

## **Angels**

Easter Term, 2018

29th April 2018, Prof Kirkpatrick, Angels for Robinson

6th May 2018, Rev Dr Simon Perry, Jacob Wrestled an Angel

19th May 2018, Rev Dr Simon Perry, MA Congregation 2018, Being God's Gift

20th May 2018, Rev Dr Simon Perry, The Nephilim

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**Prof Kirkpatrick**

**Angels for Robinson: April 29th 2018**

I think I'd better begin by suggesting why Angels are the theme, this term, of our Sunday conversations.. If we now think of angels at all, the chances are that we shall call to mind those sickly pink commercials for Angel Delight or Philadelphia Cream Cheese. And I am' aware, of course that the queues at the chapel door would have been far longer if the topic advertised had been devils-in-scarlet. So one needs to emphasize that for millennia angels have been figures central to religious thinking and experience. Sometimes, they have been perceived as authoritative messengers from dimensions that, otherwise, would exceed all understanding. So [HAND OUT ONE] the Koran was dictated to Muhammed by the angel Gabriel. Or else, as in medieval cosmology, the celestial hierarchies could be seen as powers of pure, intelligence. Angels are incorporeal but they act in concert with the planetary heavens to involve human existence in the ever-varying life of divine creation. Now, I've only got 16 ½ minutes for this evening's address. So perhaps there won't be time to convince you that angels never did dance on the head of pins. I shall, however, hope at least to make clear that, compared with the sheer vivacity of angelic action demonic devilry – though undoubtedly good box office - is just one damned thing after another and conversely to ask, if only as a thought experiment, what things would be like if there were really intelligent life in the Universe..

To be more specific, let's recall the words cited first on the hand-out: 'Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.'

There are implications here that I'd like to keep I mind throughout. Firstly, one notes an emphasis on hospitality as a radical response to strangeness and the otherwise unknown: We are to open our homes and hearts to the utterly familiar. This may rightly – and ethically – mean that we should offer tea and sympathy or make complex political arrangements for refugees. But to speak of angelic involvement points to a relationship that is reciprocal and, unexpectedly, as illuminating for the giver as for the receiver. The word 'host' in French and Italian signifies 'guest' as well as the smiling provider of Victoria sponge cake or of luke-warm chardonnay. Hospitality reveals anew a strange inter-dependence in our existences, which should not exclude an angelic encounter with absolute difference. One may note that the second anthem from the end of Purcell's Dido and Aeneas dramatizes the agonising consequences that follow when hospitable inter-dependence is denied. Dido is queen of a refuge kingdom. Aeneas is a refugee from the ruins of Troy. But he finally rejects the hospitality – and indeed love – that Dido offers him, she kills herself, unconsolated even by the drooping wings that the last chorus evokes for us. (Aeneas, by the way, goes on to found a world-conquering empire. Dodgy? Or what?)

In the second place – which concerns theology more than ethics – the strangeness of angelic visitation points beyond hospitality to the joy, even festivity, that is possible in the fullness of creation. Art, music and poetry are much better than argument or doctrine in giving house room to angelic epiphanies - which is why they figure so prominently on the handout. But in this regard Scripture, too, makes a fundamental contribution .

Scripture, first and last, speaks of angels at the intersection between the all-too familiar brutalities of history and the absolutely unknown sources of creation. When Adam and Eve are cast out of Eden, Cherubim with flaming swords are appointed to protect the paradisaal garden. That sounds terrifying. But note: they are not there simply to keep us off the old-fashioned college grass but to safe-guard the Tree of Life. And when, at the end of time, the angelic trumpets blaze out,. But the purpose is to deafen our ears to the grim screech of history and declare that life in its fullness has now been restored

Between the Alpha of Eden and the Omega of Apocalypse, there is a good deal of angelic action, involving hospitality to the unknown – to the beautiful or often to the terrifying. So in Genesis 13, Abraham entertains three angels – later taken to be a manifestation of the Trinity. These promise that his ageing wife will, against all expectation, bear children who will then prove to be founders of flourishing millions of faithful souls. One might add that this story is immediately followed by the story of Lot in Sodom and Gommorah. Lot, too, is visited by angels. But dominant note here is terror not consolation or promises. The angels are so beautiful that Lot's neighbours try to break in, meaning to rape the visitors. Lot, in an act of perverse hospitality, offers his own daughters to the mob, hoping by this to divert attention from his guests. But Angelic powers repel the assailants; Sodom is razed to the ground and Lot escapes. The story doesn't actually end there. But since the sequel involves drugs and incestuous rape (against Lot himself) I'm happily leave that tale to later speakers in this series. And enough, perhaps, has been said to suggest that hospitality, in a very complex sense, represents a radical mode of engagement between the human capacities for on the one hand destruction and on the other visions of redeeming life.

The new Testament carries the consequences of this inter-action, through moments of beauty and terror, to a supremely strange conclusion.

To Mary an angel announces the impossible reality of Christ's birth. The terror as well as the beauty of this are dramatised in Simone Martini's depiction [Handout] where Mary twists aside as much in horror as acceptance of the strange visitation that she is receiving. One recalls here the words of the 20th century poet, Rilke – whose Duino Elegies are, throughout, devoted to angelic epiphanies: 'Even if one of [the angelic presences] pressed me suddenly against its heart, I would be consumed in that overwhelming existence. For beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror, ' And then there is Christmas, where joy and festivity become the very air that the universe breathes. Botticelli [next on the HANDOUT] expresses this in vision of the mystic nativity, where the angelic order dance around the still point of the hovel in which Christ was born. This could be taken as a pictorial version of the two anthems we hear tonight. Each is a Sanctus – as set by William Byrd and by [Lassus]. And, in the celebration of the Mass, the Sanctus is the song where angelic voices and human voices join in communal preparation for the Eucharistic feast.

Theologically, though, the most significant appearance of angels is, I suggest, their non-appearance at the crucifixion. According to St Matthew's Gospel (26: 53) Christ in Gethsamene rejects any suggestion that legions of angels should save him from the Cross. And something of the significance of this may be expressed in Blake's portrayal of Christ lifeless in the tomb. Christ here is unmistakably dead; and the function of the angels, it seems, is not to console but to deepen the absolute darkness that here surrounds him.

Now, I'm not a theologian and at this point I'm probably out of my depths. For the strangeness that one needs to entertain at this point is the strangeness of irresolvable paradox. We need somehow to accept that, in and through the crucifixion, humanity is not merely redeemed but celebrated in excelsis: Because Christ lies dead in the darkness he is truly human. Angels cannot die. But God in the form of Christ can die and does. And one consequence is that we humans need never ourselves aspire to become angelic (which you will, I hope, take to be a relief) or even to feel inferior to the Seraphim. We are mortal and fragile. But precisely in being so we are what God in Christ became. Conversely, it is in a through our similarity to Christ that we enter most fully into the surging life and sparkling surf of creation.

This brings me, almost, to Dante's poetry, the so-called 'Divine' Comedy where – beyond perplexing paradox – scintillation and joie de vivre prove to be the very element in which human beings and angels alike are always meant to exist. In passing, though, let me briefly seek support from a real theologian, Sergei Bulgakov, the one time Marxist and now a favourite of Rowan Williams, who in 1929 wrote a whole volume concerning the

Angels. In the extract on the HANDOUT the crucial phrases are those that insist that angels were created to wholly to serve the created world – and above all human beings – in joyous abandonment of their own claims to exist. We had better, then, speak not of hierarchies of being – of rankings, of more and less, of ups and downs – but rather of inter-relationship. The angels – at least those we know about – are to be seen as co-humans, just as we are co-angels, magnificently not identical but ‘co’ in all our differences. I might add that Bulgakov declares that human beings are co-animals. (Genesis and our ecologists say something similar.) . The upshot is that creation itself can be seen as hospitable not simply in providing comfort but rather in offering to all things ‘original, spare and strange’ a field of dynamic and creative inter-action. We are called, in response, not merely to understand existence but also to participate in its polyphonic reciprocations.

And this is where, for the last five minutes, we turn to Dante. The canto from which I quote on the HANDOUT concerns the 9 circles of angels, from Seraphim down to those common or garden angels, who contemplate God and, in doing so inspire all movement in the created universe. The canto also represents the climax of Dante’s journey through the physical universe, of planets and stars. Until this point the poet – travelling, as it were, astronautically – has been as interested in understanding astronomical phenomena as if he were some medieval Brian Cox. It is one of Dante’s dominant characteristics that he rejoices in how the human mind can orient itself, or find itself at home, in the universe through a rational – or even scientific – appreciation of its patterns and laws.

But now something strange, even paradoxical, occurs. Now, for a first time, Dante has a direct vision of God. And it would seem reasonable to suppose that, just as the universe expands to ever wider dimensions, so God will be transcendently bigger, ‘wider still and wider than anything encountered in creation. How wrong can you be! God is here envisaged as an infinitesimally tiny point of light located within the circling of planetary and angelic spheres. [Hand out Punto] Strangely, God is at home within the very heart of the created order.

This really ought not to seem strange to Christian eyes: after all, Christ as God is incarnate in creation; and we know (from Matthew 19) that ‘the first shall be last and the last shall be first.’ Dante – finding in his own mind a home for this paradoxical truth – sees how radically it challenges our view of the world in which we exist. Yet his response is not to abandon human modes of thought but rather to call into play, simultaneously, mathematical considerations of number and effects of poetic rhythm.

As to mathematics If evidence were needed for Dante’s interest in mathematics then the next passage on the handout should be enough. Suppose you wanted to know the number of angels in creation .... well think of that ancient mind boggler which calculates that, if you placed one grain of rice on the first square of a chessboard, two on the second, four on the third, by the time you got to 64 you’d have the astronomical figure printed from Google on the handout. Actually, there are far more angels than that. But more important here than mere quantity – or hierarchy – are the ratios that relate one form of life to another. So the greatest of the planetary heavens are moved by the greatest of the angelic orders, the Seraphim. But the greatest of these orders in terms of dignity is closest to the infinitesimal pin-prick of divine light. So the greatest and the smallest are in directly proportionate relationship. This is what Dante at line 76 speaks of as a ‘wonderful logic’ – a ‘mirabil conseguenza’. Wonder is recognised even by Brian Cox as a fundamental impulsion in the intellectual life. And it is wonder which now replaces surprise or terror as the mode in which we participate in the angelic choreography.

But Dante’s art here is – to my mind at least – correspondingly wonderful. So [HANDOUT 10] number is never here denied but rather subsumed into a marvellously energetic play of rhythm and alliteration. I’ll read in Italian, hoping that the strangeness of this will give a sense that no translation ever could: 10] ibid 25-30

distante intorno al punto un cerchio d'igne  
si girava sì ratto, ch'avria vinto  
quel moto che più tosto il mondo cigne;

e questo era d'un altro circumcinto,  
e quel dal terzo, e 'l terzo poi dal quarto,  
dal quinto il quarto, e poi dal sesto il quinto.

And onwards till one had enumerated all nine ranks .

If you agree that this is festive, then – at HANDOUT – the source or origin or ultimate home of that festivity is revealed to be the mystery of the creative Trinity, God's Three-in-One-ity. We recall that that Abraham was visited by three angels. In Dante's vision, there are 9 orders of angels, divided into three orders, all three inter-related and interactive. And Dante's own text now becomes a rhapsody on the word 'three – which, in Italian, is 'tre':

L'altro ternaro, che così germoglia  
in questa primavera sempiterna  
che notturno Ariete non dispoglia,

perpetüalmente 'Osanna' sberna  
con tre melode, che suonano in tree  
ordini di letizia onde s'interna

So Dante doesn't become an angel. But his rational calculations and human words participate – as we can when reading them – in the Trinitarian vitality of Creation.

Two final point which I won't pursue now but dangle before you simply as questions. Dante speaks of the circulation of angels as being 'angelici ludi' as angelic games – a kind of finale to celestial Olympics. Is that what Creation ultimately is: an infinite celebration? And what about us? Well the great Pope Gregory tried as Dante does to describe and define the angelic orders. But at lines 133 to 135 of this canto he is seen opening his eyes in Heaven after his death and discovering that he'd got it completely wrong. His reaction might well have been 'Oh Hell! What a mistake I made'. Strangely, though, he laughs at himself. Are we, perhaps, at our most human in being taken, comically, unawares?

Angels for Robinson: April 29th 2018

Readings: Genesis 18 1-12; Matthew 26 47-53

Organ music, before and after, pieces by Messiaen, as discussed with Jeremy.

Anthems: i) Byrd 4 Voices Sanctus (ii) Purcell 'With drooping wings', final chorus of Dido iii) Lassus (?) Sanctus

## Hymns

i) Holy, Holy, Holy ii) All glory, laud and honour iii) Angel voices ever singing

**Rev Dr Simon Perry**

## **Jacob Wrestled an Angel**

Gen. 32: 25-31; Luke 16:16-18

Well this evening we continue this term's theme, Angels. This was a theme begun by Prof. Robin Kirkpatrick who preached last week, and who suggested the theme of Angels a few months ago. And I will confess, I consented because it seemed like a good idea at the time. But when you look at the role of angels in scripture, it is a messy mix of accounts from various cultures and mythologies – and yet at times angels are woven into the historical claims of the New Testament.

This evening, we focus on a mythology – one of the founding myths of the Jewish people. Every culture can be described using the tool of narrative – in which every person within that culture finds their own story and plays a role. And the Old Testament reading this evening comes from a famous incident from the book of Genesis that has mystified interpreters throughout history. Well – we plan to solve that mystery within the next 8-10 minutes.

In fact, the text doesn't speak of an angel – it simply refers to a random, unidentified bloke – who somehow represented God. In fact, that's probably as much of a definition as you can give to an angel, if you include the entire breadth of scriptural references to angels. Yes – I'm afraid angels always appear to be men, for some reason – but that's probably because even the word itself, if you trace its Indo European history goes back through Latin and Greek culture, to a Mycenaean reference to a Persian messenger on horseback.

However, the role of an angel, a messenger, or ambassador – is not simply a glorified and ethereal postman – but more like an emissary, who embodies the authority of the one who sent him. An angel is the executor of divine policy, an agent of the authority that sent him. Like a winged, supernatural Boris Johnson figure. Though to what extent Boris Johnson could be defined as a random, unidentified bloke who somehow represented God, I leave to you. Having said that, it's probably a more realistic picture of what an angel is in scripture than the popular image of a blond-haired, androgynous, winged figure of beauty who flutters onto the mortal plane of existence as if straight from a shampoo advert.

In the present story, the angel basically mugged Jacob while Jacob was on his way to meet his twin brother, Esau. Basically, Jacob had cheated his brother out of their father's blessing by conning the old man into thinking he was Esau. Bizarrely, I was asked in the bar last week about my favourite bible verse – and, thanks to Alan Bennet, it just happens to be relevant here: 'but my brother Esau is a hairy man, and I am a smooth man'. So the smooth man wrapped his arms in goatskins, pretended to be Esau, conned his father out of his older brother's inheritance, and ran away. Esau vowed to kill his little brother. And years later, Jacob is on his way to try and make peace with his brother – and on the way he is mugged by a random bloke who somehow represents God.

So the two figures get into a brawl. And the word that used to describe the dust up, is a play on the name of Jacob. Jacob, so some Hebraists assure me, is a word that means to struggle, to usurp, the use underhand, violent tactics. And it just happens to be rooted in the same word as Jacob's own name. So – this figure essentially confronted Jacob, and Jacobbed him. But there was no sixth round knock-out for either figure. The fight went the full distance, right until the morning in fact. And then the angel seems to have looked at his watch and realise he would be late for breakfast.

Seeing he couldn't win the fight, he appears to have given Jacob a dead leg – or at least numbed his hip. But Jacob simply would not go down. The angel demands that Jacob let him go, but Jacob refuses. 'I will not let you go until you bless me'. But the angel gets frustrated and demands that Jacob tell him his name. Now – why would a supernatural person have to request the name of his mortal target? - I have the sense it was a rhetorical question. When I asked by five year old if he'd eaten the donut that had left a trail of jam and sugar from the kitchen table to his guilty chops, it wasn't because I didn't know the answer. I wanted him to confess.

And that is largely what seems to be happening with this angel. Jacob's was a name that represented underhand struggle, and the angel wanted him to admit what he was and who he was – he was the usurper. And, on his way to try and pacify the angry brother he had cheated, Jacob was forced to speak out loud who he actually was – to face up properly to his true nature. And having heard this, the angel not only blesses Jacob, but changes his name to Israel. Again, Hebrew scholars assure me that the name is significant – since it means God fights. So Jacob fought the angel, and in so doing fought with God. And this incident is the birth of Israel: it means, God fights – though the text tells us that Jacob's name was changed because he fought with God.

So there – at the very root of what it means to be Israel, is the notion that Israel has to fight with God. That doesn't sound very religious, because surely – we are supposed to worship God, not fight him. But the incident as a whole reveals something far grittier and satisfying about what it means to be the people of God.

It was in the most down-to-earth circumstances that Jacob struggled, and fought, and prevailed. And it was in the context of being properly reconciled to his brother, humbling himself, facing up to his own failures and deceit, and almost transcending his nature as a usurper. In trying to do what was right – he had a battle on his hands, a battle that left him physically wounded. There was something fundamentally violent about the change of character granted to him by the angel. The transition from Jacob to Israel was a violent struggle.

I suspect it may be for this reason that Jesus, in the New Testament, mentioned that when the Good News of God's Kingdom is preached – everyone enters it violently. There is nothing serene, peaceful, passive about becoming a member of the people of God. It is a painful struggle.

And it's not simply the godless heathen out there who are expected to undergo this baptism of fire – it's the people who already think that they already are the people of God. Whether the patriarch Jacob, or the people of Israel listening to Jesus.

Above all, in the Old Testament as well as the New, at its very core – Israel are the people called to listen, to hear, to be attentive. That's why the Shema, 'Hear O Israel, the Lord Your God...' is at the root of the identity of the people of God. Shema means listen – and to listen is not simply to keep your donut-hole shut while the other person is talking. To listen is to have the capacity to be transformed by your encounter with the other. It sounds easy.

Hearing well, being Israel well – is a struggle. It can be traumatic and violent and fundamentally unpleasant. It is not the same as the fairly glib virtuous declarations about open-mindedness. No – to hear, to be Israel, to be transformable in the light of a genuine encounter with a genuine other is tough, and unsettling, and disturbing. And there is nothing and no one so fundamentally other, than the curious figure who confronted Jacob.

In light of all this – the angel figure in this story simply holds a mirror up to Jacob. Jacob faces up to himself, and it is one almighty struggle, because in so doing he was facing up to God himself. So he named the place, Penuel, 'because I saw God face to face, and lived.'

**Rev Dr Simon Perry**

**MA Congregation 2018**

**Being God's Gift**

Firstly, I would like to congratulate you on resisting the temptation to go and watch the glorious, long awaited and thoroughly exciting union between people who have been criticized of thinking they are God's Gift. A union... of representatives from a very highly privileged section of society – with those from a world often regarded as underprivileged and unsophisticated. A union that will take place at Wembley Stadium, as Chelsea face Manchester United in the FA cup final. And of course, if you make it past the headlines, you may also be aware that in the suburbs of Slough, a British prince will be marrying Angela Merkel. And yet, despite such distractions, you have been faithful to your college and your university and come back to Cambridge to progress to MA Status.

You're entitled to do this, because it is assumed that you are older and wiser and worthy of the degree. So this is both a demonstration of the your faithfulness to the college, and the college's faithfulness to you. The readings from Scripture both focused upon faith or faithfulness (it's the same word in Greek), as a means by which you display loyalty, responsibility, steadfastness. The second dimension of today's readings is that of developing your gift. Clearly, there is a sense in which you have to be gifted to have studied here in the first place, and much of what we celebrate today assumes the development and useful employment of your gifts – however they manifest themselves.

Many of you had already demonstrated faithfulness in the development of your gifts while you were still at Robinson.

Numerous examples come to mind, from which I have selected three.

First, there was the rower, who carrying her blade towards the river - whilst looking behind her in order whilst in the process of ridiculing her coach. Facing backwards while walking forwards towards a river - was only going to end one way. With an unexpected self-administered baptism by total immersion in the River Cam. She went on to become a boat club captain.

Then there was the Geographer who in his first year attempted to climb over a railing on his way home from a wild night in town. A high set of railings with pointy spikes at the top probably did not seem like an insurmountable obstacle. Needless to say, he was hospitalised after an unexpected self-administered rite of extreme body-piercing. And he went on to win the flower arranging competition at Hinxton Village Fete.

And lastly, of course, was the mountain-top experience of a choir member - who on tour in Austria decided to climb an Alp. Scaling up above the snow line, barefoot! Before he could perform an unexpected self-administered cryogenic process, he happened upon a member of the Austrian mountain rescue service who promptly stuck him on a cable car. And that student went on to be described by journalists at the Cambridge Tab as a Jesus figure. "Sure, Cambridge has Trinity College, Christ's College and Jesus College, but Jesus himself resides at Robinson College."

These kinds of events might seem more amusing now than they did at the time. But that is part of the dynamic of faith and faithfulness. Faith has little to do with the mental acrobatics required to make yourself 'believe what you know ain't true'. Faith is the capacity to soldier on despite the present difficulties, or overwhelming odds, or impossible hurdles.

Faithfulness with the gifts developed here – means that we use the gifts at our disposal to try to make the world a better place. Hopefully, that is part of what you have been doing for the last 3-4 years. It has perhaps not been the best 3-4 years in world history – but this is the world we have been thrown into, and there are few people in your generation a better position to do something about it than you.

This university and this college have done their best to equip you for whatever lies ahead – and, according to today's readings – it's up to you to keep faith and to use those gifts, in such a way that you become God's gift to the world.

## Old Testament Reading

### I Kings 2

2 When David's time to die drew near, he charged his son Solomon, saying: 2 "I am about to go the way of all the earth. Be strong, be courageous, 3 and keep the charge of the Lord your God, walking in his ways and keeping his statutes, his commandments, his ordinances, and his testimonies, as it is written in the law of Moses, so that you may prosper in all that you do and wherever you turn. 4 Then the Lord will establish his word that he spoke concerning me: 'If your heirs take heed to their way, to walk before me in faithfulness with all their heart and with all their soul, there shall not fail you a successor on the throne of Israel.'

...

10 Then David slept with his ancestors, and was buried in the city of David. 11 The time that David reigned over Israel was forty years; he reigned seven years in Hebron, and thirty-three years in Jerusalem. 12 So Solomon sat on the throne of his father David; and his kingdom was firmly established.

## New Testament Reading

### I Timothy 4: 9-16

9 The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance. 10 For to this end we toil and struggle, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Saviour of all people, especially of those who believe.

11 These are the things you must insist on and teach. 12 Let no one despise your youth, but set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity. 13 Until I arrive, give attention to the public reading of scripture, to exhorting, to teaching. 14 Do not neglect the gift that is in you, which was given to you through prophecy with the laying on of hands by the council of elders. 15 Put these things into practice, devote yourself to them, so that all may see your progress. 16 Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; continue in these things, for in doing this you will save both yourself and your hearers.

## MA Graduation Thanksgiving Prayers

Loving God, we thank you for all that we celebrate today,

Memories that shape us, make us smile or laugh, or cringe or weep – but that make us who we are.

We thank you for those whose friendship has been formative but whose company we miss.

We thank you for those who have taught us and inspired us and cared for us – those whose influence upon us and commitment to us, we have only come to appreciate after the passing of time.

Opportunities that have opened up and will open up in the future, because of the place where we have studied, the people from whom we have learned, the work we have invested and the work others have invested in us.

For all your blessings, we thank you, Lord.

**Rev Dr Simon Perry**

**The Nephilim**

**20th May 2018**

A series of sermons on angels was always going to include a talk on fallen angels, not least because they seem to generate far more interest than well-behaved and socially compliant angels. There are plenty of traditions that grew around scripture, depicting war in heaven and angels falling after a disastrous battle. Jesus himself claimed to have witnessed Satan falling from heaven like lightning. But this evening I thought it might be better to look at what fallen angels get up to in Scripture. There are several popular stories and myths about the various behavioural habits of these former angels – and no shortage of tales about how they ended up engaging in amorous activity with attractive females. Sometimes those females have babies...

But the oldest of those popular tales is probably the one we heard from Genesis when the sons of God saw that the daughters of men were attractive – and went into them, which is not the most subtle euphemism in Hebrew literature. The Sons of God here clearly refer to some kind of angels. The product of their union with mortal women was a race of giant, heroic, warriors – known as the Nephilim. The root of the word is the Hebrew verb to fall, made into a plural noun. The Nephilim were not angels themselves, nor fallen angels – but they were the fallen ones.

It does not mean however, that they were fallen from heaven because they were never there in the first place. They were giants, but they were mortals. And they were fallen, because they had all fallen in battle and consigned to Sheol, in the bowels of the earth – the place where everyone in the Old Testament went after they died. It wasn't only in Hebrew literature that the race of Giants was overthrown - the Giants of Greek mythology were similarly defeated and imprisoned in the depths of the earth. Some traditions concluded that there was consent to these mortal-angelic unions on the woman's part, because it was a means of ensuring that their children would become great heroes with long lives and superhuman powers.

If there is a point to the Biblical story, it seems to be that sexual relations between angels and mortals is frowned upon. Frowned upon because although the desire to produce strong, healthy, attractive offspring is a healthy, evolutionary desire – the desire to produce semi-divine offspring is probably a step too far. It might be regarded as a short-cut to greatness – though of course, there is the small matter of giving birth to a giant, which could prove a little uncomfortable for a mortal. But God did not approve – probably because mating with angels seemed to have offered a shortcut to greatness.

In fact, it was deemed a major causal factor in the flood, because God decreed that humans should remain mortal and that their days should be numbered. So part of the purpose of the flood, it seems, was to kill off the Nephilim.

It's difficult to know just what to do with a story like this in the Bible. Naturally I turned to Melvyn Brag for answers, and he even read the text from Genesis to his guests on his Radio 4 programme. All they did was laugh, and move swiftly on. However, there is an interpretive tradition of the New Testament declaring that the Nephilim are the reason why women should wear hats in church! In Paul's letter to the Corinthians he instructed the women to cover their heads in church, 'because of the angels' who might be lurking to see if they find any of them attractive. So, if you want to protect yourself from cold, from rain, or from supernatural sexual predators, some kind of hat is required.

I suppose one way of interpreting this is to look at how the Nephilim were regarded in Old Testament tradition. They were great heroes, men of renown, and power, and long life. And the reason God did not approve of humans trying to gain semi-divine status was not that he felt threatened – but that it went against the very fibre of the created order that humans inhabit.

Of course, hero worship is everywhere. Whether you were watching the Royal Wedding or the FA Cup final, it is difficult to escape the adoration of heroes, of the so called cult of celebrity. But God's gripe with the Nephilim was not simply their celebrity status – so much as the fact that striving to gain semi-divine power and authority turns out to be dehumanising.

Today is Pentecost – when above all the Christian Church celebrates the coming of the Holy Spirit. Jesus of Nazareth had laid out an example of what it meant to be human, what it meant to be with or without power, and above all he demonstrated how Yahweh's power is manifested above all in radical, human, humility. The Son of God was not born as a giant, or a king, or a warrior. He was born to a peasant family struggling to exist in some far flung province of an empire that wielded real, obvious, undeniable, omnipotent power. So it was only natural that the imperial machinery should put Jesus to death.

But in Christian theology, the resurrection is a vindication of the kind of power Jesus wielded. The power that looked like failure – that was not obvious, fireworks and all canons blazing, but the power quiet and hidden behind the closed door of a tomb. And after the ascension, the church itself becomes the channel through which the power of Israel's God is to be exerted. And so, at Pentecost – the Holy Spirit, the presence of God himself, comes upon the church. This is why Paul tells the Church in Corinth that they are a Temple – the gathered community is a Temple in which God dwells by his Spirit. There was no need to produce Christian heroes when the Holy Spirit is present to the Church.

But there was plenty of hero worship in Corinth. I follow Paul, I follow Apollos, I follow Cephas – and Paul says forget that. There can be no boasting about great men, when the Spirit of God himself is what makes the church who it is.

The Church doesn't need great people, or celebrity endorsements, or a strong media presence. It just needs to be open to the Holy Spirit. That is the message of Pentecost – and it is the very antithesis to those who aspire to produce Nephilim.

Before the flood, seeking shortcuts to greatness produced a world of wickedness, heroes produced a world of violence and warriors produced an era of radical insecurity.

After Pentecost, greatness had been redefined,

After Pentecost, the Spirit of the Israel's humble God rested amidst of bunch of humble people.

After Pentecost, it becomes possible for the humblest people to have the greatest impact on the world.

INTERCESSION

Spirit of God, unseen but ever active, we praise you for the fruit of your work that we see all around us. From the blossom on trees, to the characters changed through the course of time, we see your hand at work. In all we take for granted, in all that fills us with joy, at every meeting of human hearts, we see your hand at work.

Continue your work in our lives, we pray, that your flame may blaze every more brightly within us.

Soften our hearts, help us to listen fully to others, whether they are friends, enemies, words of people we will never meet, stories of people who need our help. Fan the flame of your spirit within us.

Reawaken our desire for service, inspire us to work for justice. In the family, in the nation, across the world. Whether the injustice is a child learning how to play, or a child who will not eat today – make your spirit blaze in our lives and in our church to establish fairness and justice in this world.

Open our beings to true communication. Amongst those closest to us, on whom we depend and who depend upon us. Between brothers and sisters in Christ, between colleagues at work and friends at play. Between a wealthy nation and a broken world. Dwell in the midst of our relationships, so that your fruits blossom into being before our eyes.

Loving, Holy Spirit. Burn within us, make us Holy, strengthen our faith, deepen our love.

**Professor Morna Hooker**

**Unrecognized and Unseen**

**3rd June 2018**

Genesis 19:1-26

Numbers 22:1-6; 21-35

A couple of months ago, I received an e-mail, inviting me to become an angel.

Mystified as to how this remarkable transformation might be achieved, I naturally pressed the button labelled 'Find out more'. The next page was even more intriguing, however, since this time I was invited to become a naked angel.

Up to this point in time, I have to confess that I had never given the clothes worn by angels much thought. Were they perhaps normally naked? After all, Adam and Eve wore nothing in Paradise until sin overcame them with shame, and the seraphim surrounding the throne in Isaiah 6, about which we heard last week, had three pairs of wings, and used one pair to cover their bodies. So perhaps there was nothing surprising in describing angels as 'naked'.

Pressing the next button failed to answer these questions, however, and proved somewhat disappointing, as the e-mail turned out to be an invitation to buy some wine. Like me, you may be puzzled to know why this would make me an angel, with or without clothing, but the somewhat tenuous link appeared to be that I would be buying from small wine-producers, and so helping their enterprises. And since angels are generally supposed to be good rather than evil, the request to 'be an angel' was seen as an invitation to do some good in the world – or so the promoters of the scheme said, though it went hand in hand with an assurance that one would at the same time acquire wine at very competitive prices.

The word 'angel', as we have been reminded already this term, means simply 'messenger'. He or she is more than a simple postman, popping the letters through our doors, however, since the message is delivered personally, and the messenger is often commissioned by the sender to ensure that the requests in the letter are carried out. Hence the request to 'be an angel'. John the Baptist was one such messenger in the biblical world, as his name implies. St Mark tells us that he 'proclaimed' baptism: baptism, in other words, was part of his message; but he also did the baptizing.

The connection between sender and messenger was close – so close that they were almost identified. There are many passages in the Old Testament which meander between statements that the Lord said and that the angel said, but the reason is clear; men and women cannot see God, so if they are confronted by someone delivering a message from God, it must be an angel, not God himself, who is speaking. Or is it? Such an angel appears to be a visual manifestation of God. No wonder the shepherds in the field at Bethlehem about whom we heard last week were scared out of their wits when the Lord appeared to them.

Unrecognized - Our first biblical reading tonight told of one such incident. Abraham's nephew Lot had chosen to live in a most unsavoury environment – the city of Sodom, famous for its immorality. We are told that Lot is visited by two angels – whom, however, he does not recognize as such, but assumes that they are simply travellers. He offers them hospitality, as was customary, but in the night Lot's neighbours surround the house, demanding that he bring his visitors out, since they wished to have intercourse with them. They, clearly, are equally unaware that the two men are in fact angels. These angels are certainly not naked, though the men of Sodom endeavour to make them so. Lot's somewhat strange sense of chivalry leads him to offer his neighbours his two daughters – both virgins – instead, apparently believing that his obligation to his visitors is more important than that to his daughters. But the inhabitants of Sodom have no interest in women, and pushing past Lot they threaten to enter his house, whereupon the two angels – now described as men – drag him inside and bar the door. They then strike the attackers with blindness, so that they are left groping around in darkness.

At this point in the story a hasty retreat is obviously advisable. The men urge Lot to take all his family out of the city, since 'we are going to destroy it', they tell him. They repeat their threat: 'We have been sent to destroy it,' they say: and again, 'The Lord is about to destroy the city'. The progression from 'we' to 'we have been sent' to 'the Lord' indicates that these men are in fact angels, agents of the Lord, who is going to bring destruction on the city through them. Lot is finally persuaded that flight is essential, and leaves just in time. The Lord then rains down fire & brimstone on Sodom and the neighbouring city of Gomorrah, and destroys all their inhabitants. The only casualty in Lot's household is his wife, who couldn't resist the temptation to watch the pyrotechnic display, and so was turned into a pillar of salt.

So we have two men who are in fact angels, who not only bring a message from the Lord about the imminent destruction of the wicked and about God's intention to save Lot and his family, but who also possess the power to set off the destruction and to enable Lot to escape. Is it angels who visit Lot, or is it God himself? Are they angels or men? Neither Lot nor the inhabitants of Sodom recognize their true identity, treating them as casual travellers. But they are messengers from God, agents of his will, bringing both destruction and salvation, yet unrecognized by those to whom they are sent.

Unseen - Our second reading was even more bizarre. This chapter in Numbers is confusing, because two versions of the same story have been woven together. Both describe how Balak, king of Moab, was alarmed by the approach of the Israelite tribes, fearing that they were about to invade his country. He therefore tried to enlist the help of Balaam, a free-lance prophet, asking him to curse Israel. Balaam was reluctant to do so, but finally agreed to meet Balak. In one version of the story, God spoke to Balaam in a dream, but in the version we heard, he set out but, as he travelled, an angel of the Lord stood in the way. Since the angel had a drawn sword in his hand, the donkey on which Balaam was riding very sensibly decided that the field was a more attractive option than the road. Balaam, however, oblivious to the presence of the angel, beat the donkey and forced her to proceed. The same thing happened a second time, and this time the donkey sought refuge up against a wall, crushing Balaam's foot, and making him very cross.

When the angel appeared for the third time, the donkey simply lay down and refused to go any further, whereupon Balaam once again beat her. By now the donkey is as cross as Balaam, and is given the power of speech to express her anger. Finally, Balaam's eyes are opened, and he sees the angel. This is the scene portrayed by Rembrandt, who depicts the angel as draped in a white sheet. Why the angel barred the way is not clear, since he allows Balaam to proceed, but with the warning that he is to speak only the words given him by God. Balaam certainly got the message, for the story goes on to tell how Balak repeatedly made sacrifices and asked Balaam to curse Israel, but every time Balaam opened his mouth he blessed Israel instead. He is a true prophet, and can speak only the words of God.

The story as it now stands uses various devices – first a dream, then the angel, and finally the prophecies of Balaam – to express God’s intention for his people. Israel will be blessed, and will prosper, in spite of the efforts of her enemies to destroy her. So Balaam himself becomes an ‘angel’ – a messenger whose message achieves God’s purpose, since his words cannot be unsaid and have power to achieve what is said. Through him, Israel is blessed.

We may be inclined to dismiss the stories of Lot and of Balaam as fables – but fables often convey truths, and that is true of these. The angels in both stories – whether human or supernatural – are messengers from God, bringing messages of salvation or destruction, blessing or judgement. Moreover, these messengers have the ability to make the news they bring a reality. And when we dig into the meaning of these stories, we see that the angels are not necessarily heavenly beings with wings, but may be men and women entrusted by God with a task.

We may well, as the Letter to the Hebrews says, entertain angels unawares.

So maybe the invitation to become an angel wasn’t so odd after all – apart from the bit about being naked – though I doubt whether it’s best achieved by buying wine. It is an invitation that is offered to us all, not simply to fortunate recipients of e-mails, for to be an angel is to be open to the call to convey God’s message of love and justice and peace to others, not simply by preaching it, but by embodying it, and by becoming channels of love and justice and peace in a world which sorely needs them.

**Rev Dr Simon Perry**

**Angels on Pinheads**

**17th June 2018**

So, we come to the end of an entire term's worth of talks on the subject of Angels. Above all, we have learned, angels in the bible, are messengers. The God of Hebrew Scripture is not the kind of God that appears to people directly – because no one can see God and live. No. This is not the God up there in the sky, not the God who exists in the same way that a bag of frozen sprouts exists, or the Loch Ness monster exists, or Donald Trump arguably exists. No. This is a God who is worshipped as the very origin of existence itself. So of course you don't see him popping up and speaking to people. Instead – we read about angels delivering God's will to humanity. The angel as an entity with a voice, a mediator, snapping people's attention back to the God they claim to worship.

In the New Testament of course, this God of the stars and God of the grains of sand, becomes incarnate – entering into human form in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. And so, you might think, angels become redundant. Jesus himself – after all – has become the Word. Or Rather, the Word made Flesh. This intolerable closeness and accessibility of the God of Israel – is only comforting because he is disturbing, only liberating because he is dangerous, only a source of hope because he is the ruthless destroyer of false hope. Any sane person would want to keep this dangerous divinity at a safe distance from who they really are.

It is not surprising then, that for the last 2000 years, Christians have been trying to squeeze the word made flesh back into the word, back into a book called the Bible, where it is word only. Once this Jesus is confined within a book, he's much more safe and tame because you can control, interpret, domesticate him. Instead of encountering this Jesus, you discover his meaning, the correct meanings of these words – and in fact, you need meaning in your life why not get it from the meaning in this book?

Preachers have often assured me that people out there are in search of meaning. The Alpha Course, an introduction to Christianity, claims to reveal the meaning of life. But have you ever wondered about the meaning, of 'meaning'. I'm not sure what it is, but it seems suspiciously modern. How on earth life can have a meaning is incomprehensible to me. Ever since the Hitchhikers Guide the Galaxy, humans have striven to know "the meaning of life, the universe and everything". But that same book brilliantly undermined the whole enterprise by revealing that the meaning of life the universe and everything is... 42. To collapse Christianity into some futile quest for meaning looks an awful lot like trying to keep this dangerous divinity at a safe distance from who we really are.

That desperate quest for meaning might well appear universal. Atheist and Jewish German philosophers in the 20th century diagnosed their society with a form of ontological amnesia: having set themselves adrift from the core stuff that makes us human, having forgotten what it is to exist, to be alive, to be – they become obsessed with triviality, ambiguity and idle talk. Self-delusional quests for meaning that sound profound but go no further than trite sloganized aphorisms – fertile soil for the advertiser.

So, for instance, advertisers assure me that if I'm afraid of fading into the background ("it's just not me"), all I need do is purchase a shampoo called, "John Frieda 2 shades lighter" to take my hair to another dimension.

"It takes courage to think differently" so Honda assure me – but purchasing the new Honda Civic is an act of courage – because I will thereby 'dare to be different.' By purchasing a mass produced motor vehicle.

Thank God Microsoft tried a different tack. They simply employed a blogger who seeks to “inspire people to be themselves,” by wearing bright coloured clothes.

The function of all this, is to imprison everyone’s attention with the immediate, with the short-term, with the next car, the next house, the next job, the next exam – the next goal. With the result that humans leave this world without ever thinking seriously about what they were doing here. Traditionally education has served to offer a way out of this carrot-and-stick, whirligig, merry-go-round existence – but education itself is in danger of being co-opted. It is manifested in every lecturer’s favourite question: “Will this be in the exam?”

All of this short-termism, the triviality, ambiguity and idle-talk: is everywhere and it was once ridiculed as equivalent to asking about how many angels could fit on the point of a needle. This is usually regarded as a criticism of medieval Theology as a pointless pursuit (the pun was intended – was it a pointless needle or a needless point?). The caricature of theologians sat around arguing about the space occupied by angels is entirely made up. It was late medieval Theologians themselves who used this as an hilarious joke... and were they to look at our contemporary culture would laugh at us and describe us all spending our lives arguing about nothing more important than the equivalent of needless and pointless questions about angels on pinheads. (They might say that we are trying to keep a dangerous divinity at a safe distance from who we really are.)

And there doesn’t seem to be an easy escape route. Contemplating anything more serious than the trivial often just doesn’t happen – at least, until you’re confronted with one of those personal tragedies that will eventually face us all. As the philosopher Mike Tyson once reflected, ‘Everyone has a plan till they get punched in the mouth.’

The Jesus revealed in Scripture as the Word made flesh, confronts people in the present – disturbing the comfortable and comforting the disturbed. He is described as Holy because he from utterly outside our cycles of triviality, ambiguity and idle-talk. He is described as Love because, despite and in the midst of even the most dire of human circumstance – this is a God whose presence can be found, the God whose identity is manifest most clearly in loving communion. And the response to this presence is called repentance. Repentance in scripture is not wiping clean one’s moral slate because Jesus is coming and he looks angry. Repentance is the radical reorientation of the mind, the affections, and the will. No safe distance between a dangerous divinity and who I really am.

As for angels. When they are not jostling to try and squeeze themselves onto the point of a needle, the angels seem to serve a different function. Whenever they appear in the New Testament – whether they are human or divine messengers – their function, always and without exception, is to reduce the distance between who we really are and who God really is.

**Dr Jossy Sayir**

**In praise of being rude**

**30th June 2018**

When my friend Dr Simon Perry the Chaplain asked me to give this graduation address, I first thought he must have fallen on his head. Why should the chaplain ask a Jewish French-educated Swiss Italian Turkish Engineer to give an address in his chapel? What's more, how am I qualified to address a congregation of proud no-longer-students who are about to join the hordes of Cambridge graduates who make Britain British and keep the Kingdom United? My first reaction was "Oy va voy, oy vey iz mir! What, does he expect me to give them a Hebrew blessing?" Not that I am in any way qualified to deliver such blessings. I didn't exactly train to be a Rabbi. My background is in Information Theory and Telecommunications and I serve this college as Director of Studies in Engineering. I am also the Fellows' wine steward and I chose the wine you drank at your graduation dinner last night.

As an information theorist, I can claim various noteworthy achievements: during my PhD, I developed data compression algorithms that required less RAM memory, just as the price of RAM memory was falling sharply, leaving the fruits of my noble research rotting on their vines. Later, while my colleagues thrived on exciting research topics that changed the world, I got waylaid playing sudoku, having discovered a coincidental link between sudoku puzzles and error correction codes and used this to confer a pseudo-scientific excuse for my addiction. More recently, I've been researching the use of DNA molecules as a storage medium. I can proudly announce that we are now able to offer you a storage solution where you can store up to 5 JPEG photos on DNA at a cost of £7000. It takes us 3 days to store the photos and 2 days to retrieve them, should you ever want them back, that is. Perhaps you shouldn't throw out your hard disks just yet...

As a European living in Britain, I get a lot of flak for being "rude". That's quite interesting because I don't use bad language apart from the occasional interjection while driving or when I burn my fingers while cooking. One of my children recently asked me "Daddy, when you say "Purée de beaux draps de Marne!" and "Chuchichäschtli nonemale!", what does it actually mean? Oops... how do you explain that to a 5 year old? Very embarrassing. (If you want a translation, please catch me during drinks later and I'd be happy to translate to anyone who's 18 or older). But I never ever swear in debates, when upset, or when arguing. Yet I am often told on just such occasions that I am being rude and I don't understand why. I've lived in Switzerland, Israel, Austria, and spent considerable time in Australia, Italy, Turkey, Greece, France, Canada and the USA, and nowhere before have people consistently complained that I am rude.

I've been giving a lot of thought to what makes me come across as rude in Britain that doesn't seem to bother other nationals as much. I've also spoken to fellow Europeans as to whether they have similar experiences, and many of them confirm it. We Europeans are rude. But surprisingly, many of my friends replied that in fact, it's the Brits who are rude, and I somewhat agree with them. Not that I hear much bad language used on the streets of Cambridge. But I have yet to come across a nation that conjugates the words "Excuse me" to such a wealth of meanings and intentions. On the platform waiting for the tube, "Excuse me!" translates to "Get out of my way, you insignificant being!" In Italian, that would be "Muoviti, pezzo di pomodoro marcio!" Waiting in line to pay in a shop, "Excuse me" translates in to "I was here first, you blind stuffed parrot!". In Turkish, that would be "Beni görmüyor musun, zurnanın son deliği!" My children recall a total breakdown I had in a plane after rushing through an insanely crowded Stansted airport with three kids in tow and finally making our plane when a lady shouted "Excuse me" when I dared to move her bag in the overhead compartment to fit my suitcase, which I believe meant "Don't touch my noble superior bag you inferior parent of annoying minors!". My children still poke fun at me saying "Daddy doesn't like excuse-me-ladies!".

What can we learn from these misunderstandings? That there is a fundamental difference in the way people express their feelings. Some people tend to keep a cool head and say "excuse me" when they're either angry, happy, upset, or annoyed. Others on the other hand tend to show their feelings by... well... showing their feelings. They are angry when angry, happy when happy, upset when upset, annoyed when annoyed. On a recent trip to London my train was cancelled and then I almost missed the next train because the app on my phone had swallowed my discount card. The gentleman at the counter refused to sell me a ticket before seeing the card in the app, even though I had a receipt for the discount card. Apparently, the card was sold by Network Rail, the train that got cancelled belongs to Great Northern, and he worked for Greater Anglia so the whole thing was neither his problem nor his responsibility. I was told I was being rude even though I had not used any bad language in my interaction with him. Was I upset? Was I angry? Of course I was! I don't know anyone in this country who is not upset and angry at the miserable state of our trains. But apparently, some think that the appropriate way to express one's anger is to go around saying "excuse me" in various levels of nastiness.

In fact, although I made this a Euro-British affair to capture your interest in light of current events, these differences are not aligned along national boundaries. I know many Brits who feel the way I do about misuse of polite terms and suppression of emotions. The gentleman who called me rude because I was upset at the counter at Cambridge station was in fact Polish, not British. Is there more to this than a superficial difference in showing emotions? I think there is: I believe that there are those who would like to turn this country and the world into a "limited liability society", where we never say what we mean, never show what we feel, and generally plod along in apparent superficial bliss doing no harm but doing no good either.

I have been in Cambridge for 10 years now and have had the privilege to meet and work with some of the greatest minds on earth. In particular, I was lucky to work with Professor Sir David MacKay in 2015-16, the year before he died from cancer at the age of 49. David was an inspiration. A Cambridge graduate, professor of Physics at the Cavendish, then later Regius Professor of Engineering, he resists any attempt at categorisation. He took up every battle and followed every conviction with full energy, courage, and intelligence. He was the nearest thing to a "renaissance man" that I ever encountered. He developed a writing aid for disabled people. He wrote a book on climate change and advised the UK government on carbon emissions. He fought to defend parents who had been wrongly incarcerated on suspicion of murder for the cot-death of their babies. In the last year of his life, he even fought for adequate protection of cyclists on the newly installed traffic junction near Girton, Cambridge. Oh, and did I mention that the information theory algorithms he developed run on every mobile phone you have in your pockets? David was never guarded and he never said "excuse me" when he meant something else. He was brave, committed, and invested every effort he could muster during his short life in order to make the world a better place.

You are about to graduate from Cambridge. I turned 50 earlier this month, and if I could go back to my graduating self 28 years ago, the only thing I would tell myself is this: this is not a rehearsal! Don't be cynical or guarded. Don't limit yourself in any way. Whatever you do, take responsibility for it, do it in full consciousness and give it your all. Don't let fear or worry hold you back. Don't seek refuge in the safety of stable conformism, be it in your work life, your intellectual life, or your personal life. Go conquer the world and, as the Senior Tutor said last night, do your best to make the world a better place. And if you have to be a little bit rude in the process, so be it!

And now finally for my Hebrew blessing:

מי שלמד בקהילתנו ויחזור אלינו עם נר למאור ויין למרתפנו יקודש בבריאות טובה ובהון רב והצלחה בכל מעשה ידיהם ויהיו אורחים מכובדים אצלנו בכל ביקוריהם. לחיים!