

Sermon: St Michael and All Angels Day

John 1:45-51

Nikolai and I were married twelve years ago yesterday, at six o'clock on the eve of St Michael and All Angels Day, so preaching this weekend has a special meaning for me.

As a wedding gift to me Nikolai commissioned a painting of St Michael and All angels by artist Margaret Ackland. She was finishing painting the face of St Michael on September 11, 2001 when two planes flew into the twin towers. The angel's face looks so sad, capturing and expressing the emotions of that day. He is holding a butterfly, a creature special to Nikolai and me, a creature associated with resurrection. In the midst of destruction and death, the angel promises hope.

A year to the day after Nikolai's first wife's funeral, on Christmas Eve 2000, at close to midnight, Nikolai and his daughter Kate were sitting in St James King St for the midnight mass. I was preaching, when a huge butterfly flew around the church. I stopped my preaching and commented. 'I thought butterflies were a resurrection symbol, Easter, not Christmas' and went on with my sermon.

I have a butterfly stole. I bought a butterfly ring when I left home. Nikolai had had an experience of a butterfly at the hospice after his wife Ellie's death. He had given her a night gown with butterflies embroidered in white cotton, not noticing the butterflies when he bought it. Just after her death, an ordinary orange butterfly flew around him and landed near his hand. When he made the connection between it and the garment, he knew Ellie was saying goodbye. She was okay. Then the butterfly flew a figure of eight and away. And a boat that had been in the bay all week made its way out to sea.

Now twelve months later, an angel, a butterfly, seemed to be saying to him 'all is well, you have come home, you can stop looking.' Nine months later, we were married!

Angels, messengers from God, with or without wings, recognizable or not, are present everywhere, and we hear heaps of stories about them in scripture, and in conversations with ordinary people today.

One of my favourite images of an angel is the picture in the children's book *The Nativity*. The angel has big boots, and tatty coloured wings, and is sitting at the table cradling a huge mug, having a cuppa with Mary.

When the angel Gabriel came to old Zechariah to tell him about the birth of John the Baptist, he said: "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news" (Lk.1.19). That's a pretty good description of what an angel does.

Thomas L. Weitzel:

Angels come to people at many different times and for many different reasons. They come in dreams, as they did to Joseph and Jacob (Mt.2.19-20; Gn.31.11-13). They come during prayer, as they did to Zechariah, Daniel and Isaiah (Lk.1.8-10; Dan.9.20-21; Is.6.1). They come as a result of prayer, as to Elisha and to Manoah (2 Kgs.6.17; Judg.13.8-9). And they come at unexpected times, as they did when Abraham and Sarah were just going about their daily business (Gn.18.1-8; Hb.13.2), and Mary too. They even come at death, as they did to carry Lazarus to Abraham's bosom in Lk.16

(v.22). Luther says, "At death I know not where I am to go; but my guides, the holy angels, know it well" [S71].

And when they come, they may appear "like a god" as in Dan.3 (vv.25,28), looking "like lightning with clothing as white as snow" as in Mt.28 (v.3). Or they may look just like an ordinary human being. Three angels appeared in human form to Abraham in Gen.18 (vv.1-22). Two angels appeared as men to Lot in Gen.19 (v.5). Even Gabriel appeared to Daniel "as a man." (Dan.8.15-16).

But don't let that fool you! Wings or no wings, they're still just as likely to fly off or vanish. That angel-man visiting Samson's parents flew straight up in the smoke of their burnt offering (Judg.13.20). Daniel said the angel-man Gabriel came "in swift flight" (Dan.9.21). I suppose that's one way you know that they're angels!

There are angels who do have wings, however. Cherubs have two wings. The "four living creatures" are a type of Cherub, but they have four wings or more, and each one has a different kind of head: one like a man, one a lion, one an ox, and one an eagle (Ez.1.4-14; 10.9; 14.20; Rev.4.6-8). The seraphim have six wings, but they only fly with two of them, Isaiah says (6.2-7).

And let's not forget that Satan was a heavenly being (Job 1.6, Zch.3.1f), who, with other evil angels, stirred up a revolt in heaven. Michael, the archangel, along with his army of good angels, hurled them all down to earth to roam about here, it says in Rev.12 (vv.7-12). ... oh well.

www.liturgybytlw.com/Sermons/SermonOnAngels.html

Recently I was with a man, Doug Miles, who was dying. He said to me, 'You might think I am going crazy, but there is an angel near my right elbow. It doesn't have wings, but is wearing a red T-shirt, and has long blond hair'. I said, 'i believe you'. I knew it was a sign that he was preparing for death, and that he was not alone, even though to a rational mind it might seem crazy. On the day of his death, the sun shone on him, literally. He was at peace.

About twenty years ago a woman gave birth prematurely to twin girls. They were tiny, they could fit in the palm of my hand. i was speaking with their mother and in my minds eye, saw angels surrounding the babies. I didn't say anything to their mother because I didn't know whether that meant they were going to die, or that they would live. It turns out they must have been guardian angels, because those girls both lived and thrived, and now live in Sydney.

In her prayer, *Ordinary, extraordinary God*,

Jane Bentley puts it this way:

We thank you, God, for the enchanting.

for the things that pluck us

out of our everyday experience -

however briefly -

and tantalise us with glimpses of mystery.

for extraordinary wonders of angels,
shooting stars, impossible coincidences,
and things that go bump in the night.

and for ordinary wonders,
such as the way a plain cheese sandwich
seems like a gourmet banquet
when carried for miles and eaten outside.

Ordinary, extraordinary God,
thank you for reminding us that the world, and you,
are bigger than we can possibly imagine.

Jane Bentley

Around a thin place, an Iona Pilgrimage Guide

In writing this sermon, I have been trying to get my head around, angels. Are they reality or metaphor? They occur in all religions. what do they mean for me today? I hold onto their meaning, 'messenger'. Are they different from human beings. Another order of being? who yet can appear as human.. what are angels? Are they defined by what they do? They are a link between inside and outside, heaven and earth, not wanting to see heaven as up and here as down..

A hint that 'the world and you are bigger than we can possibly imagine'.. that is what angels are about to me..

Frederick Buechner suggests:

Sleight-of-hand magic is based on the demonstrable fact that as a rule people see only what they expect to see. Angels are powerful spirits whom God sends into the world to wish us well. Since we don't expect to see them, we don't. An angel spreads its glittering wings over us, and we say things like, "It was one of those days that made you feel good just to be alive," or " I had a hunch everything was going to turn out all right," or " I don't know where I ever found the courage."

<http://m.frederickbuechner.com/content/angels>

So there are some stories,
but what of our gospel?

Nathaniel is promised an angelic vision.

'Heaven can open, & angels ascend & descend, in many kinds of ways, even today! Inside church & out. Faith in Jesus isn't an up-there compared with down-here thing', says Mc Gowan. It is about Jesus making the connection, being the go-between -God.

In Jesus, the realm of God comes near. Angels symbolize that.

It was an unlikely beginning to Nathanael's walk with Jesus, but why not? What is more unlikely than heaven touching earth?

Heaven is where love reigns. Where there is room for all God's children at the table. Where, in the words of a friend of mine, nothing's broken and no one's missing.

And yet, in Jesus, the unexpected happens. And Nathanael sees it. Heaven has a foothold on this earth. angels again..

Sojourners' Jim Wallis says, "In Jesus, God hits the street." Nathanael--now a follower, however unlikely--will walk that street, too, where a table is spread and all are welcome. An Angel in disguise perhaps?

'Ordinary, extraordinary God,

thank you for reminding us that the world, and you,

are bigger than we can possibly imagine.'

Several years ago, i visited the Tate Gallery in Liverpool, in the UK with Rhys and Anna, Near the entrance was a huge pink sculpture of Jacob wrestling with the angel.

This monument depicts an episode from the book of Genesis (Chapter 32, verses 24-32). According to the Biblical story, Jacob was forced to wrestle with an unknown assailant through the night. In the morning his opponent blessed him because he had not abandoned the struggle, and revealed himself to be an angel and messenger from God. Jacob gave thanks saying, 'I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved'. During the early 1930s the sculptor Epstein had read and re-read the book of Genesis and executed a series of unconventional water-colours on Old Testament stories. The subject of Jacob and the Angel fascinated him.

In the carving, the night-long struggle between Jacob and his assailant is translated into a strangely ambiguous embrace between two colossal male figures. Jacob is depicted with his eyes closed and head thrown back; the angel is holding him in a tight grasp, as if squeezing his last breath from him. Jacob and the Angel was completed in 1940, and you know what was going on at that time.

I was struck by the struggle- the humanity and the earthiness of the wrestlers. so human and yet so divine! I was drawn into the struggle. I know that wrestling with God, and this is what i am doing today, wrestling meaning from angels, listening, seeking for the message.. (especially when it is immersed in readings from Daniel and revelations as well as the gospel.. cosmic battles are more remote to me than this super human depiction, but maybe they are similar) struggling with truth,

and reality, and beauty and love, those basic of human/divine signs. Angels are simply messengers, of God, no more and no less. I need to keep an eye out, or I may miss them. I need to expect them, to tread lightly and catch them unawares:

The writer to the Hebrews (13:1-2) says:

'Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.'

<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/epstein-jacob-and-the-angel-t07139/text-summary>