

# Christmas Day

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## Introduction

The good news of Christmas Morning is upon us. Children have hurried out of bed, presents have been opened and joy abounds. Yet for many Christmas is also a time of changes, of touching a loss or a bereavement, a time of looking back as well as celebrating today. We read the passage today considering the idea of an angel, and the role of the angel in the story which brings the heavenly host to sing to the holy family.

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## Text

Luke 2:1–14

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!”

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## Comment

What is an angel? The Christmas story is imbued with a direct divine intervention in the form of angels sent as messengers. For us, an angel is usually represented by a pre-pubescent girl in a white costume with tinsel in her hair. This Victorian convention of the angelic female child follows a long history of Christmas plays which can be traced back to the first crib scene, the introduction of which is attributed to St Francis of Assisi. The angels in the nativity play are usually drawn

from the angel who appears to Mary, and those which sing to the shepherds, both of which appear in Luke.

The angel has also passed into modern contemporary culture, Abba, Robbie Williams and Ed Sheeran have all written hugely popular modern songs using the idea of an angel to express hope for change, loss, and a belief in an afterlife. Abba's 'I have a dream' makes a connection between believing in fairytales and in angels, one which is a force for good, 'I believe in angels Something good in everything I see. Robbie William's song 'Angels' is now over 20 years old, the first draft of which was written by Ray Heffernan after his partner suffered a miscarriage. In the song lost love is a love for angels. Loss and the intervention of angels are readily understood by people today and it is a song commonly requested at funerals.

Ed Sheeran wrote 'Supermarket Flowers' about the loss of his grandmother, describing her as an angel, and referring to her journey to heaven as being a moment of rejoicing. Heaven will say 'Hallelujah' as she is admitted there. Again this is becoming a very popular song for funerals as people identify with the sentiment of losing a much loved older female family member.

These popular concepts of angels are carried by many into the understanding of the congregation of the nativity play and its function. Family bonds of love, shared times together and intergenerational experiences all typify our Christmas experience within church, and so it is natural to wish to soften the darker side of the Christmas tale with angels that mediate grief, provide good news, and a link between our mortal lives and eternal life.

In the metaphor of the angel in Matthew's story, we have a direct intervention by the divine in the human experience. As we can see from the use of angels in popular music it is an idea which is understood widely as a helpful bridge between those things of faith which we cannot explain and the reality of lived experience of loss and major life events.

This Christmas may be a time of touching a loss, a time of changing events, or of dreaming a new future. The metaphor of an angel bearing such a message or mediating such a pain carries the reality of the gospel into our unique experience and speaks to us of the love of God for each of us.

Whatever our personal view of an angel, may ours, like the shepherds', bring the heavenly host to sing Glory to God this Christmas Day and everyday.

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## Response

For some church members today there is a perceived conflict between the culture and traditions of church and pop-songs, social media and modern culture. It is hard when writing Christmas material to bridge the gap between the popular culture of the parents who will come to see a child in a nativity play, and some of the older regular members of the church. What popular songs could be played in church to demonstrate aspects of the Christmas story? Are they from the 1980s or the 2010s? Why not try to compose a Christmas service using only cultural references, music and songs post 2010? Speak to the congregation about worship now, and the gospel being alive to the culture of today.

OR

How does the metaphor of the angel as God's messenger speak to you? Have you ever seen an angel? Or heard one in a dream? Or are you sceptical of angels as a reality and see them as a poetic or literary device to explain those times our lives take a dramatic turn?

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## Prayer

God who sent the angel,  
send us out from worship  
to serve the world around us  
to understand it as it is  
and to offer to our world  
the gift of Christmas  
in our love.  
Amen

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Season: Christmas

Themes: