

Advent Reflections 2021: Angels (Week 4)

A multitude of heavenly hosts

The theologian Jane Williams comments that, in the Bible, a concentration of angels can be a pointer that something very special is happening.¹ In the past few weeks, we have indeed seen that angels seem to appear for very special messages or at key turning points in one's life and in support of deep callings (such as Isaiah and Ezekiel). It is probably not surprising, that, at the birth of Jesus, a multitude of angels should appear:

In 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!' ¹⁵When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.' (Luke 2.8-15)



*Gloria Angels, Detail of the Altar Reredos at Holy Trinity Stirling,
C E Kempe, 1878*

This passage features angelic words, which have found their way into our liturgy as the opening line of the Gloria we sing at our services (except in the seasons of Advent & Lent), echoing the angel's song and their presence in announcing the incarnation.

Q: How could we best join our voices in worship?

There are other descriptions of heavenly hosts in the Bible, but our passage from Luke is fairly unique in the sense that this multitude is described as appearing on earth, spilling out from heaven. Usually, some kind of division is maintained – but not here at Christ's birth. For Luke, the heavens are opened!

There is one noteworthy OT parallel of angels descending and ascending in a large group in the well-known story of Jacob's Ladder:

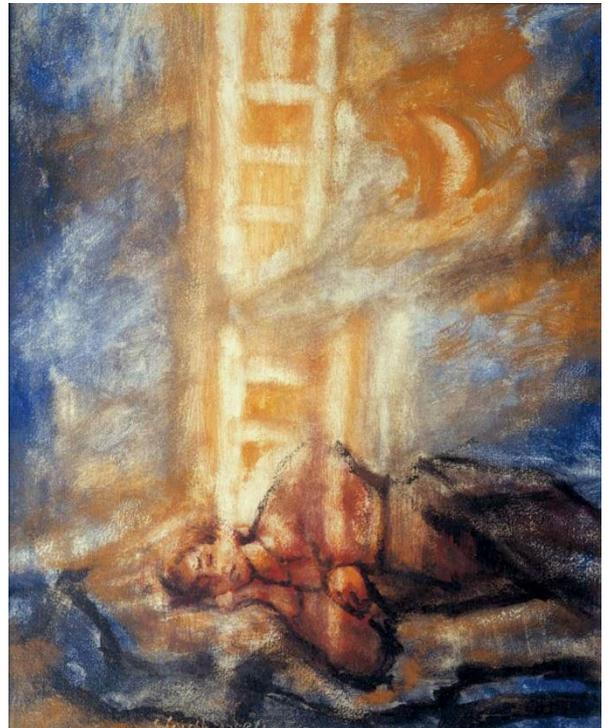
Jacob left Beer-sheba and went towards Haran. ¹¹He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. ¹²And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. ¹³And the LORD stood beside him and said, 'I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your

¹ See: Jane Williams, *Angels*, (Oxford, Lion Hudson, 2006), p.15.

offspring; ¹⁴ and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. ¹⁵ Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.' ¹⁶ Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, 'Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it!' ¹⁷ 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.' (Genesis 28.10-12)

Here, angels in a dream denote God's presence and show a powerful connection between heaven and earth (and God's presence and messengers at work in both spheres). In some strands of Christian spirituality, Jacob's Ladder is seen as a symbol of our spiritual pathway as we, step-by-step, ascend in cultivating our relationship with God and by growth in wisdom and love. But there are descending angels as well, showing God's love and presence as meeting us where we are on our own journey of ascent.

Q: When do we most feel connected with both heaven and earth?



Albert Houthuesen, *Jacob's Ladder*, 1966

Layers of angels become quite key in later Christian thought (perhaps influenced by neo-platonic philosophy where angelic spheres are understood to be maintaining the order of the heavens) and so

we find various attempts to categorise and rank the hosts of heaven (typically into nine choirs of angels). One medieval theologian who picks up on this idea, but gives it a unique twist is Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179). In her visionary work *Scivias*, Hildegard describes the usual nine angelic spheres, but very much links them with human life and calling: these angelic spheres are populated by beings on a path of truth from which we can learn for our own path towards God. So, for Hildegard, each of these spheres have to teach us something different about ourselves and God. What unites them all is that they all sing and play instruments, thus producing the sound of heaven by glorifying God.

Q: Do we ever feel to be an intrinsic part of the fabric of life? How does our experience of God and angelic messengers help us to grow in our own being?

Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias Part 1, Vision 6*, Ruprechtberg Codex

