypha and our Book of Revelation, angelology took off – elaborate hierarchies of celestial beings; specific angels for specific church communities; for particular areas of responsibility (Raphael for healing etc); a name for each archangel (Gabriel, Uriel) and so on. All this plays into the meaning of Michael's name – who is like, who really *is* God?

What is left for God himself to do? With so many willing servants, helpful intermediaries, interceders on our behalf, a kind Mother of God to put in a good word for us... God in Godself becomes more distant, not less. An unapproachably great King we'd never dare to approach; at best an absent father, rather than our loving, caring, ever-present heavenly Parent.

On the other hand, this remoteness of God *could* point us to a deep spiritual truth – that behind all the busy doings of individual *beings*, earthly and heavenly, there is an underlying or over-arching oneness of Being, beyond all concepts, names, words, images, doctrines or metaphors, towards whom there are many pointers, but no possible definition, only to be glimpsed in the deepest contemplative prayer. To use a crude simile, God not like words about God – He is the page on which they are written; not like the images, but the canvas on which they're painted.

So where do we turn? ... Ah, thank God for Jesus! Jesus the great intermediary, the ultimate messenger, who brings the heavenly down to earth, who raises the earthly up to heaven, showing heavenly possibilities in the utterly mundane. As Jacob, waking from his ladder dream said: 'Surely the Lord is in this place, but I did not know it. This is none other than the house of God; *this*, (this bare patch of ground with only a stone for a pillow), *this* is the gate of heaven.' And he called the place Beth-el, House of God. So is *this* place; *and* wherever and whichever 'this place' happens to be.

Harold Stringer