

I have never seen an angel



I have never seen an angel! At least as far as I know. But then I am not sure. What or who would I be looking for? Angels are mostly depicted as heavenly aeronautic beings, light as a feather with ethereal halos of dazzling light. But if it is possible to *entertain angels unawares* that description cannot always be right. We would hardly miss a resplendent alien walking towards us, even if she was pushing a trolley down an aisle in Tesco's.

I like to think of angels coming to us as people in the everyday situations of our lives. Recognition is a matter of feeling rather than seeing. It is not necessarily what is said which comforts or challenges us, though that may be the case in certain special circumstances. It is more a sense of '*this is different*'; a comforting warmth; a glimmer of hope; a shaft of laughter, or sometimes a splinter of censure.

Perhaps it was like that in Nazareth when the angel Gabriel came to Mary with his advent message. There were angels in town. Only one young woman recognised one, but many lives may have been touched by him

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The stranger walked through crowded streets, pausing to speak to busy vendors at their stalls but buying none of their wares. No-one took much notice at the time. Nazareth was awash with strangers. Just an hour's climb from the Esdraelon valley with its trade routes north and south and with the Jordan valley and the Roman military highway nearby too, new faces came and went every day.

This face was different. It was that which shop-keepers commented on when they chatted at their rest hour in the afternoon.

What an attractive fellow Martha commented seductively. *I can't remember what he said*, Ezra tightened his bushy eye-brows quizzically, *But he left me with a good feeling. I wonder who he was? Some official from Rome maybe!* *Never!* Martha spat out the word. *That man was kindness. No Roman has a gentle soul. I don't remember **what** he said. When he spoke I felt his look went right through me. I'm sure he knew things about me that I'd never tell you!*

While they talked and rested, the stranger continued his journey across the town towards a new dwelling on the eastern side. A steady hammering greeted him. Emerging from a clump of trees, he saw the workman on the roof.

Hello Joseph! he called as he came close. Long afterwards it occurred to Joseph to wonder how the stranger knew his name. *Can't stop*, Joseph called down. *There's rain coming up the valley. It'll be here before night. I've got to get the rest of this roof covered before then.* Almost as soon as Joseph had spoken he saw the stranger's beaming face at the top of his ladder.

I'm not a carpenter, he said. *But I can pass you tools and nails to speed the job along.* And so he did, and Joseph told Mary later how he had spent one of the happiest working hours he could remember. *I didn't even ask his name!*

They talked, as workmen do, of the weather and politics and religion, and Joseph caught the excitement of a young man confident that God was in control. He spoke with a sense of the imminence of Messiah and a whole new world about to begin.

Down on the ground again, the stranger looked up at Joseph. *Joseph*, he said, *The Messiah **is** coming. We must be ready. Obey God even when you think he's got it all wrong!*

Puzzled, Joseph watched the stranger walk away through the trees, down through the village, past Mary's house or so it seemed.

Mary looked up from her sewing thoughts with mingled pleasure and apprehension. To her, somehow, he did not seem a stranger. He closed the door. *Don't be afraid*. he said. *I'm Gabriel. I've come from God.* Then, as the whole room filled with the light of his smile, he announced, *God has chosen you!* Suddenly, Mary saw the door of heaven wide open. God's advent had begun!