

Sermon on Sunday 20 December 2020

by Rev. Alan Stewart

(Readings: Romans 16. 25-end; Luke 1. 26-38)

Angels in high-vis

A question for you; have you ever met an angel?

The existence of angels is never questioned by the writers of the Bible. And they come in many guises. Angels that make Sarah laugh and Jacob limp. Angels who rudely interrupt Mary's wedding plans and gatecrash Joseph's dreams. Angels who silence Zechariah and terrify shepherds. Angels who bring relief in the desert and mastermind jailbreaks. Guardian angels, warrior angels, messenger angels.

A friend of mine swears he once met an angel in Harrods.

Many of us, perhaps, find it hard to believe that God would be interested enough in us, to communicate let alone send an angel. That's for spiritual heavyweights or would-be mothers of Messiahs.

Here's another question: What if angels are, in fact, more common than we think? What if angels are everywhere, it's just that most of the time they're plain-clothed, undercover, ordinary, unassuming?

There's a man in a hard hat and high-vis who stands at the entrance of the building site just across the road from our house, and every time I pass by, he smiles and waves. And it's not just

me, he does it to everyone. In the last few days, in fact, he's become something of a celebrity on Facebook, as scores of people register their delight and gratitude. At last month's prayer gathering, this friendly gatekeeper got nominated by several of us as one of our main 'reasons to be thankful'. I took him a Christmas card this week to say so, and to say thank you on behalf of everyone for his infectious smile and the friendliness he radiates. I discovered his name's Clinton.

Clinton doesn't need to smile or wave at anyone. I'm sure for every one who acknowledges him, two or three or more possibly don't. Clinton chooses to transform what I imagine can be a boring job, into something of a vocation. In what is for some a contentious build, he does more with his smile and his wave than any PR company ever could. He chooses to connect with passersby; to brighten a stranger's day; to disarm with a smile which in turn begets new smiles.

When I first came across Clinton, I have to say I was caught off guard, because unsolicited friendliness is actually a rare thing. It costs nothing but, on certain days, it can mean everything.

Might it be that we, like Abraham once did, sometimes entertain angels unawares? Maybe angels sometimes come dressed in hard hats and high-vis.

If Clinton can make such a deep impression upon a whole community with the simplest of human courtesy, what's stopping each one of us doing the same; making friendliness contagious, re-programming our culture's settings, overcoming our embarrassment or insecurity, one person at a time.

I believe in angels of the celestial variety but God, I think, depends much more on his network of more earthly angels; that someone with that little extra time or kindness to give; that someone unafraid to smile or speak truth even when it's misunderstood or unpopular; that someone who can reach out to another with a gesture that maybe, in that moment, could make their day or even save their life.

I guess that makes us all angels, potentially.

Angels are agents of grace, messengers of God, so another question:

What if we were actually to treat everyone we meet as if they were an angel; a potential messenger of God? What if I were to choose to believe that every single person I meet knows something I need to know; that every friend or stranger, however young or old, however like or unlike me, is in possession of a word or a message or something I need to hear or receive from God?

I too easily write too many people off; instantly I form judgments; I'm never rude, I hope, but I'm also often never fully present with everyone I meet. I often have low or no expectations that others have anything significant to say to me. And hearing that out loud sounds terrible, but I'm guessing I'm not the only one.

If I, you, we, however, were to be fully present with even just a few people we come into contact with; however casually; in person, on the phone, online, in a supermarket line...

What if we gave our full undivided attention even for a moment? What if we expected to hear from each person we meet something life giving or life affirming; life challenging; life changing?

To be listened to with interest and respect is empowering. To be open and receptive to the wisdom, insight and divine inspiration of others is invaluable.

Such encounters would, I believe, change my world, and possibly their world, and maybe, just maybe, the world.

It sounds corny: 'Be an angel'; 'Treat others like angels'. But there's nothing corny about the work of angels.

Fredrick Beuchner once wrote: 'In the final analysis, all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace.'

Anyone can be an angel. All it takes is to know that all moments are key moments, that our true vocation is to be agents of grace; to be open to the little prompts of the Holy Spirit; to be interested in and present with others; to pick up a phone, or deliver a card, or make some extra food, or just smile and wave at a stranger.

Last question: What's your next assignment?

