

All those angels!

Look beyond the Christmas angels to the meaning they convey

ANYONE who hears the Christmas story or sings the season's carols will be struck by all the angels flitting in and out of them. They are everywhere. For some people they are real beings essential to the story of Jesus' birth. For others they confirm their suspicion that Christmas and supernatural fantasy go hand in hand.

Both are right – but not in the ways they imagine. To regard angels nowadays as real beings is to lose the plot, while to pooh-pooh them out of the story is to miss the valid point they are there to make.

Angels belonged naturally in the pre-modern world. They were essential to the view of the universe that placed God firmly in a real, physical heaven located not too far above this real and physical earth – a concept that everyone took for granted in biblical times and for centuries thereafter.

That made necessary a reliable telecommunications system, and angels provided it. An angel was a messenger (that is what the Greek word *angelos* means) conveying messages from God to earthlings. People could not help speculating how they got around, and from the earliest times they were imagined with the wings that are now obligatory props in countless Christmas tableaux.

The ancient picture of heaven has long faded out of most people's understanding, but the angels it generated linger on.

That is because the human imagination is endlessly inventive. By the Middle Ages there were guardian angels for each person, and others for whole countries. They were organised in a hierarchy of nine classes, from seraphim at the top to angels at the bottom. Good angels fought spiritual battles against bad ones – the devil was an angel who went bad.

As recently as 1951 the pope declared the angel Gabriel to be the guardian angel of radio and telecommunications, including television. If television programming in New Zealand is anything to go by, he needs a rev-up.

Gabriel did rather better when, according to Muslim tradition, he revealed the Koran to Muhammad. And better still in Christian tradition, when he appeared to Mary and told her she was going to give birth to Jesus, the "Son of the Most High" who would rule over Israel. That was some message, but it was not the only one. On the day Jesus was born, says Luke's gospel, some shepherds were minding their flocks when an angel appeared, scaring the living daylights out of them, and announcing the messiah's birth. Immediately a host of angels joined in praising God, before vanishing back into heaven. Sheer poetry, but it is poetry with a purpose.

An angel also weaves in and out of Matthew's Christmas story, but this time the focus is Mary's fiancé, Joseph, and the communication is by way of dreams. In one dream the angel tells Joseph not to be upset that Mary is going to have a baby, but to marry her regardless. In another the angel warns Joseph that King Herod is up to no good, and he must flee with his family to Egypt. In another he learns that Herod is dead and it is safe to return.

In all these events the angels appear from the outside to deliver messages from another world; but they can also be read as projections from the inside of human situations, actions and

experiences. To that extent, the angels are earthed. Even the heavenly host appeared to shepherds of all people, in a field of all places, with a message highlighting peace on earth and good will to all people.

For moderns, the Christmas angels offer three broad choices. We can insist that they are real supernatural beings. We can dismiss them as no longer believable. Or we can look past the literalism of both those options and let the poetry shine through.

Angels would then still belong in the Christmas story as a mythical way of conveying that there is more to this Jesus than appears on the surface. They are part of the imaginative glow suggesting that there is something of God (or Godness) about him.

For centuries he has provided the way for millions to fill out their ordinary, transient lives with that dimension of Godness and find a meaning, a dignity and a purpose that would otherwise have eluded them.

Angels as poetry enhance that message in much the same way as strings of lights add sparkle to our Christmas trees. There is value still in allowing the harmonics of the ancient story to echo in our 21st century world.

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