

I'd like today for you to cast your mind back to the first time you came into St Mary's church. It might be the first time you've entered these rarified precincts today in which case, welcome, please don't be scared. That's my job. Anyway, I'd hazard a guess that when you first came in this place what you thought was 'what a beautiful church'. That's what most people say they think when they first come into this building, and I think we can assume those sentiments are genuine expressions of aesthetic appreciation rather than an automatic spasm of the politeness reflex that is responsible for the 'nice service vicar' platitude. And I think we can also assume that when people make those sort of comments they're not subscribers to the 'the church is people not a building' school of thought. We of course know that by far the most beautiful thing about St Mary's is the people who come here; I suspect, alas, almost every time someone steps in here and exclaims 'what a beautiful church' that's not what they have in mind. Apart from me of course.

Well yes, it is a beautiful building, for a given definition of beauty, a sort of Victorian-pretty reimagining of decorative mediaeval if-it's-not-moving-paint-it type of beauty. It is, on those terms a very beautiful building you are sat snoozing in right now. And like all visual beauty it's merely surface polish, skin deep, as thin as a layer of paint and possibly some varnish on top.

Don't get me wrong. A thin layer of paint with possibly a layer of varnish on top can make all the difference between a house of prayer and a soulless whitewashed barn. But if you're looking at St Mary, Beddington and just saying 'how pretty,' you're missing what is one of the most striking things about this church. There's a lot more here than meets the eye, and for all it's surface immediacy, this place is not a chocolate box: deep down, this is a very strange place indeed.

One of the main ways that this church is strange is that it is bursting at the seams, stuffed to the gunnels with angels. You can't move for the heavenly things. I've not yet tried to count them all but it must be getting a bit no-minueting-please-line-dancing-

only crowded on the head of that pin. There are far more pictures, paintings, carvings and stained glass windows of angels in here than there are Jesuses, Marys and saints put together. Pretty much everywhere you look someone's picked up a pot of paint and daubed an angel on it.

There's angels banging drums, angels playing the organ, angels plucking lutes and angels blowing trumpets. Salted away in the choir there's one that is apparently playing a nose flute. There are angels announcing and accompanying, opening scrolls and the brandishing lilies. There are a couple of wearing Liberty print frocks, and even an archangel- no less- sporting a seafood cloak, Crichton's hands (you've had to have watched Red Dwarf to appreciate that) and a haggis on a stick. Somewhat unusually for beings usually depicted as androgynous, this church also has a stained glass angel sporting a beard.

A couple of times at least you can spot a member of the heavenly host dispatching a dragon to its fiery grave; in the church centre there's a less ambitious version as one is pictured apparently trying to catch flies with a pair of plates. If you're not up on your angelology you might think there are some cherubs practising their circus skills unicycling in the east window and- to at least one of you- there's even an angel who seems to have been afflicted with a bad case of intestinal wind. Manna plays havoc with the digestion. I won't tell you where that one is so as not to ruin worship for you in the future. There are angel wings spread in the Last Judgement painting but here God's messengers are less frolicsome than usual: holding the scales in which our souls will be weighed and proudly displaying the instruments of Jesus's passion. A lot of angels. And that's just for starters.

So far, you might say, so nothing much to write home about. All that's strange about the forgoing is that the description of them has been filtered through the Rector's brain. There may be a few more than usual in this place, the Victorians may have gone a touch overboard on the wings and halos at St Mary's but lots of churches have

angels. What's so strange about that? Well it's not the having them that's odd: it's the things themselves that are.

Angels are really, seriously, strange. You'd never believe it after a thousand years of Christian art. In less than a millenium, we've successfully managed to thoroughly domesticate the angel. The popular conception of the creatures is that an angel is a very pretty, very nice-nicey being; a sort of holy fairy; Tinkerbell from Peter Pan just a little bit more grown-up and a little more serious.

Thoroughly domesticated and massively wide of the mark. Listen to this description of cherubim from the book of Ezekiel:

*Each [cherub] had four faces, and each of them had four wings. Their legs were straight, and the soles of their feet were like the sole of a calf's foot; and they sparkled like burnished bronze. Under their wings on their four sides they had human hands... As for the appearance of their faces: the four had the face of a human being, the face of a lion on the right side, the face of an ox on the left side, and the face of an eagle.*

Bear that in mind next time you hear a child called a 'little cherub'.

According to Isaiah, seraphs have six wings: two to fly with, two to cover their faces and two to cover their 'feet'. Which all sounds pretty pedestrian compared with another rank of the heavenly hosts as described (again) in Ezekiel

*Their appearance was like the gleaming of beryl; and they had the same form, their construction being something like a wheel within a wheel. When they moved, they moved in any of the four directions without veering as they moved. Their rims were tall and awesome, for the rims of all four were full of eyes all around.*

And these are what are everywhere you look in this church.

Angels do feature quite a few times in the Bible story, but they're possibly not quite as central to our faith as you might imagine from looking at this church. However, they are part of it, and they *are* there, popping up- usually unexpectedly -from the beginning of the story to the end. A message here, staying a hand there, stopping a donkey elsewhere. A touch more forcefully, guarding the gate of Eden once those dodgy humans had been thrown out here, slaying the first born of the Egyptians there, wrestling with Jacob till daybreak elsewhere. Angels here, there and everywhere, working away in the background up and down the ladder; mostly cameos until the last act and then it's out with the bowls, scrolls and trumpets and they get some of the really the big parts. And what we've done... is imagined them as fat babies with wings.

Just as, over the years, we have domesticated our depictions of angels, if we are not careful, we can domesticate our faith too. For the impeccable motive of accessibility we might try to denude our worship of it of its elements of strangeness: dumb down the language, replace ancient chant with bad pop songs, go for communion with Ribena and Mother's Pride and stick the vicar in a gingham shirt and a hoodie. For the commendable sake of making a difference we might try to ignore the embarrassingly mythical and the mystical and turn our faith into an ethical code and a movement of philanthropy. With the excellent aim of growing the church we might big up on the welcoming side, building a community of friendly fellowship and a full social life. With the aim of strengthening our commitment we might try to imagine Jesus as our best friend, a pal we can talk to, someone we can invite round for a chat and a cup of tea. All good stuff- apart from the hoodies and naff choruses- and all pretty pointless if you strip out the insurmountable strangeness, that utter otherness at the core of our faith that the angels represent.

If you come into St Mary's, see at all those angels, and only see the prettiness, you're missing the point. They're not there for decoration. They're there to make an intensely serious point.

And that point, the point behind all those endless images of angels in here, is that *this* is the place where heaven touches earth; *this* is the place where humans eat the food of angels; *this* is the place where God dwells among humans. In this place Christians meet, those strange people with their feet on the ground and their eyes on heaven.

Here heaven touches earth. It's meant to be strange because from where we're standing heaven looks like a very strange place indeed. Read the book of Revelation, it sure is strange. So embrace, celebrate the strange. But remember, in the end that's an illusion, the prism of a partial perspective distorting what we see; our clouded vision bending the celestial light. It's not heaven that is strange. What is actually wholly bizarre is not what's in here, but what we consider to be real life. We truly are strangers in a strange land: and our home is in heaven. Embrace the strange, and welcome home.