

The angels are here! – Look, Hear – Here!

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 25 December 2022

A Reflection by Rev Penny Jones

Christmas Day A

Isaiah 9: 2-7; Luke 2: 8-20

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

I want to begin by inviting you to look up - Look - here! at this trinity of angels, symbolising Courage, Compassion and Joy. Jyllie Jackson, the artist who, with her team, created them, saw these as qualities particularly embodied – incarnated indeed – here in our community at Pitt St Uniting church. Those of us who worship here regularly – can we see ourselves I wonder? It is hard sometimes to see ourselves as others see us! And those of you visiting here today – I wonder what aspects of yourselves you see here in our angels? For they are icons of incarnation.

I call them icons deliberately, and I use the word to suggest that these angels are functioning for us in something of the same way as a Greek or Russian Orthodox icon. Orthodox icons are much more than just holy pictures. They are venerated in that tradition not for themselves, but for that to which they point – to God incarnate in the Christ. An icon says, ‘*look, here!*’ It draws attention to us and who we are; to the stories of our tradition and the persons within them like Jesus and Mary and who they are; and to God, and who God is.

For these angels are not placed here idly. They are not ‘Christmas decorations’ – though we also know that real Christmas decorations, the kind passed down the generations of a family (not the kind replaced each year from the \$2 shop) can also be icons of family history. These angels are icons. Icons of the divine light that is within each and every one of us. That is why they are illuminated, because the light of God shines out from within each of us. We too are angels, proclaimers of the divine light within.

So, our angel icons remind us of who we truly are. But they also remind us of the central characters of our tradition and the ways in which they also draw attention to divine light. Angels themselves feature as icons of divine glory in our Christmas story. Of course, that story, as many of us have received it from childhood days, does not exist in the Biblical text. At best it is a composite of bits of Luke, who supplies the shepherds and most of the angels, and Matthew who offers the Magi. The details are all smooched together like a Christmas pudding with our ideas of what a manger looks like, and various animals, some borrowed from the prophets and some invented, like a donkey for Mary and some camels for the Magi.

And there really is nothing wrong with that – God bless Francis of Assisi for the first crib scene; and thank goodness for the compassion of those who want to give Mary a donkey. (According to Google maps it is a thirty four hour walk from Nazareth to Bethlehem – a long way especially if you’re heavily pregnant!).

There is nothing wrong with the human inventiveness that has filled out the gaps in the story and made a coherent narrative – so long as we all recognise that that is what is happening. Angels can be included and given songs to sing, because things do not have to be factually accurate to carry truth. And the Christmas story is itself an icon pointing to a truth beyond itself.

So, do our angels in any way resemble actual angels? Several folk at the opening the other night remarked on how ‘life-like’ they are ... People testify to wings – and greater than human dimensions – so thus far we are doing well. But – how could we possibly know? Do they resemble us? Yes, of course! And also of course not!

But do they glow with some truths about us? Yes. They bear witness to the light that is in us and in this place. They bear witness to important things for which we have stood and will continue to stand. And they point beyond themselves to that greater glory that some of us dare to call God.

Our angels tell us at one and the same time that we are enough – because God in Christ became one of us; and that there is so much more beyond our wildest imaginings or capacity to comprehend. These iconic angels – invite us both to look beyond their material reality – the bamboo and paper, - and precisely to look at it. To look at it with the intention of seeing beyond it. They say in effect “*Look, hear! Here I am*”.

This is also the purpose of the angels in Luke’s story of the shepherds. They draw attention to what is important. Let’s face it shepherds in those days were not seen as in any way important. If you were looking for a social influencer you definitely wouldn’t have picked a shepherd! They were not exactly highly regarded, even though their work was essential. Their modern-day equivalent would be the office cleaners who work the midnight shift at minimum wage. Or – just possibly - an artist from flood damaged Lismore, with minimal resources striving to bring beauty to a town centre church in time for Christmas! To such as these, angels are sent.

So, while the angels may seem to draw attention to the birth of Jesus – and they do! – Luke has a secondary purpose in causing them to appear to shepherds, the people of the land.

He is saying in effect – ‘*Look here – God cares about the most unimportant person you can imagine*’. God cares enough to send angels - a whole multitude of the heavenly host.

So, if you’re feeling unimportant – and many of those for whom Luke wrote his gospel were women and slaves and others not greatly regarded in the ancient world – then hear that you are important too. Things that may seem quite insignificant – a bunch of dirty shepherds out in the fields, an unmarried mum, you and me, and even an extraordinary creation of bamboo and wire – we matter. Here – right here and now matters. And – if we can hear it, the message of the angels is for us too.

For we may rightly feel very small at times. When we consider just what a speck of dust our precious planet earth is in the midst of the millions of stars and galaxies, we may wonder what our purpose here is and whether we matter at all. But our angels and the Christmas story announce something more. They tell us that indeed Courage, Compassion and Joy are all possible and that while we are but specks of dust – and it is liberating to accept that smallness– we matter infinitely. For the divine is Here – right here, right now, and we can see it if we look.

All three of our angels are in the Christmas story if we look. The shepherds found even the first angel overwhelming, never mind the hosts that followed. The text says '*they were terrified*'. And so, what was asked of them was Courage. For courage is about being scared but doing it anyway. So, although they were terrified, they didn't run away or collapse. They stayed put, heard the angel out and then did what they were asked to do. To see and hear such things requires Courage. The kind of courage we see perhaps in Jyllie and her team of artists, who, though they had never made an angel before, or lifted one into a roof space, set about their task with faith and hope.

Compassion is in the story too – not just in the actions of Joseph in protecting Mary, but in the Kindness of strangers not even mentioned in the text who provided shelter for the infant to be born. Like many angels they are unnamed and unseen.

And joy is there too of course – in the couple rejoicing in the birth of a child and in the shepherds as they hurry home to tell their story. The angel of joy – illusive, indispensable joy, hovers around this human story of life and death, pain and delight – all mingled as they must always be. For angels do not spare us suffering, but they help us look beyond it.

Our angels are icons. They invite us to 'look – here!' Right here, and in this moment to recognise the divine in ourselves, in our Christmas story and way, way beyond. Even as we seek to embody their qualities of Courage, Compassion and Joy; even as we acknowledge the examples of Mary, Joseph, the strangers, the angels and perhaps above all in this story the shepherds; yet there is more.

The angels point us to God, born among us and yet beyond us; to the infinite in a feather dropped from a bird or an angel's wing; to the possibility that here indeed is Emmanuel – God with us.

So ... may we rejoice this Christmas day, and may the angels of Courage, Compassion and Joy go before us to remind us – Look, Hear – Here I Am.

Amen