

I have to be honest – I've never seen an angel. But I've spoken to someone who does. A few years ago I was part of a radio discussion panel on the subject of angels. I was the Christian and there was a Muslim and a Hindu there with me and someone of no faith and Lorna Byrne. Lorna, who you may or may not have heard of, has written lots of books about angels, because she lives with them, she experiences them all the time. I went into this whole thing a bit sceptical. Mediaeval theologians might have had a great deal of fun debating how many angels could dance on the head of a pin, but the church doesn't spend a lot of time these days debating that – we have other things to disagree about.

So I approached the discussion thinking that Lorna must be – well, how does one put it – crazy! But she wasn't. How she described her experiences was beautiful. It was as though she's attuned to angels in a way that I'm not, attuned in the way that some people seem to be able to hear higher range sounds and most of us cannot and the experience has brought her a deep and palpable sense of peace.

In one of her books she says this

“Your guardian angel loves you. You are precious to it. You are the most important person in the world to this angel.”

It's a reassuring message for many people who don't experience this in any other way.

We're anticipating this evening, at the beginning of this new academic year, the Feast that occurs at the end of the week, the feast that gives its name to this term, the Feast of St Michael and all Angels, Michaelmas. This is when the church stops and gives thanks for these created beings that we remember at Christmas and remember a little bit at Easter but that for the rest of the year, until the end of September, most of us – or at least I do – get on with things without really thinking about them.

But scripture is with Lorna Byrne as we've heard this evening, that they're all around us.

The man of God who's mentioned in the First Lesson is Elisha who put on the mantle of the great prophet, his teacher and master, Elijah. He'd already seen some amazing things. As his master was being taken up into heaven, Elisha watched and he saw horses of flame and a chariot of flame whisking him away. Now in this rather desperate moment when the camp seems to be surrounded by the enemy, Elisha looks up and he sees horses and chariots again, heavenly ones – and we interpret this vision as a vision of angels, guardians come to fight on the side of right. Elisha was surrounded by them.

In the Second Lesson Jesus is more specific and in talking about a little child talks about their angels. Jesus too, according to scripture, had already experienced angels. Perhaps his mother Mary had told him how one appeared to tell her that she was going to be his mother. Perhaps she also told him that the skies above Bethlehem had been filled with them on the night when he was born. Perhaps she told him that their singing brought shepherds down from the fields,

where they'd been keeping watch over their flocks by night, to be the first to welcome him into the world. Perhaps she told him how Joseph had dreamt of an angel who had warned him to take the family as refugees to safety in Egypt and how another had told him that it was safe to go back home.

But whatever Mary told Jesus, the gospel tells us that whilst he was being tempted in the wilderness, while he was spending those forty days and forty nights struggling with the devil, it was angels that ministered to him.

But it's something that Jesus says at the end of that reading that seems to be most significant for us, that touches on the heart of the matter for us, whether or not we've experienced the touch of an angel ourselves

'Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones; for, I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven.'

It reminds me of something that's said in another book of the New Testament, the Letter to the Hebrews, where the writer says

'Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.'

We're all in the business of looking after people, me as a priest, you as an academic, you as a future medic, you as a chaplain, you as one who makes things happen in the college, in the hospital. We're all in the business of looking after people – and often at their most vulnerable. We know that this is difficult and demanding, especially when it's day in, day out. But Jesus is encouraging us to see beyond the obvious, the need, the demands, the stress, the difficulty, and to recognise the child, of whatever age, and to glimpse their angel.

You may well know the poem by Phyllis McCormack called 'A Crabbit Old Woman'. It was written back in 1966 but it still makes you stop and think 52 years later. It begins like this.

What do you see, nurse, what do you see?
What are you thinking, when you look at me
A crabbit old woman, not very wise,
Uncertain of habit, with far-away eyes,
Who dribbles her food and makes no reply
When you say in a loud voice, I do wish you'd try.
Who seems not to notice the things that you do
And forever is losing a stocking or shoe.
Who, unresisting or not; lets you do as you will
With bathing and feeding the long day to fill.
Is that what you're thinking, Is that what you see?
Then open your eyes, nurse, you're looking at me.

And for nurse read doctor or dentist or surgeon or pathologist or pharmacist, or chaplain, or priest or whoever you are, whoever I am.

As it said in the First Lesson

Elisha prayed: ‘O Lord, please open his eyes that he may see.’ So the Lord opened the eyes of the servant, and he saw.’

We need to live, eyes wide open, expecting to see angels – and perhaps, perhaps in that crabbit old woman we will see the face of an angel.

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