

Preached by The Rev'd Canon Ken Boullier
24th December 2017 for Advent 4 & Midnight Mass
St Mawes & St Just in Roseland

Advent 4

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16

Luke 1:26 - 38

The Birth of Jesus Foretold

ANGELS

This Christmas I am going to focus on our Christmas Angels, who, in turn, will draw our attention to the Christ Child, Jesus, Emmanuel – God with Us.

You may have noticed that this year our Christmas trees are adorned with little knitted angels. Our Stitch and Chat group have been busy knitting countless angels who are being distributed all over the parish.

You may have seen some identical ‘angels’ featured on BBC spotlight a few days ago in a report from Torpoint. Nine hundred knitted angels have surprised residents there, a town which had previously been accused of having "no Christmas spirit". The angels have been left in random places across Torpoint, in the middle of the night by members of St James' Church.

A local resident had overheard the comment from a local resident last Christmas and decided to take action.

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The inspiration came to the folk at Torpoint and here in our parish from a project started by North Shields and Whitby Bay Methodist Church. They now have a website www.christmasangel.net where more than 51,000 angels have been registered.

The festive figures are designed to bring a sprinkling of joy to anyone who finds one. A member of the Sunderland angel team said: *"We are thrilled these angels are joining in the fun and can't wait for people to find them. The reason we are doing this is to share God's love and to bless our public and community places with a Christmas message of hope and love."*

So who and what are angels, what is their significance at Christmas and do we actually believe in them?!

A recent survey, quoted at the launch of the BBC's new policy on religious broadcasting, revealed that 25% of the British public believe in Angels.

The word *angel* derives from the Latin *angelus* "messenger". This is very much the role of angels in the Christmas story with Gabriel announcing to Mary that she is to bear this God-Child the Messiah

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and with the heavenly host appearing to the Shepherds
announcing that the Christ has been born.

However there are many more roles for Angels recorded
in the Bible. Those of us who use the daily BRF New
Daylight bible notes will be familiar with some of those
suggested by Margaret Silf in our Advent readings:

Visiting Angels

Connecting Angels

Sustaining Angels

Announcing Angels

Warning Angels

Consoling Angels

Liberating Angels

I am going to share a few of them with you now, and a
few more at the Midnight Service:

Visiting Angels

Genesis 18:1-5

A Son promised to Abraham and Sarah

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The LORD appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. ²He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. ³He said, 'My lord, if I find favour with you, do not pass by your servant. ⁴Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. ⁵Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant.' So they said, 'Do as you have said.'

Abraham's encounter with the three messengers of God by the oaks of Mamre is known to many through Andrei Rublev's icon of the Trinity, which is seen to represent not just these three angelic visitors but the Holy Trinity itself.

Middle Eastern hospitality is legendary, the poorest families often setting their choicest food before guests whilst going hungry themselves.

The Gift of life itself is exchanged as the visitors and restored and Sarah received the gift of life of a child, long after the age of childbearing is past.

We live in a society where being housebound, alone, lonely and even homeless are on the increase.

The book of Hebrews teaches us that 'by offering generous hospitality some have entertained angels without knowing it'.

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A visit from a neighbour, an invitation to share a cup of tea or a friendly greeting in the street can bring life to a soul that is dying for love.

And when the gift is offered, the giver invariably feels more alive too. Where life is given, life is returned, abundantly.

*God is looking for visiting angels where you live,
How might you respond?*

Sustaining Angels

1 Kings 19:4-6

4 But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: 'It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.' 5 Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, 'Get up and eat.' 6 He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again.

Most of us have known the feeling of being at the end of the line. There is simply no way forward, no energy left to fight the next battle, no motivation to keep going at all. We had such grand plans for a better world, and now, we realise, we are '*no better than our ancestors*'. We are weary of it all and, like Elijah, all we want is to

lie down and sleep - even to enter the final sleep for which Elijah begs.

Yet here we are, still going. Where did that energy come from? For Elijah, it came in the form of an angel and the simplest of meals - a cake and a jar of water. Not much for the long journey into the future, but enough to sustain the next few miles, reminding us that our life's journey is to be taken one small, trusting step at a time. Just as the people of Israel were sustained in the desert by a supply of food and water only ever sufficient for one day's journey, so it is for Elijah - and for us. Yet the sustaining love of the provider never runs out.

Sustaining angels cross our path more often than we realise, with their gentle invitations: 'Can I give you a hand? May I help you carry that load?' 'Come in and rest a while.'

There was a pub sign advertising 'Free beer tomorrow, for everyone who missed it yesterday' The world's promises are like that. Tomorrow never comes. The angel's message is different. With God it is always 'today', and there is always what we need for today's journey.

When did you last meet a sustaining angel?

Can you be a sustaining angel for someone else?

Announcing Angels

Luke 1:26-28,31

The Birth of Jesus Foretold

26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, 27 to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. 28 And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.' 31 And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.

How are you with interruptions? When I am engrossed in a book or watching a favourite TV programme, I don't appreciate it at all when the phone rings.

I have often caught myself in these moments of irritated impatience, but one day my thoughts went a bit further and I found myself wondering how things would have been if Mary of Nazareth had been as intolerant of interruption as I am myself.

To describe the angel's visit as an 'interruption' in the smooth running of her young life is an enormous understatement. The angel's message would completely overthrow everything she had ever known or could possibly have expected. It would pitch her into a very unenviable situation that could easily have led to her death by stoning. But the angel didn't impose this future upon her. He offered it to her as a choice, held within a wholly reassuring affirmation of God's favour and love

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for her and a promise of life - indeed, eternal life - within, and far beyond, what appeared to be a disastrous immediate prospect. She trusted the affirmation and the promise, as she made her historic response: 'Yes!'

Most of us will not have experienced circumstances so extreme or choices so demanding, but for us too there will have been times when some unwelcome interruption threatened to derail our carefully constructed life journeys. With hindsight, sometimes we can see the hand of God in these moments, especially if the interruption was challenging us to respond to something we knew was right but was nevertheless potentially disruptive. Mary of Nazareth is a model in so many ways - not least in the art of being open to interruptions, truly listening to the annunciations they may herald, and making the more life - giving choice in response.

*May we be open to, and even welcome,
interruptions. They may be annunciations.*

Liberating Angels

Acts 5:17-21

The Apostles Are Persecuted

17 Then the high priest took action; he and all who were with him (that is, the sect of the Sadducees), being filled with jealousy, 18 arrested the apostles and put them in the public prison. 19 But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors, brought them out, and said, 20 'Go, stand in the temple and tell the people the whole message about this life.' 21 When they heard this, they entered the temple at daybreak and went on with their teaching.

When the high priest and those with him arrived, they called together the council and the whole body of the elders of Israel, and sent to the prison to have them brought.

Prison bars can take many different forms, and so can angels. How might the apostles have felt that night, imprisoned by a hostile regime and dreading whatever might happen next? It was into this suffocating fog of terror that the liberating angel appeared, to open the prison doors.

Can angels, messengers of the Holy Spirit, penetrate our fears and set us free? Most surely they can, but they may not arrive with wings and harps. They may

be so disguised that we fail to recognise them.

Jane, 85 years old and rather frail, lived alone in a district you wouldn't want to walk through after dark. One day she heard that her friend was in hospital. She knew she must visit, but that meant crossing some derelict land in the dark to get to the bus stop. Her fears escalated as she walked across this threatening landscape and saw four rather intimidating young men standing there in hoodies. She prayed for courage, faced her fears and approached them boldly, taking herself by surprise with her words: 'I'm glad you're here, lads. I was feeling a bit nervous on my own.' At this they became very protective: "Don't you worry, granny. We'll take good care of you. No one will hurt you while we're here.'

These angels were heavily disguised, but they set her free from the imprisonment of fear.

Liberation first frees us from something, but its full purpose is to free us for something. The apostles were freed from imprisonment, for a bold new ministry. The bus - stop angels freed Jane from her immediate fear, but through their response she was freed for something more - to be present to her friend lying alone in hospital.

What has imprisoned you in the past?

How, and for what, were you set free?

Two traveling angels stopped to spend the night in the home of a wealthy family. The family was rude and refused to let the angels stay in the mansion's guest room. Instead the angels were given a small space in the cold basement.

As they made their bed on the hard floor, the older angel saw a hole in the wall and repaired it. When the younger angel asked why, the older angel replied, "Things aren't always what they seem." The next night the pair came to rest at the house of a very poor, but very hospitable farmer and his wife.

After sharing what little food they had, the couple let the angels sleep in their bed where they could have a good night's rest. When the sun came up the next morning the angels found the farmer and his wife in tears. Their only cow, whose milk had been their sole income, lay dead in the field.

The younger angel was infuriated and asked the older angel, "How could you have let this happen? The first man had everything, yet you helped him," she accused. "The second family had little, but was willing to share everything, and you let their cow die." "Things aren't always what they seem," the older angel replied. "When we stayed in the basement of the mansion, I noticed there was gold stored in that hole in the wall.

Since the owner was so obsessed with greed and unwilling to share his good fortune, I sealed the wall so he wouldn't find it." "Then last night as we slept in the farmer's bed, the angel of death came for his wife. I gave him the cow instead. Things aren't always what they seem."

Sometimes that is exactly what happens when things don't turn out the way they should. If you have faith, you just need to trust that every outcome is always to your advantage. You might not know it until sometime later.

The Book of Romans has this to say: *'we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.'*

The story is told of a man in China who raised horses for a living. When one of his prized stallions ran away, his friends gathered at his home to mourn his great loss.

After they had expressed their concern, the man raised this question: "How do I know whether what happened is bad or good?"

A couple days later the runaway horse returned with several strays following close behind. The same acquaintances again came to his house – this time to celebrate his good fortune. "But how do I know whether it's good or bad?" the old gentleman asked them.

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That very afternoon the horse kicked the owner's son and broke the young man's leg. Once more the crowd assembled to express their sorrow over the incident. "But how do I know if this is bad or good?" the father asked again.

Well, only a few days later, war broke out. The man's son, however, was exempted from the military service because of his broken leg.

Yes, you guessed it, the friends again gathered-- but we'll stop the story there. You can easily see how it could go on and on. This tale points out that from our limited human perspective, it's impossible to know with certainty how to interpret the experiences of life.

The challenge is to trust God. Victor Hugo said:
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In the bleak mid-winter	22
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*and all the garments rolled in blood
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.*

*⁶For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named*

*⁶For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*

*⁷His authority shall grow continually,
and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom.*

*He will establish and uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time onwards and for evermore.
The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.*

Luke 2:1-14

*2In those days a decree went out from Emperor
Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This
was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius
was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be
registered. ⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth
in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called
Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house
and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with
Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting*

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a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

⁸In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

*¹⁴'Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favours!'*

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However there are many more roles for Angels recorded in the Bible. Those of us who use the daily BRF New Daylight bible notes will be familiar with some of those suggested by Margaret Silf in our Advent readings:

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Liberating Angels

I shared some of them at the morning service 12 hours ago and here are a few more to add to the list:

Connecting Angels

Genesis 28:10-12

Jacob's Dream at Bethel

Jacob left Beer-sheba and went towards Haran. ¹¹He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. ¹²And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.

After a major accident, Jennifer was left partially paralysed and confined to a wheelchair. Sadly, her husband, unable to cope with the new situation, left her. She struggled through life as best she could, greatly

helped by the kindness and practical assistance of friends. One day, during a Quiet Day in her church, she was reflecting on how Jacob too found himself in a desolate place, with only a stone for a pillow, and yet, in that place, encountered the angels of God ascending and descending the ladder that connected heaven and earth. At the end of the Quiet Day, Jennifer realised, Surely *'God is in this stony place, and I never knew it'* (see 28:16).

Jennifer's discovery was a heartfelt 'Yes!' to the reality of her own experience. She knew only too well the cruelty of those stones, but she also knew that the stony ground was the very place where the ladder begins, and that it rises straight into the very heart of holiness. The angels, ascending and descending were her friends and sometimes the strangers too, who kept on connecting her to God's love and compassion through their own simple acts of kindness.

When our lives go bad on us and God seems to be impossibly far away somewhere there will be a ladder to remind us that the very place we stand is eternally connected to the heart of God, and there will be messengers sent to give us God's love in a thousand unexpected ways

Have there been angels in your life who have reconnected you to God in your hours of need?

Announcing Angels

Luke 2:8-14

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This morning we had the account of Mary receiving the news from the Angel Gabriel that she was to bear the Christ Child. Tonight, in our Gospel reading, we hear of the Heavenly Host proclaiming Glory to God and Peace on Earth.

Shepherds, like Fishermen, live and work in a very real world, a hard life lived on the edge of material reality, not a virtual reality driven by the super-spiritual suggestiveness of the make believe or vivid

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imaginings. And yet fisherman and farmers are often the most spiritually aware of all human beings.

To be called away from the huge commitment to the task of shepherding would take a lot. In this case a lot of Angels and something potentially more scary than anything the physical world could throw at us.

May we be open to, and even welcome, unexpected invitations. They may bring us into the very presence of God and open the possibility of Peace in our lives.

Warning Angels

Matthew 2:13-15

The Escape to Egypt

13 Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.' 14 Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, 15 and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I have called my son.'

Very often, when God is trying to get through to me, God has to make several attempts to penetrate the thick walls of my conscious mind before I get the message. Sometimes my conscious mind is completely impervious to anything the Holy Spirit might want to suggest to me. For some people God seems to get through to them with angels visiting, as they did to Joseph, in dreams.

Maybe, like me, you struggle to remember your dreams, and maybe God doesn't have to storm the barricades of consciousness to get through to you. But for many people there are memories of what some might call 'deep dreams', that, in hindsight, appear to have been prophetic, profoundly affecting an important life choice.

Margaret Silf writes of a friend who once dreamed that he had to cross a river. A little way upstream there was a large, elaborate bridge spanning the water. His dream seemed to suggest that he should choose to swim across rather than use the bridge. He struggled through the river, and was just about to reach the opposite bank when he looked back and saw that the bridge had collapsed.

Of course, only the dreamer knows what the dream means in practice for his or her own life, and only the dreamer can interpret the dream, through the Holy Spirit. Warning angels sometimes arrive when there is a

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real risk ahead, and they offer us warnings in symbols that our unconscious minds can grasp. If we listen to their wisdom, we will look back later and know that these warning angels were in fact guardian angels

Has a warning angel ever visited your dreams in this way?

How did you respond?

Consoling Angels

John 20:11-14

Jesus Appears to Mary Magdalene

11 But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; 12 and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet.

13 They said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping?' She said to them, 'They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.' 14 When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus.

Angels can be heard as well as seen. Debbie recently had to undergo a medical procedure that was causing her some anxiety. As she made the journey to the hospital with mounting apprehension, she noticed that familiar music was filling her mind. With her inner ear she was listening, quite unexpectedly, to Rutter's song 'The Lord bless you and keep you' – a musical angel. The more

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deeply she tuned in to this inner music the more calmer she became. When she finally arrived at the hospital, to her amazement and relief, she found an old friend sitting there, also awaiting a procedure. Like Mary, Debbie had been visited by two consoling angels that morning.

Another friend, Alison, died suddenly in the prime of life, leaving a distraught widower to mourn her. She wasn't 'religious' but she was deeply spiritual and had a great sense of humour. She had always promised, half in fun, that after she died she would return as a black butterfly. We had smiled at the time, but the smiles turned to tearful amazement at her funeral service. A black butterfly fluttered around the church, settling from time to time on various shoulders. After the service, everyone commented on it, but her husband, lost in sorrow like Mary, hadn't been aware of it. It was then that his second angel appeared, laid a friendly arm around his shoulders and consoled him: "You see, Ron, Ali knew we all needed reassurance that she was there, but you didn't need an external sign, because she was and always will be at home in your heart.

May we hear the angel voices that sing to us of God's love when we most need it, and may we be the angel voices to those who long to be consoled

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After they had expressed their concern, the man raised this question: "How do I know whether what happened is bad or good?"

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A BLESSING OF ANGELS – John O'Donohue

„May the Angels in their beauty bless you.
May they turn toward you streams of blessing.

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May the Angel of Awakening stir your heart
To come alive to the eternal within you,
To all the invitations that quietly surround you.

May the Angel of Healing turn your wounds Into
sources of refreshment.

May the Angel of the Imagination enable you
To stand on the true thresholds,
At ease with your ambivalence
And drawn in new directions
Through the glow of your contradictions.

May the Angel of Compassion open your eyes
To the unseen suffering around you.

May the Angel of Wildness disturb the places
Where your life is domesticated and safe,
Take you to the territories of true otherness
Where all that is awkward in you
Can fall into its own rhythm.

May the Angel of Eros introduce you
To the beauty of your senses
To celebrate your inheritance
As a temple of the holy spirit.

May the Angel of Justice disturb you
To take the side of the poor and the wronged.
May the Angel of Encouragement confirm you

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24th December 2017 for Advent 4 & Midnight Mass
St Mawes & St Just in Roseland

In worth and self-respect,
That you may live with the dignity
That presides in your soul.

May the Angel of Death arrive only
When your life is complete
And you have brought every given gift
To the threshold where its infinity can shine.

May all the Angels be your sheltering
And joyful guardians.”

John O'Donohue – *Eternal Echoes: Exploring Our
Hunger To Belong*

Midnight Communion
O Little Town of Bethlehem

GS
3

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Silent Night	15
On Christmas Night	9
O Come all ye faithful (<i>all 4 verses</i>)	13

Midnight Communion	GS
O Little Town of Bethlehem	3
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