

Yesterday at St Peter and St Paul's Church, we launched our Festival of Angels at the Christmas Brass Band concert.

Angels have been arriving in the church during the past week, and we now have several hundred - all of different shapes, sizes, patterns. It is a real community project – all the angels have been made by individuals, local artists, community groups such as the WI, local businesses and children in the local schools and nurseries. The handbell Group, Messy Church children and Friendship Group are amongst those who have made angels as part of the display. It is going to be quite a challenge to count them all!

We all have many different images of angels. Each year in December, white robes and tinsel halos appear in the Christmas nativity plays in schools and churches.

In classical art, whether it is sculpture or stained glass windows, angels are usually portrayed as tall and beautiful figures, in human form, except for the addition of wings!

Victorian art and architecture in particular often featured angelic figures. Osborne House on the Isle of Wight, which was the country home of Queen Victoria, has many angelic statues throughout the house and ground. Holy Trinity Church in Weymouth, where I was curate for four years has now fewer than 70 angels in different points around the church.

Angels feature throughout the Bible at points of interaction between God and human beings. They are his messengers.

We find them both in the New and Old Testaments. In the book of Genesis, angels often appear in dreams and visions to affirm that the message that is being imparted is from God. Jacob, for example, had a dream in which he saw the angels of God ascending and descending and received the word from God that his descendants would multiply and be blessed by God in a special way. He awoke from that dream saying:

Surely, the Lord is in this place – and I did not know it! And he was afraid and said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.”

We can each think of many other points in the Bible, where angels appear as God’s messengers: to call men or women for a particular task, to give direction, to warn of danger, or to affirm God’s will.

During the coming days of Advent, and throughout our celebrations of Christmas we will be reminded of the role that Angels played in preparing for and proclaiming the coming of Jesus.

It was of course Gabriel, who visited Mary and told her the amazing and wonderful news, that she was called to be the bearer of God’s Son.

It was an Angel who spoke to Joseph in a dream and reassured him that the things that were happening were part of God's plan.

We will again hear of the angels proclaiming to the Shepherds, the wonderful news that Jesus was born in Bethlehem.

Later on we will recall the warning given to the wise men not to return to Herod after finding and worshipping Jesus.

It is good during the season of Advent to celebrate and give thanks to God for all the angels that God has sent and continues to send to make his presence in our lives and his will known to us.

God speaks to us in many different ways. In our times of prayer. Through our reading of the word. Sometimes through other people, or in a deep dream or vision. Sometimes, these appear to us as angels.

Most of the angels in the Bible are un-named. There are, however, 4 named archangels in the Old and New Testaments and Apochrypha.

Firstly, the Archangel Michael

Michael is often presented in military dress, holding a shield and a flaming sword. In the Bible, the Archangel Michael is seen as the protector of God's kingdom. In the Book of Revelation, it is Michael who leads the battle against the angels of the devil.

His name means: "who is like God?"

This is a rhetorical question. It does not mean, Michael is like God – the name points us towards God, as the psalmists do. Who can protect us like God?

God is our rock, God is our salvation, God is our fortress, God is our shield.

Michael then is the vision or voice which reminds us in times of fear and anxiety, that we can call on God for our protection.

The Archangel Uriel - His name means “Light of God”

Uriel is known as the angel of wisdom. He shines the light of God’s truth into the darkness of confusion. In art, Uriel is often depicted carrying either a book or a scroll, both of which represent wisdom. Another symbol connected with Uriel is an open hand holding a flame, which represents God’s truth.

The Book of Enoch in the Apocrypha, describes Uriel as one of archangels who preside over the world. In the Book of Enoch, chapter 10, it is Uriel who warns the prophet Noah about the impending flood.

In the Second Book of Esdras, God sends Uriel to answer a series of questions that the prophet Ezra asks God. When answering Ezra’s questions, Uriel tells him that God has permitted him to describe signs about good and evil at work in the world, but it will still be difficult for Ezra to understand from his limited human perspective.

Uriel then, is the voice or vision which reminds us to seek God’s will before making decisions, when seeking fresh inspiration, or striving to solve problems and resolve conflicts. It is the voice which encourages us to let go of emotions such as anxiety and anger that can prevent us from discerning wisdom.

Ultimately, Uriel points us towards Jesus, who said “I am the light of the world.” By this, Jesus is saying that his teaching and the example he gives us, are like a light to show us the way in the maze of life’s choices.

Then there is the Archangel Raphael

Often depicted with a staff and travel pack, as if prepared for a journey - reminding us of the journey that Tobias, the son of Tobit made to Media. We read in the Apocryphal book of Tobit, that Tobias did not know the way to Media, and had no companion for the journey. However, Raphael, an angel of God appeared, and agreed to accompany him on the way and was instrumental in restoring his eyesight.

For this reason, Raphael is known as the Angel of Healing – his name means “God heals.”

Finally, we come to the Archangel Gabriel

Gabriel is the angel that most people are familiar with, through the accounts of the Christmas story. In art, he is often depicted with his right hand raised in a gesture of peace and blessing; holding a stem of lilies in his left hand reminding us of his most famous role in the Bible as the carrier of the message to Mary that she had been chosen as the one who would bear God's Son into the world.

Gabriel is the archetypal messenger of God. Interestingly his name means "God is my strength."

A while ago, I saw a film about, Henry, a preacher in America. His church, St Matt's was in a rundown downtown area of a city. He was struggling. Not only struggling to keep things going at church – the youth group was having to close, youngsters were getting in trouble with the police, and the church was being pressurized by a developer to sell up and move to a new estate. Henry was also struggling to make time for his wife and family. He knew that things were getting tough and so he prayed to God for help. Responding to this request, God sent an angel... in the human form of Dudley.

Dudley tried in lots of ways to get alongside Henry and help him to see things from a different perspective... to give him the confidence and courage he needed to stand up for the things that God had called him into that community to do.

The film portrays in an amusing way, how for a long time Henry refused accept the angel's presence, let alone his helpful advice and guidance! However, as Henry does in the end begin to believe in the angel and respond to his promptings, the effect is transformational.

Although the film was fictitious, I think it conveys some important questions for us to reflect on...

Are we always open to God's call in our lives? Do we always want to hear?

Sometimes God can challenge us in ways that as human beings we resist. It is often easier to stick with the familiar, the known, the tried and tested, to keep things as they have always been. As a result, we sometimes try to block out whatever it is that God might be trying to say to us.

When we are tempted to close our minds to the things that God might be saying to us, because of our doubts and fears or concerns over practical barriers – God says to us too, that we are not asked to move forward in our own strength alone, but in the power of his Holy Spirit.

Gabriel reminds us that God is our strength.

In all of these ways, the four named Archangels in the Bible point us towards some important truths for us to reflect on during our Advent journey:

God is the one who we can depend upon in times of hardship.

It is God who gives us his light to comfort, to guide and help us to discern the truth.

It is God who journeys with us through all of life's challenges and longs to heal and restore us.

It is God who calls us to share in his work of bringing light and love and hope into the world today – the work that he began 2000 years ago when he sent his Son to be born amongst us.