



A THOUGHT FOR THE WEEKEND

1st December, 2023

"I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you."

Luke 1:19

As Advent approaches our 'walk-on' this weekend is the angel Gabriel. Did you know (I didn't!) that 'traditionally' there are seven (or eight!) archangels (chief angels) who *"stand in the presence of God"*? You have to go to one of the lesser Apocryphal books, Enoch (Ch. 20), to find a list. Only two are named in 'our' Bible: Gabriel and Michael. (The 'el' bit means God, so their names mean 'God my strength' and 'Gift of God' respectively; -there are other translations... check the Old Testament for other '-El' names: Ezekiel, Joel, etc.!)

Only twice is the word "archangel" used in scripture, once in Jude *"the archangel Michael"* (1:9... mysterious verse!), and once in 1 Thessalonians 4:16 (a recent Growth Group passage), when *"the voice of the archangel"* will accompany Christ's return (again, translations vary).

Elsewhere Michael is mentioned three times in Daniel as *"one of the chief princes"* (10:13) and *"the great prince who protects your people"* (12:1). (He is not to be confused with the various 'human' Michaels named in Old Testament families.)

Back to Gabriel (who is never described as an 'archangel' in scripture). He gets four mentions, - two in Daniel's mysterious visions (8:16, 9:21) and two in Luke, announcing the births of John the Baptist (1:19) and of Jesus (1:26)... the Annunciation.

When I was young, I learnt the carol *'The angel Gabriel from heaven came; his wings as drifted snow, his eyes as flame...'* It fired a boy's imagination, but Luke mentions no snowy wings, or eyes as flame. We are left to imagine (as have illustrators and film-makers) what this heavenly being looked like, although Daniel says he *"looked like a man"* (8:16) and he *"came ... in swift flight"* (9:21); so there are clues!

There are nearly 300 Biblical mentions of angels, and a lot of scholarly time has been spent debating their nature, role and function. They are the messengers and guides from God for his people. Gabriel says to Zechariah, *"I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you..."*. So maybe it's better to concentrate on their messages!

So let's set aside for a moment pictures of Gabriel at the Annunciation and the hundreds of angels that filled the skies above the Bethlehem shepherds, wonderful 'though they be. I want to suggest two thoughts, perhaps slightly controversial: (1) that we may encounter an angel - male or female- in a form no different from anyone else; a person perhaps who comes into our lives from nowhere and seems to slip away after delivering her/his message; and (2) that therefore it is possible that you or I, or someone we know, could be God's angel for a particular timely message, person, and purpose. God's message can inhabit an ordinary person, who becomes 'God's angel' -God's messenger- to speak at that moment.

The Hebrews writer has more to say about angels than most, and his last comment is, *"some have entertained angels without knowing it"* (13:2). That's true, and can we also say, 'some have been angels without knowing it'? There's a thought for the weekend!