

Receiving angels

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 27 November 2022

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Advent 1A

**Isaiah 2: 1-15; Psalm 122 (responsive); Contemporary Reading:
'The Barranong Angel Case' by Les Murray**

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

So, angels are coming. How will we greet them?

At once, perhaps we start to ponder: but what are we greeting? And are there such things as angels anyway? Modernity's functional materialism has so much to answer for! From a Reformed Christian perspective today it is also sometimes hard to engage. For whilst the classic Reformed theologians were quite clear that angels are to be taken very seriously, as they appear in so many places in the Bible. Yet later thinkers have found less value. In some quarters of liberal and progressive Protestantism they almost became erased: rejected with supposedly passé doctrines like the virgin birth, miracles and even major articles of the historic creeds.

Ironically, as liberal Protestantism declined, other faith constructions began to thrive, not least New Age spiritualities with their extraordinary mix of angelic and other speculations. Did demythologising thereby open the door to old heresies? - as well as to a loss of divine wonder in the secular world? Certainly, as Les Murray pondered in his poem '*The Barranong Angel Case*', which we heard read earlier, do we have the capacity to see and receive the angels of Christian tradition today?

When I think of angels, I often go back to my childhood, not least to Sunday School. Now I don't know exactly what others gained from Sunday School. Apart from being able to mess about with friends on otherwise dour Sundays, I only really remember two things. The first was the stamp. For if you didn't play up too much, you received a sticky backed, serrated edged, images of Bible, or other Christian, characters. Bereft of later electronic and other entertainments, this was quite something. We kids were used to collecting stamps, depending on our gender, of footballers or ballet dancers, trucks or flowers, or a mix of all. Companies produced them to sell their wares, not least in cereal packets.

The Sunday School stamp however was always different. You could never tell what you were going to get. Rather like religion as a whole - some days it could be incredibly banal, moralistic, or insulting to the intelligence; on others it could open doors to amazement and changed perspective. Some stamps were unwitting visual double entendres or images beyond the conventional: near naked male saints embracing in divine love; fabulous queens of heaven and other extraordinary beautiful and bold women portrayed in daring contexts; eunuchs, gender fluid heroes, and Jesus himself - they of official 'two natures' and very queer birth and lifestyle. Not least however there were angels.

For me, angels, like God, are unavoidably queer. Yes, they, like God, can be straightened out, and turned into either threats to keep us in order or made into fluffy adornments. Essentially however, like God, angels cannot be pinned down and are eternal sources of both inexhaustible strength and comfort and also extraordinary challenge and disturbance. No wonder - for they are truly about wonder - they continue to both enchant and provoke us with mystery. No wonder that they have flourished in popular culture in recent times, even as some liberal Christians have felt embarrassed about them.

In considering angels there is of course a balance to be struck. This is one major reason why so-called gnostic forms of Christianity were condemned in the first centuries of the Church. For many forms of Gnosticism developed elaborate theological schemes, in which angels played a great part and helped form a huge panoply of celestial levels and beings. This was partly the result of early Christianity's mixing with the array of other dynamic ways of life and philosophies in the ancient world. Such engagement – what we might call 'multi-faith and multi-cultural' endeavour today – led to vital developments but also distracting forms of syncretism, such as was found in so much of ancient Gnosticism.

Similarly, Reformed Christian traditions have typically looked disparagingly upon the worst excesses of what scholars call medieval scholasticism, partly because features such as angels could deflect from what Reformers felt to be the real, central, heart of Christianity and faith in God. The classical Reformers pointed out how distracting were some medieval theological debates, such as the now notorious question posed of '*how many angels can sit on a head of a pin*'. Yet, as I said earlier, this was not to deny angels, as part of God's revelation in Bible and tradition, but only to question their place and use.

In his greatest theological work, the *Institutes of Christian Religion*, Jean Calvin gave significant place to angels. Indeed, in his systematic consideration of Christian doctrine, half of his writing on Creation included reflections on angels, and demonic forces. Calvin was clear that, whether in gnostic or medieval scholastic or contemporary form, distracting speculations about angels were unwise. Finding God in what we know of Creation, Tradition, and, above all, Scripture is enough. As he wrote, in words as applicable to modern as to the ancient gnostics:

*In their cupidity they affect to go beyond the world, as if the ample circumference of heaven and earth did not contain objects numerous and resplendent enough to absorb all our senses; as if, in the period of six thousand years, God had not furnished facts enough to exercise our minds in ceaseless meditation. Therefore, let us willingly remain hedged in by those boundaries within which God has been pleased to confine our persons, and, as it were, enclose our minds, so as to prevent them from losing themselves by wandering unrestrained.*ⁱ

Calvin of course was also keen to insist that angels, like saints, were not to be confused as mediators of the divine. However, like all the great historic theologians, he was also clear that angels are important, as well as potentially distracting, elements of Christian Faith. For as Martin Luther expressed it:

*An angel is a spiritual creature created by God without a body, for the service of Christendom and of the church.*ⁱⁱ

Now why, apart from honouring the Scriptures, was this so important for the great Reformers to affirm? And why might it be important to us too, whether we might understand angels metaphorically or in some other way? Part of the answer surely lies with the vital importance of transcendence.

Although I would hardly claim either Luther or Calvin as queer, or, in today's sense, as progressive, theologians, they were certainly mightily subversive in their day – and, I would respectfully suggest, the heart of their teaching remains so today. For the affirmation of divine transcendence, of which angels are a part, is a crucial element in both Christian Faith of any meaningful variety and in the gift of Christians to the world.

Without divine transcendence, it seems to me, even the best forms of liberal and progressive theology become captive to their contexts and the limitations of those who articulate them. For all the vital importance of grounding theology and spirituality in life's realities today, the immanence of God among us is not enough. As the poet Les Murray powerfully relates in his poem *'The Barranong Angel Case'*, such transcendence may easily be denied in so many different ways. However we become trapped in our own concerns without receiving angels.

Angels, as affirmations of God's grace and creativity, help keep alive three vital aspects of divine transcendence. Firstly, they preserve the freedom and mystery of God – and, in doing so, I would suggest, the freedom and mystery of human beings, created as we also variously are, in the divine image. If we understand God as merely the highest of human ideals and values, or as the sum of them, then, in my view, and those of our greatest theologians, we confine God, and thereby ourselves.

Not everyone here may even agree about that, but that is how I see things. Collapsing God into what we know of this immediate world risks the loss of mystery and the powers of grace and liberation. That, as I have said in other places before, is why faith kept me alive as a young queer person in a world that denied my existence and gave people like me no language or place to be. For if, in God's provenance, angels, and the other queer folk of the Sunday School stamp existed, maybe I and others, also seemingly impossible creations, could also exist.

In other words, divine transcendence is intimately entwined with the immanence of God. Healthy faith, as Luther and others have rightly said, involves paradox and creative tension between transcendence and immanence. The angels are part guarantors and vehicles of this. At a time when philosophers, scientists, media and artists, often muse creatively about other worlds and modes of existence, it would be a little odd for Christians to give up on angels and transcendence. Why, even Mark Zuckerberg believes in metaverses, and has reconstructed his business around the idea. Even if the gnostics and the scholastics were at times carried away with speculations, why on earth would Christians today want to deny the possibilities of other ways and forms of being, and the grace and freedom of the mystery of God in their creation?

Secondly, divine transcendence, which angels symbolise, helps keep alive human and divine imagination. This, like angels in our Advent and Christmas narratives, not only brings wonder and light to our hearts and lives, but it helps manifest the grace, mystery and liberating power of God. This, surely, is where prophetic passages come from, like today's reading from Isaiah. For the context of this liberating divine word and vision is the destruction of the people of Israel in the times of the great Exile.

Jerusalem, for which we prayed in our psalm today -the great symbol of God's people – was taken away, with so much else. God's people were enclosed in the walls of the world. In such circumstances, it is divine transcendence which needs affirming and receiving, not merely the assurance of divine immanence, which at such times is so hard to see and experience. Without a God beyond, and well as within, and between, we are lost.

Les Murray in his poem 'The Barranong Angel Case' powerfully highlights how, in many Australian settings, we find ways to deny the call of divine transcendence. Even if an angel, a prophet, a Christ-bearer, were to live among us, or even be born among us, would we see, hear and respond to them?

Would our immediate interests intrude and keep divine transcendence, grace, freedom and imagination, out?

Do we really want to hear Isaiah's vision, and the voices and presence of the angels, and live into them?

Thirdly, angels, as expressive symbols of divine transcendence, help keep justice alive. This is what Isaiah's visions, speaking into the miseries of enclosure in the present and what can be immediately perceived. They, like angels, and other expressions of divine transcendence, lift our gaze to other ways of perceiving and being; into other possibilities for living and re-creating our existence.

If we receive angels, the petty, restrictive worlds which Les Murray describes can be transformed.

I do not know about you, but, if I am in tough space or struggle, it helps me to trust that God is with me, and, as part of that, maybe a gorgeous queer angel, or more than one of them, is standing there beside me – with or without a flaming sword, or a flaming handbag! (Take that metaphorically, symbolically, how you will). For me, at least, such divine transcendence matters, in whatever angelic form.

And, of course, as all kinds of faith stories tell us, angels are always among us in all kinds of ways, often in very surprising people. Perhaps for most of us, we see 'no obvious angels', in the words of the hymn we will shortly sing. Yet angels are still among us, and we are also called into their ministry.

Therefore, as we open ourselves to receive angels and respond to divine transcendence - whether angels from Lismore shortly, or wherever among us - let us open our hearts and lives to be bearers of divine grace and transcendence ourselves. For, as Shirley Erena Murray puts it in our hymn:

*Whoever will take it is given the role:
the fruitful, the faithful, the joyous of soul,
for Christmas comes into the here and the now
when we are the angels
who dream and deliver,
who rise and create this new world!*

In the inexhaustible love, mystery, and freedom of God. Amen.

ⁱ *Institutes of Christian Religion* volume 1. 14.1

ⁱⁱ *Table Talk*