

Luke 2:8-20

11.12.16

A thin place

I wonder what you make of angels. Do you think they exist? What are they, anyway? For many who find aspects of the Christian faith hard to believe this is a step too far and a point where cynicism sets in – as angels join the ranks of elves, goblins and fairies. Yet like it or not angels are an essential part fo the Christmas story. One appears to Mary to tell her about the baby she will give birth to. One appears to Joseph to warn him of what is happening. One appears to the shepherds on the hills of Bethlehem before an entire choir joins in. One appears to a man named Zechariah to tell him that he will be father to John the Baptist. They are an important ingredient of the story.

Well, let me say for a moment what I think we might learn from the angels and why they feature so often in the recounting of these events. You see, in the Christmas story what is basically happening is that heaven and earth are overlapping. The divine and the human are intermingling. God is intervening in human affairs in a new and decisive way. God is coming to us in person - and it is not surprising therefore that a bit of heaven percolates into earth, that things associated with heaven should suddenly make an appearance in the world. Jesus is being born, and when heaven invades earth that way – well, maybe we should expect the odd angel or angelic host to suddenly appear. And there seem to be particular places where this happens, certain places where the wall between heaven and earth is very thin, where the barrier between heaven and earth is almost porous. It's there that you find the angels.

Some of you, I know, have visited the Scottish island of Iona. This is the place where the Irish monk Columba brought Christianity to the West coast of Scotland and it is the cradle of the Celtic strand of Christian faith that took root there. For centuries Christians have made pilgrimages there and the walls of the ancient abbey that stands there have for years and years heard and absorbed the worship and the prayers of Christian people. And it can easily seem as if the dark shapes cast by flickering candles on the walls of the abbey are the dim shadows of angels, visitors from the other side who silently attend our praise. The founder of the Iona community which takes its bearings from the island, George MacLeod, famously called Iona 'a thin place', somewhere where heaven and earth come close and it certainly can seem like that.

And there are others. What a fantastic evening we had last Thursday when we held our fundraiser for the Mulanje Mission Hospital in Malawi which our church supports. I am privileged to have visited that hospital, which is such a beacon of light in a troubled and desperately poor country. When I was there two years ago I had a strong sense that this hospital, overlooked by a great mountain, and where such love and care and expertise are offered in Christ's name, was a thin place. In the midst of suffering and illness, and birth and death, heaven was just a breath away and the angels were very near.

Of course, as the Mulanje Mission Hospital makes only too clear, thin places are not always religious places. It can be a labour ward. It can be an HIV /AIDS treatment centre. In the Christmas story it is the Bethlehem hillside in the dead of night. In the Christmas story it's also the animal quarters of some humble dwelling that becomes like a colander, leaking the divine, soaking holiness into a squalid space. These are not sacred places – far from it. Yet, having said that, as was evident in the church at Mulanje, where there is worship we often find a thin place – the two are linked. So it was that that hills of Bethlehem echoed with the song of the angels,

Glory to God in the highest heaven,

And on earth peace among those whom he favours...

Being a church, being a temple, being a religious site does not automatically make for a thin place. But where there is worship, where there is love for God, and where there is love for our fellow human – there the walls become thin, the membrane becomes porous and the angels can be heard whispering.

The season of Advent is a journey to a thin place. It's a journey to that uniquely thin place where in a tiny infant in a manger heaven and earth merged, the divine and the human mingled. He is the primary thin place and wherever he went in his life and ministry heaven drew near: where the sick were healed, the lame leapt, the blind saw, the dead were raised, the outcasts welcomed and the poor greeted with good news. Our calling as disciples is to be thin places, where heaven seeps into earth – and where you might just glimpse the shadow of an angel. Amen.

O sovereign God,
Lord and ruler of all and

come amongst us in Jesus Christ,
we pray today for your world.
We hold before you especially those places
where heaven seems far from earth
and where your presence seems distant.
We think of places under siege,
where bombs fall and where the sounds
of gunfire and explosions are heard;
we think of refugee camps and hostels
where displaced people seek refuge;
we think of prison cells where people are held –
justly or unjustly – but where human dignity
and value are denied.
And we think of hospital wards
and care homes denied adequate resources and funding.
O God, bring heaven close to such places.
Bring hope and healing, we pray.

And God,
We pray for your church
that it may be filled with your presence;
that in our worship and our life and our witness
the song of the angels may echo.
Bless this place in the coming days
as many people come here for services.
May it be a thin place.
May all who come find themselves drawn closer to you
in the mystery of what we celebrate.

And bless those we know in special need today:
those who are sick or troubled,
those who are lonely or afraid,
those who are tired of life and have had enough.
Be to them a strength and a refuge.
We pray all these things in the name of Jesus,
our Lord and Saviour. Amen.