

Sermon St John's 23rd September 2018

Readings: Wisdom 1.16-2.1,12-22; James 3.13-4.3,7-8a; Mark 9.30-37

I've been thinking quite a bit about angels recently, which is not something I do very often. I left a few angels behind in my previous parish, as well as some whose angelic qualities were harder to discern. Cathy and I have been made welcome here in Ranmoor by some wonderful angels. We had some truly angelic singing on Monday from the choir. And I'm looking forward to getting to know the angels of Ranmoor better. As well as those whose angelic qualities may be harder to discern.

There are lots of angels in the Bible of course. But I've been reminded recently of the angels in the Book of Acts, chapter one. When Jesus ascended to heaven two men in white appeared and said to the disciples, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven? This Jesus who has been taken up into heaven will come back one day. In other words, what are you doing standing around looking upwards? Jesus will come back one day so get busy. In the past months there has been quite a bit of standing around looking upwards. Not surprisingly, there has been a great deal of focus on the ceiling. But now, thank goodness, the ceiling is repaired and we can stop looking anxiously upwards. We can get on with the business of being the church.

Unfortunately, our readings today are not especially encouraging. They all seem to take a rather jaundiced view of humanity. Not too many angels to be found within them. In the Wisdom of Solomon we are told of the ungodly, lying in wait for the righteous man to test him with insult and torture. To see how far they can go before God the Father intervenes. As Christians we naturally identify the righteous man as Jesus. Who was inconvenient to those with power in Israel. Who reproached them for their sins. The wicked put God to the test by killing Jesus but they failed to understand God's secret purposes. They did not realise that He would not intervene. That God's strength is made perfect in weakness. The disciples in our Gospel reading did not understand this either. When Jesus told them that he would be betrayed and killed and would rise again it made no sense to them.

We know how things turned out and we can understand strength in weakness at a cerebral level. But it can take a lifetime to really learn to live it. Like the disciples we jockey for position, security and power. And I am as guilty of that as anyone. I felt enormous pride on Monday when I was made Vicar of Ranmoor and Area Dean of Hallam. But our Gospel reminds us that we are called to be servants of God. And I am called to be the servant of the servants of God.

Our second reading from the Letter of James seems to be addressed to those who are very far from being angels. They are guilty of envy and selfish ambition, boastfulness and falsehood. They dispute among themselves, are avaricious, covetous and even murderous. This all sounds a long way from St John's Ranmoor. One of the things that has impressed me about you is the way that you have held together in very trying circumstances. And I know there are lots of people who have worked very hard who deserve thanks for that. But it would not be surprising, given all that has happened, if there had been the odd cross word. The odd bit of tension.

And where that is the case I hope we can submit ourselves afresh to God. Seek that wisdom from above. Make peace and be reconciled. I'm sure we can all do with polishing our haloes a bit and becoming more of the community of love that God invites us to be. So that St John's is not just a beautiful building but a welcoming, attractive community that draws others into its life.

A few years ago Robert Warren wrote a book called the Healthy Churches Handbook. He identified some of the things that make for a healthy church. They include things like being energised by faith, being outward-looking and concerned to find out what God wants. Healthy churches work well as communities but are also able to accommodate newcomers. And they are willing to face the cost of change and growth. At the back of Rob's book there are some interesting exercises. And one of them is called naming the Angel of the Church. You may recall in the Book of Revelation, John writes to the angels of seven churches. And Robert Warren's exercise gets people to think about what the angel of their

church might be like. It's a bit like if the church was an animal, what sort of animal would it be? Or if the church was a colour what colour would it be?

As your new vicar I need to understand what St John's angel is like. Of course angels are not seen all that often. They tend to appear in dreams or perhaps are glimpsed out of the corner of one's eye. They don't have substance like a building or even a parish profile. They have to be waited on and welcomed. And it may take a while before the angel of St John's comes into focus for me. Like the Angela Gabriel who visited Zechariah and Mary, angels often come when they are least expected. There's a whole study of angels and I won't trouble you with them now. But angels vary. Some of them, like Gabriel are messengers. Bearers of the good news. Others fight for justice and righteousness like the Archangel Michael. Others bring healing like Raphael. I wonder what sort of angel the angel of St John's is? Obviously he or she is very musical but I am sure he or she has many other qualities as well. And it will be part of my job to help the angel of St John's to fly. To give it wings. To enable it to be the best angel it can be. And I will need all of your help to do that.

One of the things that I hope St John's will always be is hospitable. It was great to share in the Wednesday lunch this week. You may recall the story from Genesis of the three men who visited Abram and told him that his wife Sarai would bear a son. Abraham welcomed the three men which is fortunate because they turned out to be angels. They remind us that when we welcome the stranger we may be entertaining angels unawares.

In our Gospel, Jesus applies the same sort of lesson to children. When we welcome a child we welcome Christ into our midst. Children may not always be little angels but they have something to teach us about the kingdom of God. About trust and openness. About cutting through the conventions and complexities that we build up in life. Children often see things more clearly than the rest of us and they are frequently the best missionaries. Children are not just the church of the future but of the present. And I'm looking forward to working with the children's leaders to think about how we make sure that children are at the heart of our life together.

I suspect most of us don't think about angels very much most of the time. But angels are important. They are common to many of the world faiths. And in our supposedly secular society there are a lot of angels around. You see them in card shops and garden centres. People with no particular religious affiliation still talk about guardian angels. They are still part of popular spirituality. Angels cross many boundaries and they reflect God's deep love for the world and his desire to engage with it. They are signs of God's mission. All of us are called to share in that work. We are called to be on the side of the angels. Amen.