

The mid-1990s was an awful time in the East African country of Rwanda. There was a massacre where extremists from the Hutu tribe killed hundreds of thousands of people from the Tutsi tribe. Well, back in the early part of the 20th century, the tension and violence in Rwanda had already started. I have some distant relatives who were involved in Christian work in Rwanda, and they told me an extraordinary story from that time.

One of the Rwanda Mission stations was caught up in the middle of the violence. Tutsis were being attacked by Hutus and a group of Tutsis took refuge on the mission hill, where a group of Christian missionaries was based. For a while, the Hutus didn't attack the mission station, out of respect for the missionaries. But they realized if they wanted to finish off this group of Tutsis, they'd have to attack.

So the Hutus armed themselves and surrounded the hill, ready to attack. At the time there were just two women missionaries in the mission station, and a handful of Tutsi men. As they realized what was happening at the bottom of the hill, these missionaries started praying. And they prayed through the night, that God would hold back the violence and destruction.

In the morning, they went out and all the Hutus had gone. At the time, they didn't know why they hadn't attacked. Later one of the missionaries asked a Hutu warrior. And he said: 'Because of all those warriors we saw defending the mission station.' Now, there'd only been a handful of Tutsis, and two missionaries, who were praying. So what had the Hutus seen? A hallucination? Well, you can imagine one person hallucinating, but that's less likely when you think all the Hutu warriors saw the same thing.

Was it angels? That's what the missionaries believed. They believed they'd experienced a miracle, God sending angels to protect them. The question is: what do we make

of a story like that? Do we accept it at face value, that God sent angels? Or is there a solution that seems less weird? In other words, can intelligent people believe in angels?

Our sermon series for this month is called *Keywords*. We're exploring keywords in the Christian faith and finding out what they say to us. And today we're looking at *angels*.

One thing's for sure. Angels are everywhere in the Bible. If there's one thing the Bible testifies to, over thousands of years, it's the presence of angels in the world.

Angels were there at the creation. An angel's set to guard the entrance to Eden with a flaming sword. An angel prevents Abraham sacrificing his son, and guides Abraham's servant to find a wife for Isaac. An angel tells Moses to free his people from Egypt, and an angel's sent to guard them in the desert. Angels bring about judgement on the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.

An angel announces the birth of Samson and tells his parents how to bring him up. The Psalms talk about angels guarding people, and angels praising God. Today's reading:

'Praise the Lord, you his angels,

you mighty ones who do his bidding, who obey his word.

Praise the Lord, all his heavenly hosts, you his servants who do his will.'

An angel announces the birth of Jesus: to Mary, and Joseph, and then the shepherds. Angels free the apostles from prison. In the Book of Revelation we see angels as warriors, fighting for God.

In our Communion prayer we say: 'therefore with *angels and archangels* and all the company of heaven'. All the main characters of the Bible, including Jesus and Paul, took it for granted that angels are real. Lots of biblical characters seem to have experienced angels first-hand. Even in our sceptical age, the worship of the church talks about them.

Now, if you have faith that doesn't mean you're naive and believe any old thing! But maybe there are more things in heaven and earth than 21st century materialism allows for.

If Abraham and Jesus and Paul believed in angels, and claimed to have experienced them first-hand, there's at least a possibility they're right and today's materialism is wrong.

But what do we mean when we say 'angels'? Fat babies with wings, like you see on old maps? What do we know about angels? Well, let me quickly go through six things you need to know about angels, from what the Bible says about them:

1) Angels are supernatural or heavenly beings created by God. In other words, creation has heavenly and earthly components. Angels are spiritual beings created to serve God, worship him and carry out his will. They're definitely not to be prayed to, or worshipped. Like us, they're part of God's diverse creation.

2) People don't 'become angels' after they die. The Christian hope is that believers who die, on the day of resurrection, will have new risen bodies, in the same way Jesus rose from the dead. People don't become angels. People and angels are separate beings created by God, each with different tasks and responsibilities.

3) Angels are mainly messengers from God. The word angel comes from a Greek word 'angelos', which means messenger. So the main role of angels in the Bible is to be God's messengers to people on earth.

4) Angels don't seem to have wings. Now that might come as a surprise. Why do I say that? Well, if you look at the times angels appear in the Bible, they appear in human form. So much so that angelic visitors are often mistaken for people.

5) There is some biblical basis for 'guardian angels'. In Matthew chapter 18, Jesus is talking about little children. He says this: 'their angels in heaven always see the face of my

Father'. Now what does he mean by 'their angels'? It's possible that Jesus means angels are in some way assigned to watch over and protect children.

6) You may have met an angel without knowing it! There's an intriguing bit in the letter to the Hebrews. Hebrews 13:2. It says this: 'Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by doing so, some people have entertained angels without knowing it'. That fits in with what we know about angels from the Bible. They can easily be mistaken for human beings.

Could it be that you or I have had an encounter with a person who somehow helped or guided you, somebody who pointed you to God or helped deepen your spiritual life? Remember, angels are messengers from God. They look like people.

So in the weeks ahead, keep your eyes and ears open. Maybe meeting an angel isn't such a remote possibility as you think!