

Bennochy church 22nd October 2017

I don't believe angels have wings, but, I do believe our world is full of angels. To be an angel is to be a messenger, that is what the Greek word '*angelos*' means, and I suspect, that we have all entertained angels, without recognising who they are. To be an angel, is to have a nature that is both generous and inclusive. To be an angel is to see no barriers, between themselves and the other, no matter who they are and what kind of lifestyle they live.

One of the most greatest challenges to us as Christians, is this idea of hospitality. Hospitality is more powerful than welcome and hospitality is far removed, from simply inviting your friends for a meal. That is easy. The hospitality of Jesus, is to go where you would not wish to be invited, and to meet the people, whose difference from us, makes us want to turn the other direction. We have all been in the uncomfortable places, with people who are not like us, and our natural instinct is to want to escape, as quickly as possible.

Angels go to the uncomfortable places and offer that hard hospitality, always facing the possibility of rejection, with a love stronger than their own. But there is another face to the angel. The people so different from us, that to us, they are the 'unlovables'. We can all name our unlovable's. The people we just don't want to be around. They are out there, part of the world that God has made. Their choices will never be ours. But,

they have the face of Jesus, as we have the face of Jesus. because we have all been made in God's image. That is a core part of our humanity. Who we are, and all of us are loved by God. The question is whether we allow his love, to overturn our natural rejection of others.

This dynamic is not one way. Perspective depends on where you stand and which way you face. To others, it is our faces that does not fit, and for various reasons, we are the ones rejected.

One of the greatest examples of hospitality is found in Genesis chapter 18. It is a very simple story. Hospitality is not complicated. It is the visit of strangers, who are honoured as guests. In the story, Abraham says to them, *do not pass by my door without stopping*. The underlying assumption of the story is far more dramatic. These strangers are God himself, with two attendant angels.

Notice this , Abraham does not skimp on the meal. This is serious hospitality. It is a different world that challenges us. In this nomadic, ancient, Eastern civilisation, hospitality, taking a stranger into your home, was seen almost as a sacred act. Even for someone who was a member of another hostile tribe. Hence, strangers were often entertained by clan chiefs and the receptions, lavish. The power of hospitality was embedded in the culture. Our society endangers hospitality because of the

suspicion of the stranger. When someone knocks on our door, what is our reaction?

It was only after they had eaten, and the conversation moves on to Sarah, that the writer moves the story on, to hint at who these strangers were. In other words, Abraham is not putting on a show for honoured guests, because at first, he did not know who these people were. This is how a clan chief would have been expected to treat his visitors. The writer is not seeking any high praise for the actions of Abraham. In the culture, this was normal.

What is different is, this is a dangerous story. To portray and to reveal God in such concrete terms was very unusual in the ancient world. This encounter, is about serious hospitality! Of God himself and of angels!

The echo of this story finds its way into the writings of the book of Hebrews, and links it with the idea of standing in the shoes of those who are in prison or who are suffering. I think it is actually very difficult to stand in someone else's shoes. Experience is so unique. Even common experiences are different.

What is the writer trying saying about hospitality? Today, its power does not lie in our culture. It is almost the opposite, going against the tide of society. Yet, I believe people today are seeking a sense of belonging, to be part of something bigger, beyond the individual.

Hospitality is such a strong biblical principle. You have the example of the early church meeting in homes and sharing what they had, and hospitality seemed to be in every step and heart beat of the journey of Jesus. It is an acceptance that went well beyond welcome. It was not just open arms but an open heart, to receive people as they were. I want to suggest that the power of hospitality lies in God's love that enables us to accept others, even our enemies. Yet, most of us just don't want to take the risk, of welcoming the 'other', the stranger, and see the face of Jesus in them.

One way to think about it is this and this is the challenge for us as a congregation. Hospitality, changes a 'visitor' to a 'host'. Let me say that again, *hospitality, changes a 'visitor' to a 'host'*. That means, they are no longer outside the tent passing by on their journey, they now offer what they once received. We need to take a step beyond just welcome, so that our visitors, become our hosts to others.

Abraham served his guests in an ancient land. Jesus broke bread around a table. All are welcome. In the heart of God, no one is a stranger.

I still don't believe angels have wings, but the messengers of God, are all around us. His love to receive, and his hospitality to offer. Amen.