

Lord God, as we ponder scripture, by your Holy Spirit may we see the presence of Jesus in our lives today. Amen

- Looking around the stained glass windows of St Mary's you can see several angels and archangels. Feathery, male, some with wings that look as if they'd have real difficulty in supporting the weight of the muscular figure beneath. Are these accurate depictions? Do angels really look like this? What do you think of when you think of angels? And do they really matter anyway?
 - Well, if they don't, there's quite a lot about them in the bible. Without them, we wouldn't have Mary discovering she was pregnant, baby Jesus escaping with his parents to Egypt from the cruelty of Herod, the adult Jesus ministered to in his 40 days in the wilderness, Peter released from prison, at least two of our three readings today, or in fact any of the other 75 occurrences in the bible.
- So angels are quite high profile in the bible. But what can we make of them?
- In popular spirituality they are right up there. People talk about white feathers appearing after someone has died. People have little glass angel charms. People obviously take comfort in them, rather, I feel, to the exclusion of Jesus. This is surely not what we should be doing.
- What can we make of angels? There seem to be four answers to this question. Three from today's readings and one which I shall slip in as a sort of added bonus. Let's start with Genesis, our first reading.
- Jacob was a tricky character. Unreliable, untruthful, scheming and with appalling parenting skills. In Genesis the bible doesn't seem to depict him as having many good qualities at all. If you just thought he was the father of Joseph, he of dreamcoat fame, then I encourage you to read the story of Jacob starting halfway through Genesis chapter 25. It's gripping. It always gives me the impression that if God can go out of his way to choose such an unpleasant character as Jacob then sinners like you and I must have some hope!
 - In today's little episode he was running away from his twin brother Esau who had threatened to kill him for being such a twerp and had been charged by his parents, Isaac and Rebekah to find a decent wife. So he's alone, under the stars at night, head on a stone for a pillow, presumably feeling rather vulnerable. Eventually he drifted off to sleep and his guard must have slipped a little, and he dreamt.
 - When do you find God speaking to you? ~Is it when all is well with the world or when you have worries and anxieties. Is it when you look at the world with suspicion and fear, or when you relax because you're exhausted trying to keep up the pretence?
- For Jacob, as well at least as for me, it was the latter. Times when we are alone, perhaps enjoying the silence, praying maybe, pondering what is going on. Jacob dreamed of a ladder stretching up to heaven with angels ascending and descending on it. And he knows God is very close to him, calming his fears and promising a wife, descendants and a secure place to live.
- When he wakes up, he realises he has experienced the presence of God and is afraid. The fear comes because of the ancient Jewish belief that God is so holy, so pure, so unbelievably different from us, that even to see him was too much for humans to cope with. Indeed to see God meant to die.
- So angels have an important role to act as go-betweens, messengers from God. Angels speak Godly words to us. Words of peace. Words of hope. Words of encouragement. A breath of heaven on earth.
- And if you feel you are just not good enough for God to speak to you, this can be helpful. Because God's hosts of angels are there at the ready to pass on his divine compassion and acceptance. That's surely what happened to Jacob who must have had pretty low self-esteem considering all the knavery he got up to.
- All this is Christianised by Nathanael in our Gospel reading. Hold Jacob, the trickster in your mind and skip forward 2000 years of so to Jesus choosing his first disciples. He picks Nathanael who seems a good and true Jew, striving to keep the law. Of course Jesus knew his scriptures and must have had Genesis in mind when he says to Nathanael *'Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!'* Nathanael is truer than the deceitful Jacob. And Jesus draws the analogy with Jacob further when he says, *'Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.'*

- Who is the spotlight on here? Not Nathanael, not the angels, but Jesus, himself, the Son of Man.
- Once again, Jesus, who does this so many times so effectively has subverted the Jewish truths and claimed them for himself. Angels are not only messengers from God. They also focus us on the Son of God, Jesus himself.
- They become more than bringers of God's messages, they become signs of God's presence, the number one presence of God, Jesus Christ himself, not just in a shadowy dream with your head on a stone for a pillow.
- I asked you when you felt God speaking to you. My next question is, when do you feel you are in the presence of Jesus? Some would suggest nearly all the time. Others might answer when I receive his body at communion. Others might say when you see compassion in the eyes of another. Still more when you are singing a hymn which has words that speak to you. And there could be lots more answers.
 - When do you feel you are in the presence of Jesus? Does it ring bells that when you're with Jesus, it's as though you're the house of God, the temple itself, with God's angels coming and going and God's own presence there beside you.
- Isn't it extraordinary that whatever you think about angels, and I have to confess I can go weeks without thinking about them at all, when you focus on them a bit, they draw you immediately into thoughts about the presence of Jesus and words from God.
- In a few minutes I shall say 'Therefore with angels and archangels, and with all the company of heaven, we proclaim your great and glorious name, for ever praising you and singing, ... and you will all chime in dutifully, ... **Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might, heaven and earth are full of your glory. Hosanna in the highest. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest.**
 - Once again, one of the most worshipful parts of the communion service. And angels are in the thick of it. And they point us to Jesus. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.
- I had no idea how this sermon was going to turn out today, but I think it is more worship focussed than many of my sermons are and that is surely a good thing. And that has happened because we are thinking about angels.
- But there is one other important result that angels bring from today's readings. Because in our third reading, from the comic strip style Revelation, we hear of a great battle between good and evil., '*Michael and his angels fought against the dragon. The dragon and his angels fought back, but they were defeated*'. The angels conquered evil not by superior power, not by strategy or weight of numbers or superior armaments. How then did they win? '*they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony*'.
- True goodness cannot ever be defeated by evil. Relying on the goodness of Jesus Christ brings new life into hopeless situations.
 - So once again the focus of the battle against evil is thrown back on Jesus, the Lamb of God. And this is once again a call to us to allow our worship with the angels to affect our lives as we strive for justice and peace in the world
 - My more normal emphases of our affect affecting the world we live in once again surfaces. Surfaces out of the worship of Jesus with angels and archangels and all the conquering powers of heaven.
- So thinking about angels helps us to hear what God is saying. They are messengers.
- Thinking about angels keeps us close to Jesus. They are spotlights. But only if keep the biblical stories close at hand. If we go into popular thought, angels become at best a cuddly toy, and at worst a substitute for Jesus.
 - So when you next hear someone waxing lyrical about angels, affirm them and tell them the story of Nathanael, and bring it round to Jesus and the really Good News which he embodies. Then the spotlight switches on.
- And thinking about angels clearly helps us to worship. Just remember the bit in the Eucharistic prayer we have just recited. They are heavenly creatures. And heaven is the Kingdom of God where Jesus is the king, the temple.
- Whatever you think of angels, don't ignore them. And don't just let their soft feathers comfort you when you are feeling lost or sad. Instead let them draw you back to Jesus. Worship him with them, with all the company of heaven and allow that worship to enable you to defeat evil by relying on the blood of the lamb. Amen.