

## Christmas Midnight 2004

Don't you just love angels? That story of the angels appearing to the shepherds to tell them the news and send them off to Bethlehem is one of the great moments of the Nativity story isn't it? Luke tells us that it was in the dead of night just like now and that the night was lit up by the glory of the angels. Our candles here this evening can remind us that we worship here together with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven.

Well, I've no doubt that between us all we'll have seen literally hundreds of Nativity plays telling that story of the message of the angels to those shepherds. The angels all portrayed by beautiful blonde haired little girls and the shepherds all in dressing gowns with tea towels on their heads. Even as I speak I expect images of such occasions are coming into your mind. Apparently sales of tea towels have rocketed in recent months, not because we're are doing more washing up, we're not, we all have dishwashers; but in order to create perfect shepherds costumes with Yasser Arafat style headgear.

But back to the angels; these beautiful creatures in long flowing white gowns with wings, often accompanied by ethereal music and all holding their hands up like this. It's not really surprising that children often confuse them with fairies is it?

We've got it badly wrong somewhere because in the Bible angels are almost always terrifying.

When an angel appears to Zechariah the father of John the Baptist Zechariah is struck, dumb. When an angel appears to Mary we're told that she was deeply troubled. The dear old Shepherds that we've just read about cowered in fear at the sight of the angels, '...mighty dread had seized their troubled mind.' What's

going on here? You can't imagine anyone being scared of the angels we portray in our Nativity plays and yet that fear is there for all to see in the Bible story.

Well, of course one of the things that's going on is that we've sentimentalised the story of the events surrounding the birth of Christ in order to make it fit in with the gooey, sentimental, soft-focus, tinselly carnival that we have turned Christmas into. We've made it something for the children and because we're so romantic about childhood that has meant that we've risked eliminating from it any meaningful message.

One thing we certainly try to steer clear of is anything frightening and yet fear is a very important human emotion. One that affects adults and children alike. It might be monsters under the bed or it might be the ultimate fear of death, but it's all part of being human so it's important that it should be there in the story and that we shouldn't skirt round it.

The real world we live in is full of fear. Think of the people of Fallujah under the American bombardment; think of the people of Darfur facing the random violence of the militias; think of the fear engendered by knowing that if you tell the truth you will be persecuted; beaten or even killed; think of the fear of the Palestinian mother who knows that Israeli army bulldozers are about to destroy her home and finally drive her frustrated son into the arms of Hamas or Islamic Jihad; think of the fear of realising that you simply have no food and no prospect of getting any. Imagine what it must be like to realise that you have come to the end of your resources and to set off along with thousands of others to a refugee camp where there is enough food for a fraction of the people and where a child dies every few minutes and knowing that your own