

The Angel's Story Part 1

You never know what to expect. That's what someone said to me when I got this job as one of the messenger angels. You could go years without anything to do, and then you barely have a moment to smooth out your wings – you're so busy.

And that's how it's been. Mind, I have one of the best supporting roles of all. My lead angel is none other than Gabriel. The boss. The Archangel no less.

It all began with what seemed to be a routine mission to the temple. Appearing to a priest with a message that he and his wife were going to have a baby and they should call him John – he was to be a kind of forerunner of the Messiah.

Now, it's one of the great pleasures of the job to see people's reactions. Usually scared witless. No wonder Gabriel's opening line is always "Don't be afraid" – as if.... Sometimes the clients accept the message without a problem, but this priest was to have none of it. But... but... (typical priest I thought). Turns out his wife was getting on a bit in years and so surely it can't be possible....

Well, I thought Gabriel was a bit harsh when he struck the poor guy dumb and said he wouldn't be able to speak till the baby was born. But perhaps I've still got much to learn.

Job done, and I was looking forward to a few millennia of rest. But no; barely a couple of months later and we were at it again. This time to a small house – a very small house – in an insignificant place up North that I am sure isn't on the heavenly maps. Nazareth. Ever heard of it? No, nor had I.

Anyway this time the client was a young woman. But she didn't seem to be afraid when we all burst in on her – more calm – if a bit confused. Well, even I couldn't believe the message. She was to have a baby (yes, another baby message) and this one God himself (the real boss – Gabriel's boss) was to be the father. And this one was to be called Jesus – he would be the Messiah. The one to save the world.

And this Mary calmly responds to Gabriel – let it be to me as you say. As if she had no idea of the importance of the message, or its implications for her and her family and .. well the whole world. And then as we were leaving I just caught a listen to the words she sang – a song which said plainly that she HAD taken it all in. Amazing. I just wondered what her boyfriend or husband would make of it all!

Not that I had long to wonder. The next job – just a few weeks later – was to tell him. Nice guy, Joseph – a carpenter. Gabriel told him the same story and said that he was to marry Mary and bring up the child as his own. And he said he would. It made me realise that God must know which of these people are the ones he should choose to do his special jobs. All this made a change from bringing tidings of judgment and destruction – but that's another story for Gomorrah – sorry I mean tomorrow.

The Child's tale

I'm Leah and I'm 8. I'm the eldest and my Mum says I'm quite precocious (*said in a childlike way "pre-co-shus" because she doesn't really know what it means*), which means I'm nearly grown up already.

I'm not sure what I think about being grown up. I quite like being at home with Mum and Dad and my little brothers and sister. Especially as my Dad is important. He's the "head of the family" you know, and everyone looks up to him – except the smelly Romans of course, but I don't think they are important.

Anyway, I expect when I'm 10, I'll be betrothed and then soon after I'll be married, and then soon after that I'll (*stage whispers*) have a baby.

Oh. My. Life. I hope when I do, it's not like for that poor lady - my fourth cousin 20 times removed or whatever she is – Mary.

You see- it's like this. The smelly Romans have told everyone they have to go back to their family home to be registered, and so everyone from our family has come here. And when I say *here*, for most of them, that means **here**, in this house – cos my Dad's the head of the family. So there are lots and lots and lots of aunts and uncles and cousins and granddads and all that absolutely everywhere. The living area is full, the bedroom is full, the guest room is very full, the roof is very, very full, and the courtyard is packed - you can hardly move without falling over a toddler or someone's grandma. Poor Mum is rushed off her feet looking after everyone and I'm..... supposed to be helping, but the little ones can have a go for a bit cos I'm fed up.

Anyway, last night there was a knock on the gate, and when my Dad opened it, there was this man and his really, really pregnant wife and the man said "I am Joseph from Nazareth, and it is Mary's time". All dramatic like, except the poor man looked desperate rather than poetic.

And Dad looked around at the uncles on the roof and the children in the living room, and the grandmas in the guest room, and cousins in the courtyard, and then said

"Come this way"

and he led the man and his wife across the courtyard to the place where the animals live, under our living room. Imagine that- but it was the only place left where the poor lady could have some space to have the baby. He saw me and said "Fetch your mother" and I did – because when my Dad tells you to do something you do as you are told.

So Mum and some of the aunts took hot water and stuff, and then there was quite a lot of shouting – and then silence. And we all held our breath. And then the most amazing sound in the world. A newborn baby crying out for joy at being born.

And then everyone smiled, and looked at each other and smiled and hugged each other and laughed. Because the sound of New Life coming into the world is the best sound ever.

That's what I think.

The Angel's Story, part 2

Well if all this wasn't enough, we were just preparing for the midwinter holidays, you know – time off with the family, parties, celebrations when suddenly a note came round saying all leave was cancelled. There was a special mission which all angels would be involved in. A sung proclamation.

Now these are rare. And they are for kings and princesses and really important people. Plush palaces, magnificent mansions – you know the type of thing.

So we set off, and Gabriel shouted we're here. I looked around. Dark, cold, a hillside, shepherds!! Yes shepherds. Surely this couldn't be right.

But apparently it was. And we sang "Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth"

And the message to these nobodies was that this Messiah (you know the Jesus I told you about) had been born and that these shepherds should go and worship him – not in a palace or anything. They would find him lying in a feeding trough where the animals are kept in an ordinary house.

Sometimes I just don't understand what this God is all about. It just doesn't make sense.

The shepherd's story

It was my first night on the hillside. I was learning how to be a shepherd. It's what my Dad did, and his dad before him.

I had looked after the sheep in the daytime, making sure they were all safe and fed. But night time is a different matter. There are mountain lions and wolves around. Need to keep our eyes open at all times. And it was dangerous work.

But my Mum said to me as I left home to meet Dad on the hill. "Remember, the sheep are the important things. You are just a boy. Don't get in the way. Do as you're told." I've heard it all before. Basically "you are just a nobody. Being a shepherd would be bad enough, but being a boy helping the shepherds – the lowest of the low!"

Well, it was cold, and the night seemed to be going on for ever. Lots of strange noises. Lots of bawdy stories. (that I wasn't supposed to listen to)

It must be dawn soon, I thought as I tried to wiggle my toes to see if they were still attached to my feet.

And then suddenly it was like daytime; but brighter. I didn't think dawn would be like this. But then there were screams from the older shepherds. There was a feeling of absolute terror from these hardy men who had a second ago been laughing and joking.

Something wasn't normal.

And then we looked up and the sky seemed to be full of angels. Praising God; singing; the most beautiful sound ever.

I pinched myself. No, I was awake. This must be happening.

And then the chief angel spoke. To us. To shepherds. To me.

The saviour has been born and you are to go and worship him in Bethlehem. You'll find him in a feeding trough with the animals.

And then it went quiet; and dark; and seemed to be so cold again.

We all looked at each other' no one asked whether we should go; no one thought about the safety of the sheep; no one had any doubts. We set off to Bethlehem to find this child.

And we found him. Just as the angel had said. Lying in a feeding trough. His mother and father looking on – somewhat surprised at us bursting in.

We tried to explain what had happened but the words didn't seem to flow.

I looked at the baby. He looked right into my eyes – me – just a nobody of a shepherd boy. He smiled and then laughed. Surely this was the most beautiful sound I had ever heard – even more beautiful than the angels' song.

Joseph's tale

It's all about love. I love her, you see – Mary. Always have, probably since the first moment I saw her, though when you grow up in the same village you don't really know when you first met someone.

But for me, there was always something special about Mary. On the face of it, she was everything a young Jewish girl should be, but my goodness, when she made up her mind to do something, you knew that she would stick to it through thick and thin. And I admired that in her. The other blokes said she was trouble, but I felt as if I was the luckiest man in the world when it was arranged that we should be married.

And then – then, there was that awful business of finding that she was pregnant. You know, she never told me exactly what happened, just that she knew she had been chosen to bear God's Son, the Messiah, the one who is going to save us all. And that because God had chosen her, an ordinary, village girl, it showed that God is on the side of the poor and the weak and the oppressed.

Part of me would like to know, and I sense that one day she will tell someone and that maybe it will even be written down, but I'm not sure whether I will still be around then. I'm older than Mary, and the years lie heavily on me.

But I think it will happen. Just like I woke one morning and was sure that, however unlikely it was, Mary's story was true. I was so proud of her in that moment. Imagine having the courage and determination to say "yes" to all that shame. I couldn't leave her to bear that on her own. What sort of love runs away when things get tough?

I won't pretend the next few years weren't hard. Getting to Bethlehem for the census was a nightmare – I had visions of the baby being born in a ditch on the way, but by a miracle we made it, and I even managed to find a distant relative who squeezed us into his house – even if it was in the basement, with the animals. Still, the manger made a good crib. And then things really did get a bit mad – shepherds, prophecies in the Temple, the star-watchers from way out East, and then having to get out sharpish before Herod's murderous henchman arrived. And Mary – so calm all through it. And so we'd just keep on, day by day, one step at a time. Together. "It's all about love", she would say.

So, the weeks turned into months turned into years. Before long, more children came and we settled down into being a normal family. Jesus was so much like the other children – sometimes very loud, sometimes very smelly, always very hungry – that occasionally I wondered if he was – well – just like any other child. But, then again, he was – and he wasn't. That boy has always had wisdom beyond his years and a real "sense of things" if you know what I mean. As soon as he was old enough he was helping me in the workshop, and he would pick up a piece of wood as if it was his friend, and he could see what it was meant to be shaped into.

And then, just as he was coming of age, we all went up to Jerusalem for the Passover, and we had that big to-do about him staying in the Temple with the teachers. They were amazed at what they called his “insight”. It wasn’t long after this that I went into the workshop one evening and found Jesus looking at a shadow on the wall. The light had caught two pieces of wood and there, projected on the far wall, was the image of what looked exactly like a Roman cross. A vile sight. I rushed in to move the timber, and he turned to me and his eyes were full of tears. “It’s all about love,” he said, then carried on calmly brushing the floor. I threw the sticks into the corner in frustration against the Roman oppressors.

So the years passed. Up to today. I was in the workshop again. All the boys are trained up now, and we have a good little business going, though I say so myself. I’ve taught them all I know, and I’ll be handing it over to them soon enough.

Jesus came in, dressed for a journey.

“Pa,” he said. He’s always called me Pa.

“Pa, it’s time. I have to go.” For a moment, I was completely taken aback. Go? What did he mean – go?

And then suddenly I realised that I wasn’t surprised at all. That in fact, from the moment Mary had told me about her pregnancy, I had known that this moment would come.

He looked at me – concerned. We’ve always had a very close relationship, me and Jesus. Almost closer than if I had actually been his father.

And when I looked back into his eyes I felt I saw something which had always been there, but which I had never noticed before. A depth which was completely incomprehensible, yet which drew me in, and held me, and filled me with hope and joy.

“Is there no other way?” I asked.

In his determination, he looked just like his mother, and I knew what I was saying was pointless. He shook his head almost imperceptibly; looked round, picked up a couple of bits of wood to use as walking sticks, and left.

“It’s all about love, Pa,” he said as he went. “It’s all about love.”

It was only after he had gone that I realised which pieces of wood he had taken. Years ago, they had cast a shadow on the wall.

