

On Mothering Sunday the Bishop came to take our family service. He asked the children who helped him to run the Parishes. They got the answer immediately: 'Vicars'.

And who helps in this Parish?

The answer came straight back. 'Mary' .

'And who helps Mary?' he asked.

A little girl put up her hand.

'The angels' .

A wonderful answer.

Angels are rare but immensely important in the gospels. They appear at the most critical moments. An angel tells Mary that she will bear a son and call him Jesus. An angel appears to Joseph when he finds out that Mary is expecting a baby and tells him not to abandon her. And an angel appears at the empty tomb as the women go down to prepare the body properly.

And each time, the angel says, 'do not be afraid.'

'Do not be afraid'. That is the overriding message of the gospel and, in particular, of the resurrection.

When the risen Christ greets the women, what are his opening words? 'Do not be afraid.'

How easily we gloss over those words and interpret them as meaning don't be alarmed by this unexpected event. But it goes so much deeper than that.

St John wrote 'perfect love casts out fear' and in the life and death of Christ we have been shown that perfect love. The love that bears suffering, betrayal, injustice, death and yet was not defeated.

There is nothing, absolutely nothing to fear.

The incarnation, God coming into the world as a baby, an event so strange, so unexpected, so paradoxical that we should be frightened. How can the all powerful, all knowing creator make himself vulnerable? But we are told, 'do not be afraid.' We might not understand, but there is nothing to fear.

This child grows into an adult. An amazing man who is compassionate, a brilliant orator, a man who treats all people whether Roman or slave, whether rich or leper, equally; a man who never stands on dignity, but who commands authority, and – the supreme injustice – a man who is put to death. End of story.

But no. The tomb is empty, the stone rolled away. It is beyond comprehension. Beyond logic. Again we are told, 'Do not be afraid'.

God has broken into the fabric of his own creation, broken his own rules of the material world and infused it with his love.

He has drawn out all the poison, borne all the pain, but because we can't categorise this, because it doesn't fit into our narrow interpretation of the universe, we hold onto the pain, and the fear, ignoring his outstretched hands.

Fear is our enemy.

I am not talking about fear of spiders, or fear of flying, but those everyday fears that control our actions.

Fear of failure. Fear of appearing foolish. Fear of criticism. Fear of sparking off a row. Fear of a relationship going sour. Fear of being left alone. Fear of illness. Fear of dying.

These are the unspoken fears that lurk, masked behind our composed exterior. These are the fears which prevent either us trying or drive us to exhaustion and disappointment. These are the fears that cause us to hide the truth, and conceal our emotions.

And the message is 'do not be afraid'.

Christ was mocked, they spat at him, laughed at him, taunted him. He was left alone, deserted by his friends. He spoke the truth, followed his obedience to his Father in heaven and enraged the authorities. One of his disciples was so dis-enamoured of him that he betrayed him. And he was executed, branded as a criminal. If you think about the worst that might possibly happen, that's about it. Everything we might fear happened to him. But on that Easter morning there he is saying 'do not be afraid'. Because there is something greater, something that is beyond suffering, beyond death, something eternal and beautiful that overcomes fear. Perfect love.

And that love is here.

Christ promised, I am with you always.

How do we know? Because the angels tell us.

Now when the Bishop asked his question, 'angels' was not the answer he was expecting. Never ask a question of children if you want to get a very particular answer! He hoped for the answer 'everyone at church'. You. You are my helpers.

So, how does it feel to be angels?

An angel is a messenger of God's love, and we should, in that case, all of us be angels. We should be able to walk alongside others, sharing their pain, their sorrow and helping them know that Christ is with them, hands open wide, ready and waiting to hold their burden.

Christ is risen.

Outside this church people need to know this. They need to know that pain and suffering and even death do not have the final word. They need to know that all their fears can be handed over, Christ

will take them, because nothing, absolutely nothing matters except love. And although there may be many bloody battles, we have seen the end of the story, and love wins.

But the tragedy is that our fear, and indeed our shame at what has been done and sometimes is done in the name of religion, prevents us spreading this message.

First we must listen to the angels. 'Do not be afraid'. Then we will be able to help others to know that Christ is risen. There is nothing in the world to fear. Amen.