

## About Angels

For a while angels seemed to be “out-of-favour”, not getting bad press but not getting any press, rarely mentioned and possibly rarely taught, until the US television series *Highway to Heaven* and *Touched by an Angel* brought them back into people’s consciousness once again.

The first series, which only ran for one season (1988), saw Michael Landon (*Bonanza* and *Little House on the Prairie*) as an angel sent down to earth on probation. Along with his human companion (played by Victor French), in each episode he was assigned by God to help various people overcome their problems. Ironically French died in 1989 and Landon in 1991 and so within a couple of years of the series ending, both were hopefully experiencing real angels (and God) for themselves! Along similar lines, though with a slightly more overt Christian message, *Touched by an Angel* (1994-2003) saw a group of angels led by Irish actress Roma Downey and her “boss” Della Reese, sent by God to assist people at crossroads in their lives and, again, helping them with their problems and decisions.

That’s all very nice, if a little bit “Hollywood”, but what exactly are angels and what do they do?

The word comes from the Latin *angelus*, meaning “messenger”. By definition they are angels not because of *who* they are but because of *what* they do. Saint Augustine said: “Angel is the name of their office, not of their nature. If you seek the name of their nature, it is spirit; if you seek the name of their office, it is angel.” Pope St Gregory the Great said the same thing: “It must be realized that ‘angel’ is the name of an office, and not of a nature”, but he then goes on to say: “These holy spirits of our homeland in heaven are always spirits, but in no way can they always be called ‘angels’ or ‘messengers’ since they are angels only when something is announced through them”. And we see this all through the scriptures:

Angels have been present since creation and throughout the history of salvation: they closed the earthly paradise; protected Lot; saved Hagar and her child; stayed Abraham’s hand, communicated the law by their ministry; led the People of God; announced births and callings; and assisted the prophets, just to cite a few examples.<sup>1</sup>

And from the *A-Z of the Catholic Church*:

They (angels) control the fate of nations (Dan 10 v13), protect God’s chosen ones (Tobit 5 v 4ff), deliver his law to mankind (Acts 7 v 53)(Gal 3 v 19) and bring messages to individuals beginning with Abraham and stretching right through the Old and New Testaments.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (para 332)

St Gregory goes a step further and introduces us to the concept and unique mission of *archangels*:

Those who make minor announcements are called angels, those who make important ones are called archangels. Hence it is that not just any angel was sent to the Virgin Mary but that Gabriel the archangel was sent. [Gabriel was also sent to Elizabeth to foretell the birth of John the Baptist.]

Whenever a mighty deed is in question, (the archangel) Michael is assigned. [In the Book of Revelation (12 v 7-9) Michael leads the heavenly armies in a victorious battle with Lucifer who is thrown out of heaven along with his followers.]

A third archangel, Raphael, “one of the seven angels who stand ever ready to enter the presence of the glory of the Lord” (Tobit 12 v 15), is sent by God to bring healing to Tobit by restoring his sight.

One of the roles of angels with which we are most familiar is that of guardian angel. The Catechism says of guardian angels:

From its beginning, until death, human life is surrounded by their watchful care and intercession. ‘Beside each believer stands an angel as protector and shepherd leading him to life.’ (para 336, and quoting St Basil)

In the Book of Exodus (23 v20) we read: “I myself will send an angel before you to guard you as you go” and in St Matthew’s gospel (18 v10) Jesus says: “See that you never despise any of these little ones, for I tell you that their angels in heaven are continually in the presence of my Father in heaven.”

Whilst it is true of all angels, it is particularly true of our guardian angels that they are a sign of God’s concern and care for us. St Bernard says:

‘He has given his angels charge of you, to guard you in all your ways.’ (Ps 91 v 11) What reverence this should instil in you, what devotion it should stir up, what trust it should inspire. They are present to you, not merely accompanying you but watching over you...in order to protect you, in order to help you. Let us then be devoted and grateful to such guardians; let us return their love and honour them as much as we can and ought. But let our love and honour be referred to him from whom alone we and they derive whatever enables us to show love and honour. Let us love his angels with sincere affection: they will be our co-heirs at some future time and in this present time are the guardians and trustees placed in charge of us by the Father. They cannot be vanquished, nor led astray, still less can they lead us astray, these beings who guard us in all our ways. They are faithful, they are wise, they are powerful; what have we to fear? <sup>2</sup>

Compared to the messenger angels and archangels of scripture, our guardian angels may seem a little silent. However they are still, by definition “angels”,

---

<sup>2</sup> (taken from the Office of Readings for the memorial of The Guardian Angels.)

“messengers”: they are sent by God and the message they bring is the protection they provide, the message that God loves us, cares for us, and is concerned for our well-being. By their very presence they are constantly speaking that truth to us.

**H**ow do we picture these messenger spirits, these guardian angels, described in the Catechism as “spiritual non-corporeal beings”, “purely spiritual creatures”?

**W**e all know how angels are depicted in art, for example in the traditional image of the Annunciation to Our Lady or the appearance of the angels to the shepherds near Bethlehem. They are usually portrayed as ethereal, long-haired, winged beings, human-looking (more female than male though in scripture they are always referred to as male) and hovering in the sky, all of which is, of course, the fruit of our imagination. Clearly that’s not what they look like, if nothing else because they are spiritual not physical. But we need to picture them somehow and it would seem only natural to imagine them in a form we are familiar with, looking like us (though more holy and pure and innocent than we know ourselves to be) but with wings so they can fly and hover!

**W**henver people in the scriptures have encountered angels, they seem to have appeared in human form - presumably a matter of convenience so that they had something/someone they could relate to (in the same way that God came down to earth in human form). And so, for example, when an angel visits St Peter in prison (Acts 12 v 6-11), he (it says it’s a he) must have taken human form because Peter sees and talks to him like another person even though he turns out to be an angel. The same is true in the account of the apostles in prison in Acts 5 v19.

**O**rdinarily, however, because they are spirits, we can’t see angels or at least not that we know of - though there is the caveat contained in Hebrews (13 v 2): “Remember always to welcome strangers, for by doing this, some people have entertained angels without knowing it”. But they do exist, they are there, God has said so. And our guardian angels are watching over us all the time whether from heaven or, as traditionally pictured, standing right next to us.

**I**t’s worth reminding ourselves once again that angels are, as one source<sup>3</sup> says, “symbols of God’s care and providence and his intimate concern for his people.” Specific to the archangels it goes on to say, “Their representations show them to be figures of power and beauty, aiding in the battle against evil and protecting those who call upon them.” In St Matthew’s gospel (13 v 41-42) Jesus teaches that the angels will be present at Christ’s return which they will announce and at which they will serve. Meanwhile, as the Catechism says, “the whole life of the Church benefits from the mysterious and powerful help of the

---

<sup>3</sup> *The One Year Book of Saints*, on the feast of The Archangels.

angels.” (para 334) “The truth is they are all spirits whose work is service, sent to help those who will be the heirs of salvation.” (Heb 1 v 14)

*Lord God of hosts, in your all-wise providence  
you send angels to guard and protect us.  
Surround us with their watchful care on earth,  
and give us the joy of their company for ever in heaven.  
We make our prayer through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

(from the Office for the memorial of The Guardian Angels)

\* \* \*

Fr Neil McNicholas