

Over one hundred years ago near Antarctica, Ernest Shackleton and two colleagues reached Stromness, a whaling station on the north coast of South Georgia. They had been walking for 36 hours, in life-threatening conditions, in an attempt to reach help for the rest of their party: three of their crew were stuck on the south side of the island, with the remainder stranded on Elephant Island.

To reach the whaling station, the three men had to cross the island's mountainous interior with just a rope and an axe, in a journey that few had attempted before or since. By reaching Stromness they managed to save all the men left from the ill-fated Transantarctic Expedition.

They didn't talk about it at the time, but weeks later all three men reported an uncanny experience during their trek: a feeling that 'often there were four, not three' men on their journey. The "fourth" that accompanied them had the silent presence of a real person, someone walking with them by their side, as far as the whaling station but no further.

Shackleton was apparently deeply affected by the experience, but would say little about it in subsequent years, considering it something 'which can never be spoken of'. Encounters such as these are common in extreme survival situations: guardian angels, guides, or even Christ-like figures have often been reported. We know them now as 'third man' experiences, following a line in TS Eliot's poem, *The Wasteland*: 'Who is the third who walks always beside you? When I count, there are only you and I together. But when I look ahead up the white road, there is always another one walking beside you'.

Today we celebrate three prominent angels: Michael, Gabriel and Raphael – these three biblically named angels – are depicted as the beloved messengers of God. Michael (which means 'who is like God?') is perhaps best known for his victory over the dragon, which is told in the Revelation to St John, and often regarded as the protector of Christians from the devil, especially those at the hour of death.

Gabriel (which means 'the strength of God') is the one who in St Luke's Gospel is sent by God to Mary to announce the birth of Christ. Raphael (which means 'the healing of God') is the one in the Book of Tobit who restores sight to Tobit's eyes.

From the Old Testament account of Jacob's wrestling's all the way through to the 'conscious communion' sought in John Henry Newman's *Dream of Gerontius*, humanity has not only been perplexed by the existence of angels, but even more perplexed by whether communication with them is either possible or desirable.

It was G.K. Chesterton who once said: 'Angels can fly because they take themselves lightly', while presumably, devils and demons fell from grace, because of the weight of their pride, and greed and anger. Perhaps the most important task of the guardian angel is to help lead each one of us to the passion of Christ and to his cross. We know this is spiritually important, because it's only through embracing the cross that we find our way to heaven.

So what does a guardian angel do? Perhaps it's easiest to explain that angels do this by pricking our conscience so that we are able, when we're pointed in the right way, to recognise and follow the will of God.

Angels encourage us to be thankful for what we've got, and encourage us to see small acts of mercy and kindness as reflections of our living God. Perhaps a guardian angel works particularly through our imagination and memory, drawing us closer to the divine presence, and opening our eyes to his glory.

A few years back I remember Archbishop Rowan Williams talking about a spiritual teacher from the early church who said that there are three ways of seeing things: a diabolical way, an angelic way, and a human way. The diabolical way, he explained, is to see everything in terms of oneself and the angelic way is to see everything in terms of one's relationship with God.

We're all quite capable of seeing the world in relation to God but often insist on seeing it with ourselves at the centre. What we really need to do, is move away from the diabolical way and align ourselves with the angelic way to look at the world and see it alive with God.

Here, there's an obvious temptation to see angels rather like saints: but there's a great difference between an angel and a saint. This is because we see God in the saints, because we know who the saints are, what saints do, and how God's purposes are revealed through them.

Angels are not so easily defined. But perhaps angels remind us, not so much about being separated from reality, but about our connection and purpose. They are messengers, signposts, to help us each in our vocation - to become all that God intends us to be in Christ.

How often have we said to someone who has helped us 'you are an angel!' We're so grateful and pleased when someone puts themselves out for us, and really helped. Angels, I believe, do such things in gentle and unobtrusive ways.

All through the Bible, angels are shown to reveal messages from God, and part of the glory of who we are is that we too are called to share God's message of love and salvation to those around us. When we share our faith with others wonderful things can happen. The distance between heaven and earth blurs, and God is revealed to us. 'Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man'. The gate of heaven is everywhere.

By being who we are and by being faithful to Christ, by holding Christ's beauty in the world, by seeing everything in terms of our relationship with God, we bring closer that divide between earth and heaven.

Just like Ernest Shackleton and his two colleagues in South Georgia, we are not alone on our journey. The holy angels help us to see that heaven and earth do meet, that God is not inaccessible, that he came down in Christ and even now is pulling us up out of darkness.

We are the Church here on earth, and our message of faith is a message that the angels delight in and rejoice in hearing. Amen.

Fr Robert Newton