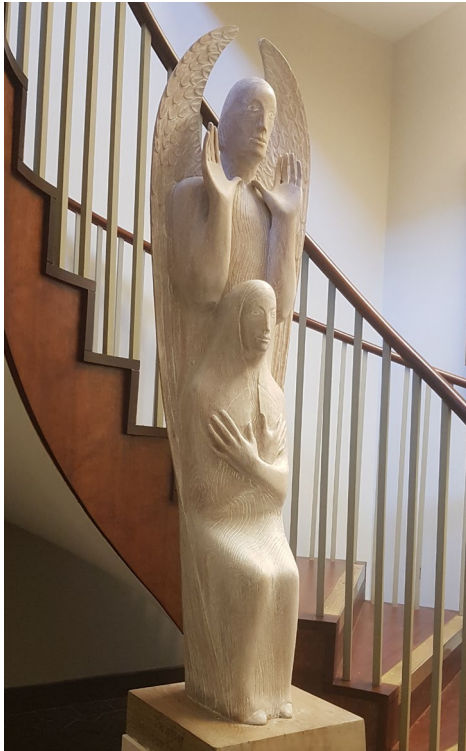


The Feast of St Michael & All Angels Sunday 29th September 2024

First service of The Revd Lydia McLean as Curate of St Marylebone

Readings [Genesis 28:10-17](#), [John 1.47-end](#)

Talking to an angel



[‘I have a dream’](#). Not one of the songs that appear in Abba Voyage, which is a shame because it has the perfect line for today: ‘I believe in angels’.

Can you sing that line with hand on heart? And if you can, so what? I believe in black holes (in that I believe that they exist) but that belief does not make a difference in my life.

You don’t hear many sermons about angels, though they get over 300 mentions in the Bible and they are all around us in everyday speech.

Be an angel and put the kettle on. ‘Angel’ here is an exaggerated image of everyday kindness. Interestingly,

this phrase is more a girl thing than a boy thing. Imagine Phil Mitchell’s garage in *Eastenders*: no-one there is going to say, ‘Be an angel and hand me the monkey wrench.’

Angels often appear (as we have seen) in song lyrics, usually when men sing about women they fancy: Robbie Williams’ [‘Angels’](#) is typical, Annie Lennox singing [‘There Must Be An Angel’](#) an exception.

More sombre is the appearance of angels in the vocabulary of grief, especially when a child dies, where the angel is an image of purity and innocence.

In all this, angels are essentially passive, tailor’s dummies we can dress up in the attributes that we most desire in human beings; a little like [the angels in our apse](#) with their conventional, white northern European beauty.

Take the stairs down to the crypt, however, and you’ll meet an angel that is closer to the biblical view of active creatures doing God’s work: Fenwick Lawson’s Angel Gabriel [*picture above*] is God’s messenger (which is what ‘angel’ literally means) announcing to Mary the coming birth of Jesus. That’s from Luke’s gospel, which also gives us the ‘herald angels’ we sing about every Christmas, announcing his arrival to

the shepherds. They begin with news of glory and peace, in words that supply the first line of the [Gloria](#) the choir has just sung.

How does any of this make a difference in our lives? Two thoughts.

In today's gospel reading Jesus tells Nathaniel that he will see 'angels ascending and descending upon the Son of Man', a strong echo of our other scene, Jacob's ladder, an angelic escalator between earth and heaven. So for John, Jesus is the place – the person – where earth and heaven meet.

Both men have faults: Nathaniel is a snob – he's just been rude about Jesus' home town of Nazareth (John 1.46) – while Jacob is much worse. Neither has his faults held against him, though. Jesus promises Nathaniel he ain't seen nothing yet, and Jacob has a dream that will outlast even Abba's (three thousand plus years so far). First, then, our readings remind us of what we experience every time we gather at Jesus' table, that God specialises in giving good things to people who don't deserve them.

Second, a thought about how God acts in our world. Some Christian voices proclaim a God whose main attribute is the power to rearrange reality for those God favours. To which you might say: you claim God arranged things to make you rich or find a parking space; so why no rearranging for the people of Lebanon? or the remaining hostages in Gaza? or the latest victims of the climate we are pushing to the brink? Angels in the Bible suggest a God who is for ever active, but not so much in manipulating reality as in calling, warning, persuading, revealing, encouraging – changing things through message more than muscle.

Take Jacob – clever but nasty, concerned only for his own profit. We see him in the wilderness, a fugitive from the murderous anger of his brother Esau, whom he has twice tricked out of his rights. Yet it is Jacob that God singles out for this twenty-four carat spiritual experience, sights that human eyes could never hope to see. What has Jacob done to deserve this?

This is no perverse reward, like a giving a naughty child a trip out in the hope that they will behave better afterwards. What Jacob sees is not a show, staged for his benefit. Jacob in his dream witnesses something already going on quite independently of him: the messengers of God coming and going, on their routine missions to the four corners of God's earth, a dimension of life that up to now has

passed Jacob by. But then God tells Jacob that he has his part to play in this: 'You shall spread abroad to the west and east and south and north; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you.'

This desert spot, Jacob's bolt-hole after his squalid little scams, is actually a place where God is at work on bigger and better things. His hiding place becomes the gate of heaven: 'surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it'. From now on Jacob's life will follow a new path.

Who wouldn't benefit from a moment of clarity like that? A moment when you can say: I have been spending all my efforts on other things, but I see it now, *this* is the big thing, this is what God wants me to have a part in.

Today, then, is a day less for speculation – do such beings as angels exist in this rather large universe of ours? – than for attention: when have angels crossed my path; and who may have a message from God that I need to hear?

All of which brings us to Lydia. Lydia is already known and loved here, and is today among us in a wonderful new way, since she was yesterday ordained as a deacon in the church of God.

The last thing you want at the start of your ministry is to be described as 'an angel in our midst', so I won't do that. That Christmas carol, though, tells us to hearken to the 'herald angels', and the ordination service yesterday described deacons as 'called to serve...as heralds of Christ's kingdom'.

God often sends a message through someone else; someone to help you find your ladder, and see the angelic traffic in your life. Your herald might not be an ordained or official person, but could be anyone with something to say about what is going on in your life. The thing about someone who is a deacon or a priest is not that they have deeper wisdom in these matters than anyone else (though they might) but that you have a claim on them. They are here to *serve*. They are here not for themselves but for you.

Yesterday Bishop Sarah encouraged us to speak to our new deacons, and ask them 'what makes their heart sing'. Good advice. Someone who has just responded to the call of God may be just the person to help you make sense of what the call of God might be for you.

We all need our ladder. Each one of us – like that bad man Jacob – needs that glimpse of heaven, needs to know that God is close, that we matter to God, that God has a purpose for us. We each need a ladder to release the coming and going of the angels in our lives, and to lead to new possibilities. Our shared task is for you to help me find my ladder, and for us to help you find yours, so that any of us might be able to say, surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it.

Note

‘We all need our ladder’ – I owe this theme to Simon Parke’s novel *Desert Ascent*.