

It is easy for us to get over-familiar with our favourite hymns and Christmas carols, so that we lose touch with the real meaning of the words we are singing. This Advent we are going to look more closely at the meaning of a familiar Christmas carol: *Angels from the Realms of Glory*. This carol written by Scottish poet James Montgomery was first printed in the *Sheffield Iris* on Christmas Eve 1816, though it only began to be sung in churches after 1825. The hymn can be sung to a variety of tunes, but here in the UK it is usually sung to the French carol tune *Iris* as found in the *Oxford Book of Carols*. Sometimes the *Gloria in Excelsis Deo* refrain is sung in place of the original lyric: *Come and worship Christ the new-born King*. The verses are a progression from Angels to shepherds, wise men and saints, to sinners' repentance here on earth. A complete Advent preparation. As it can be a tricky carol to sing, especially if numbers are small, we are going to listen to a version of the carol after communion each Sunday.

Looking at the first verse the question that springs to mind is - what is an angel? They are familiar characters in our Christmas carols but who or what are they and what do they do? The word angel is a blend of the Old English engel (with a hard g) and the Old French angele, which derives from the Late Latin angelus, meaning 'messenger'. Jewish Scriptures, what we call the Old Testament, use the terms 'messenger of God', 'messenger of the Lord', 'sons of God' and 'the holy ones' to refer to those we usually called angels. Sometimes depending on the story they can be appear to be human or supernatural. If you remember back to Abraham, he and Sarah entertained three strangers who appeared to be human travelers but were in fact a trinity of angels.

Traditionally Angels are God's holy ones with a variety of roles; servants, messengers, agents of judgement and salvation. Interestingly it is in the Old Testament that we first meet the Angel Gabriel, a real Christmas favourite, who appears to Daniel bringing words of encouragement at a difficult time. Angels are also the ones who continually sing God's praises as in Isaiah's vision as they sing to one another *Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory!* So angels as part of the cast of characters in our familiar carols is not surprising.

Of course Angels abound in the New Testament announcing the coming of the Messiah to first to Zechariah, early in Luke's gospel we find an angel appearing by the altar as he prepares to perform the ritual burning of incense. As the smoke rises and worshippers outside prostrate themselves in prayer, he sees an angelic figure who announces that his wife, Elizabeth, will bear a son who they will call John. This boy will be greatly blessed, return many to the Lord their God and make ready the people for the appearance of the Messiah.

Closely on the heels of announcing Elizabeth's pregnancy, Gabriel comes to Mary but the surroundings of this appearance could not be more different, from the grandeur of the Temple in the city of Jerusalem to the small and very rural setting of Nazareth. The message to Zechariah was that prayers for a child had been heard and were to be answered. Here the message given by the angel is that Mary is 'highly favoured' or 'precious' in God's eyes. She has been chosen to be the recipient of a wonderful blessing. Zechariah asked for a sign but as he was rendered speechless until the birth it may not be quite what he had in mind. Mary, on the other hand, simply asks how this amazing pregnancy and birth is going to happen.

Linked to Mary is Joseph her betrothed who was going to find this developing situation difficult to understand. But he too had a vision of an angel of the Lord explaining the whole situation, after which Joseph was obedient to God's will, took Mary as his wife and the named their son Jesus. Lastly our carol brings us to the angelic choir announcing Jesus birth to the Shepherds but they are for next week and verse two.

I wonder when you listen to or sing this familiar carol what image comes into your mind of angels.

Angels from the realms of glory,  
wing your flight o'er all the earth;  
ye who sang creation's story  
now proclaim Messiah's birth:

Do you have pictures from nativity plays of gauze wings, Christmas cribs or paintings? Do you recall Bible stories like Daniel or the more familiar ones from Luke? Maybe you remember people like St Paul and St Peter who in the Acts of the Apostles encounter angels more than once, in dreams or even in prison. When you think about all the people throughout the Bible who encounter angels can we see how their faith and obedience might help us to recognise God at work in our own lives.

Sometimes when we sing familiar words in carols it seems that all this is something in the past, in the Bible, in stories. That angels are something that other people encounter, not us. If Angelic visions might seem to be rare today we should hold onto what the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews [13.2 ] reminds us.

*Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.*