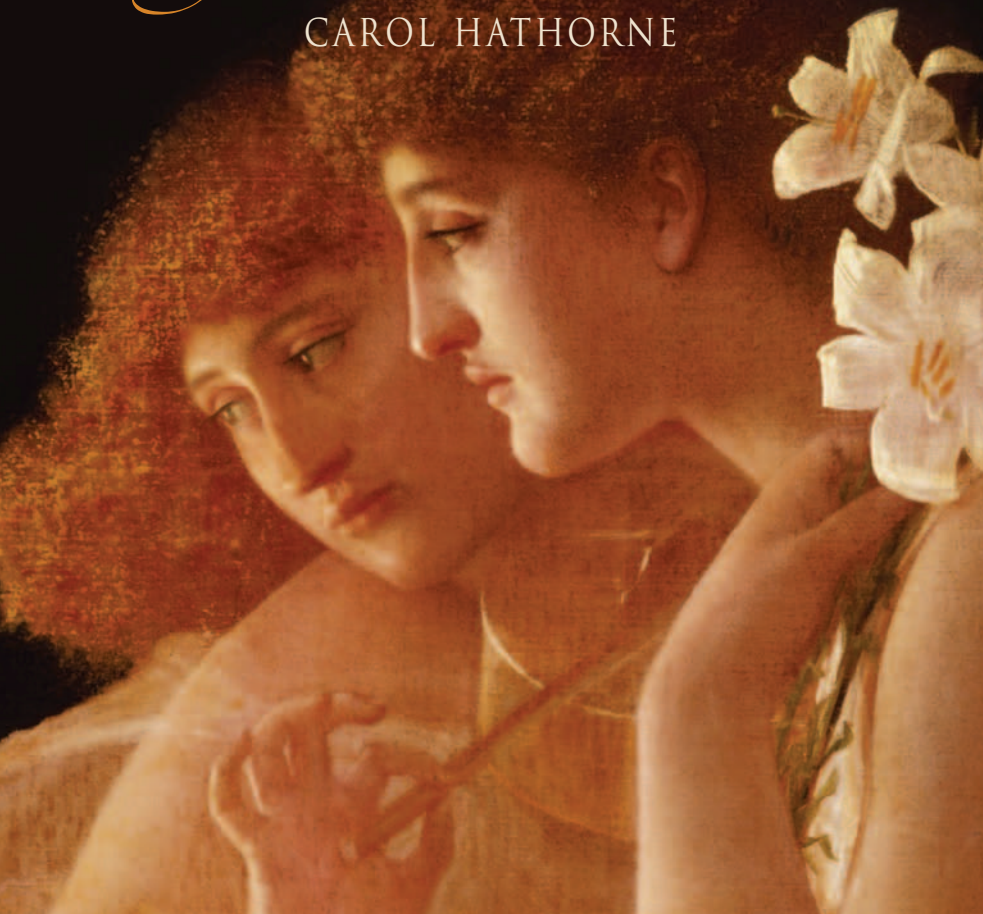


ASSIST OUR SONG

Angels then and now

CAROL HATHORNE



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INTRODUCTION

We knocked the man down on Boxing Day 1999—a cold and eerily dark evening that will stay with me for ever. My husband and I drove home along the main road from Oswestry to Nescliffe in the kind of rain that makes you shiver inside your clothes.

It had been good to spend the day with my brother and his grown-up family in Chirk, north Wales. It was a welcome chance to recharge our batteries after all the Christmas services we'd taken as a clergy couple. Evening crib services, midnight mass and early Christmas morning eucharists had all merged into one celebration as we exchanged hugs and presents with the family. Visiting Dave and Joan and their sons and three grandchildren had become a precious Boxing Day tradition and a God-given gift that we looked forward to during our busiest time in church. But now, it was 9pm on a truly filthy night and we would be so glad to get back to Cannock, Staffordshire, and the vicarage.

'Jesus!' It wasn't a blasphemy. The name came out of both of us in a simultaneous prayer as, out of nowhere, a tall, shambling figure in black appeared in our path on the road. It was a figure in a hood, walking away, filling the rain-lashed windscreen. There was no way Mark could avoid hitting him. It all happened in a split second: the looming figure, the thud of the impact, the windscreen on my side of the car shattering into a weird black spider's web before my eyes.

As the car stopped about 50 yards further on, Mark switched on the hazard lights. Then he jumped out and ran back to the scene. I hurriedly followed, aware of the cars zooming by on the dark road, and then of Mark flagging them down, calling out about finding someone with a mobile phone, still a fairly rare occurrence in those days.

The man was lying by the side of the road, a big, stationary

hump. Already, miraculously, people were around him, trying to help, even though the road had seemed empty only moments before.

'Is he... dead?' I couldn't bear to look. It hadn't been our fault: he was in black clothes and had been walking in the middle of a main road, his back turned to the oncoming traffic. And yet, we might have killed him.

'No. He's been talking.' Mark put out his hand to me as more help arrived from passing cars. One tall man was an army paramedic; another said he was a fireman. Even in the midst of the trauma, those mere facts seemed so fortuitous that I gulped.

A young woman who had been first at the scene also had a mobile phone and had called the emergency services. The ambulance and police were on their way. Everything had simply been taken out of our hands, exactly how and when we needed it to be.

Through it all, the man we had knocked down lay in the gutter, covered with coats. He began to struggle, trying to sit up, and I saw that he was about 40 years old. His hood was down now, and his dark, curly hair was plastered to his head by the rain. He was confused and abusive, refusing to let anyone touch him, growling and lashing out, and it soon became clear that he was very drunk.

The rescue services arrived together, and soon there were flashing lights and policemen in fluorescent yellow coats, putting out cones and redirecting traffic around us. We told an officer what had happened and he came to look at our car before taking Mark into his panda car to make a statement. A message he sent via his radio quickly confirmed that the car we were driving hadn't been stolen. To think we might be suspected of being car thieves was sobering, to say the least, and for a split second it was as if we had been catapulted into a scary and unrecognizable world.

I was asked to wait in the car while Mark was interviewed and, as a matter of procedure, breathalysed. I didn't know what was happening to the man, but another ambulance arrived, and all I could do was to sit there behind the shattered windscreen, praying that he was going to be all right.

The eeriness of the night was intensified by my isolation and lingering sense of disbelief and horror. I kept reliving the moment the hooded figure had loomed into sight, and I wished I could be with Mark in the panda car, if only to hear what was being said. I knew Mark had had only one glass of wine, hours before, at lunchtime, so he was in no danger of being alcohol positive. But the time passed really slowly, and it was so surreal, being in the middle of flashing lights, seeing the police, glimpsing curious dark figures in the cars going by, watching heads turn in that almost hypnotic fascination that people seem to have when passing a road accident.

And yet, in the very strangeness of the situation, I felt around me a sense of presence almost impossible to put into words. The need to pray was very great and I sensed that I wasn't praying either alone or in vain. Someone or something was there—unseen, indescribable, but definitely present. And that someone or something was whispering that, impossible though it seemed, this ordeal would pass, for all concerned.

Eventually, the police officer came back with Mark, and another arrived on his heels. He told us that the man we had knocked down had refused to get into either of the two ambulances and had been taken home by the police. We were free to go, and there were no charges to answer.

With the broken windscreen letting the rain and darkness in, it was a long, cold journey back to Cannock. Mark was afraid to put the windscreen wipers on in case the whole thing collapsed on us, so we travelled very much in a spirit of trust, both unusually quiet and subdued. It was with a sigh of relief that we arrived home over an hour later. The rain had stopped, but the night was still heavy with gloom as we turned down the side of St Chad's church and up to the darkened vicarage.

In the study, the telephone was ringing, and Mark hurried to answer it while I went through putting on lights and drawing curtains. 'That was the police,' he said as he followed me into the living-room a few moments later. 'Apparently, the chap insisted they drop him outside his house, and then he walked up the path and

went inside! I'll check again over the next few days to see if they hear any more. But they're saying at the police station that there must be somebody looking after him!

'Us, too!' I shivered as I went to switch on the gas fire, reliving the surreal and frightening events of the evening, and the feeling, still hard to put into words, that we hadn't endured it on our own.

I thought of the helpers who had come out of an empty road with just the right skills and qualifications—and the sensation of company that I'd had while sitting praying in the car when our worst nightmares had seemed so close and real. It was exactly as if we, and the man who had stumbled drunkenly into the path of our moving car, had been under some form of protection, I pondered.

Then my eyes went to the coffee table, and the book, so far unread, that our grown-up daughter had given us, the day before, on Christmas Day: *Angels to Watch Over Me*.



ANGELS THEN AND NOW

This book is about angels—what and who they are, and the place they have in the scriptures. It is about the role of angels as they seem to be used by God as divine messengers and guardians in the lives of great Old Testament characters like Abraham and Jacob, Daniel and Elisha. It is about angels ministering to the early followers of Jesus, whose zeal for the gospel landed them in prison and in danger. Angels also appear as travelling companions, like the one who stood with Paul in the midst of a terrific storm at sea, and they carry home safely the servants of God who have finished their earthly life and long to see him face to face, like the first Christian martyr, Stephen.

In God's heavenly kingdom, the new Jerusalem, myriad angels are described as bowing down, day and night, ceaselessly worshipping him who is both holy and worthy (Revelation 4—5). The Bible says that angels also play an important part in carrying out God's final judgment, when, according to Jesus, the 'sheep' will be separated from the 'goats' (Matthew 25:31–33).

This book is also about people—not only the amazing multifarious cast of biblical characters, and a few taken from history and other works about angels, but ordinary men and women just like you and me, who are willing to testify to the existence of angels in their lives today. Some of their stories are similar to our Boxing Day road accident in that there was just a strong sense that 'someone' was taking care of them, while others report coming into contact with a being whose message, spoken or unspoken, changed their lives. This being may have looked like a human stranger, or have possessed the traditional heavenly attribute of wings, or have

been identified only by extraordinary light, or gentle voices speaking or singing.

For others, an angel has been an unknown and unidentifiable comforting presence during an illness or after an operation. There are also some who believe that their most traumatic journeys have been shared by a special companion, sent specifically by God to make sure they reached their destination in safety.

Angels have also been glimpsed in worship, in sometimes quite unremarkable church buildings, inspiring a lifetime's wonder, or even in works of art. In a few cases, they have appeared to give a warning or to halt a catastrophe in a person's everyday life.

But what exactly are angels and what do we know about them?

First, the Bible says that, just like people, angels were made by God—they are part of his teeming creation—but they have greater power and knowledge than we do, and are certainly much more mobile. In the Bible, and in current personal experience, angels seem to appear within an instant, and the distance between heaven and earth is nothing to them.

The existence of angels is accepted by all three of the great Western religions, and they appear not only in the Bible but also in the Jewish Talmud and the Islamic Qur'an. The biblical tradition, further developed by the Church Fathers, is that angels are created, spiritual beings who assist God and make up the court of heaven (see Psalm 8:5; Job 1:6; 38:7) According to the book of Revelation, some of the angels got above themselves and wished to rule like God, and so there was a terrible war in heaven (Revelation 12:7). A fallen angel—Satan, also known as Lucifer—headed the rebellion, but was defeated, and roams the world to this day, intent upon tempting and possessing as his own the children of God.

Belief in angels was declared a dogma of the Church at the Council of Nicea in 325, but a later synod condemned the worship of angels—something also discouraged by scripture: 'Do not let anyone disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels, dwelling on visions, puffed up without cause by a human way of thinking' (Colossians 2:18).

According to the Qur'an, when human beings were created by God, the angels were required to bow down and worship them—an order that prompted Lucifer's rebellion. The prophet Muhammad also saw a beautiful vision of the angel Jabrail (Gabriel), who promised to guide him in his role as a newly chosen prophet.

The Greek philosopher Socrates believed in guardian angels, and many famous saints, including Francis of Assisi and Columba, also claimed to have seen them. Joan of Arc (1412–31) first heard the voice of an angel at the age of 13. She demanded an audience with Charles the Dauphin, heir to the French throne, telling him that she had a message from God. She led the Dauphin's army to victory, and at his coronation ceremony over 300 people were said to have seen an angel in their midst. In the 16th century, the Carmelite nun Teresa of Avila experienced visions and visitations from angels, which led to her famous writings, *The Way of Perfection*. Former American president Abraham Lincoln also frequently felt the presence of angels, as did General William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army.

Angels appear in the writings of Shakespeare, Milton and Dante, as well as in the works of contemporary writers. It is, in fact, quite amazing to glance along a few shelves in a public library and note just how many books of all genres have the word 'angel' in their title.

There are nearly 300 references to angels in the Bible, 108 in the Old Testament and 165 in the much shorter New Testament. These spiritual beings are recorded as being used by God as messengers (the word for 'angel' actually means 'messenger' in both Greek and Hebrew). The angel Gabriel brings the news to Mary that she has been chosen to be the mother of our Lord, the shepherds are told by angels that Jesus has been born, and angels famously pass on the wonderful message of the resurrection.

According to the scriptures, angels are also employed by God to be the guardians of human beings: 'He will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways,' says Psalm 91:11. And in Matthew 18:10, Jesus warns solemnly against harming little

ones, because they have angels—angels who always behold the face of ‘my father in heaven’.

The traditional Catholic belief in a personal guardian angel is a very comforting thought, and Mary, mother of Jesus, is believed to have been born with many such angels to guide and protect her. In spite of all his sufferings, the Old Testament prophet Job speaks of angels (Job 4:18), and God speaks to Job about them when he reminds him of his own human insignificance, in Job 38:4–7:

*Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?
Tell me, if you have understanding,
Who determined its measurements—surely you know!
Or who stretched the line upon it?
On what were its bases sunk,
or who laid its cornerstone
when the morning stars sang together
and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?*

In the Psalms we read of angels comforting God’s people and delivering them from all kinds of trouble and danger: ‘The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him, and delivers them’ (Psalm 34:7), while in the New Testament book of Acts, angels are recorded as ministering to the Lord’s people at least six times.

Traditionally, angels have also been associated with travel: their emblems can be seen on the prows of old ships. It is interesting, therefore, that angels as travelling companions are featured in both the Old and New Testament, as well as the Apocrypha.

In the book of Genesis, the patriarch Abraham sends off the eldest of his servants on a mission to find a wife for his precious son Isaac, from among his relatives in the land from which God called him. Reassuringly, Abraham tells the servant, ‘He will send his angel before you; you shall take a wife for my son from there’ (Genesis 24:7). Moses also knew the companionship of angels. In his call to return to Egypt, the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a burning bush (Exodus 3:2), and angel travelled in front of

Israel's army at the crossing of the Red Sea (Exodus 14:19).

In the New Testament book of Colossians, Paul reminds us that all things were created by God, and all things existed through the supremacy of Jesus Christ: 'things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him' (Colossians 1:16).

It is said that the complex grouping of angels into ranks or 'hosts' is at least partly derived from the 'things invisible' in Colossians. The 13th-century theologian Thomas Aquinas described separate entities of angels, and placed them in three hierarchies, each having three categories. The highest are seraphim, cherubim and thrones; the middle rank are dominions, virtues and powers; and finally come principalities, archangels and angels.

Seraphim are described vividly in Isaiah 6, when the prophet had a vision of God in heaven. This is the only place in the Bible where seraphim or seraphs are mentioned specifically.

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said: 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.'

The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said: 'Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!'

Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: 'Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.' Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I; send me!'

ISAIAH 6:1–8

‘Seraphim’ means ‘burning ones’, from the Hebrew word *saraph*, to burn. These six-winged beings are positioned above God’s throne and their whole purpose seems to be to praise his glory and holiness, though one of them has been chosen here by God to carry the burning coal to touch Isaiah’s lips and so empower him to answer the call to be a prophet.

Cherubim, when referred to as ‘cherubs’, have become synonymous with those cute baby angels that we sometimes see on Christmas cards, but in the Bible cherubim are altogether much more muscular and scary! It was cherubim who were placed by God on the east side of the garden of Eden, together with a flaming sword, after Adam and Eve had been driven out of their paradise (Genesis 3:24). King David sang the praises of the Lord, thanking him for delivering him from the hands of his enemies, and describing how ‘he rode on a cherub, and flew; he came swiftly upon the wings of the wind’ (Psalm 18:10).

The prophet Ezekiel had many strange visions. While living in exile in Babylon, he prophesied the destruction of Jerusalem. Ezekiel saw ‘the glory of the Lord’ and, in the midst of lightning and fire and brilliant light, ‘something like four living creatures’ (Ezekiel 1:5). Each of the four creatures had two wings outstretched, and another two wings covering the body. They moved speedily in any one of four directions, with the aid of wheels, and when the prophet saw the likeness that they worshipped, he fell face down.

Later in Ezekiel, these living creatures are called cherubim, and are described as being full of eyes and surrounded by wheels within wheels. In Ezekiel 9:3, the Lord has descended from his throne above the cherubim to the threshold of the temple, while in 10:1 he returns to take his seat above them. God’s glory is to be withdrawn from Jerusalem, and the fluttering of the cherubim’s many wings indicates this important event.

Images of cherubim are described as being fashioned in wood and gold elsewhere in the Bible. For example, these images stood as a guard to the precious ark of the covenant, which contained

the tablets of stone inscribed with the Ten Commandments that God gave to Moses (Exodus 37:6–9), and eventually stood in the temple built by Solomon (1 Kings 6:23–28).

Other categories of angels do not seem so obviously present in the pages of scripture as do seraphim, cherubim, angels and archangels. According to medieval scholastic theologians, thrones and dominions are said to ‘regulate angels’ duties’, while virtues work miracles on earth and powers protect us from demons. The role of principalities, archangels and angels is to be guardians and to minister to people.

The Bible does tell us that angels can be with us in a split second. They appear as ‘men in white’ (Acts 1:10), or as unexpected visitors bringing strange messages (Genesis 18:1–10); they hold swords (Numbers 22:23); they can open the doors of a jail (Acts 5:19) and shut the mouths of lions (Daniel 6:22). They also fly high in the air (Revelation 14:6) and stand on the sea (Revelation 10:5), and they fed Jesus in the wilderness (Matthew 4:11).

The angel Gabriel and the archangel Michael are the only angels actually named in the Bible. Gabriel’s name, in Hebrew, means ‘God’s hero’ or ‘the mighty one’. He is seen very much as God’s messenger, and the messages he brings are always good, if sometimes startling, news! It was Gabriel who appeared to Daniel to explain the meaning of a vision (Daniel 9:21), to Zechariah to tell him his wife Elizabeth would have a son (Luke 1:19), and to Mary to bring her the amazing news that she would be the mother of Jesus (Luke 1:26).

Michael, the only designated archangel, is named in Jude 9, in Daniel 10:21, and also in Revelation 12:7: ‘And war broke out in heaven; Michael and his angels fought against the dragon.’ In the Old Testament, Michael seems to be used by God as a messenger of law and judgment especially in relation to God’s people, Israel. His role throughout is one of battle against Satan, and his festival in the church calendar, 29 September, is significantly and deferentially known as ‘St Michael and All Angels’.

Common to all angels are symbolic attributes of light, flight and heavenly beauty, and many are described as being clad in shining

white robes, although some, like Daniel's 'man', are more strange and terrible to behold (Daniel 10:5–6).

Before the advent of science, angels were thought to be responsible for moving the stars and the elements, and for the phenomenon of gravity. During the Middle Ages, people believed in angels simply because they believed in God, and this was the time when many great works of art were created in which 'the bright birds of God', as Dante described them, were dramatically featured. Some angelic paintings show angels with all-seeing eyes in their wings or in the centre of their graceful hands, while others have peacock-feather plumage to symbolize the countless eyes of seraphim.

Over the centuries, certain other artistic traditions developed in the depiction of angels, many of them derived from scriptural descriptions. Gabriel carries a lily or a staff at the annunciation, or a trumpet at the last judgment. Michael wields a sword in battle against the forces of evil, and at the last judgment is depicted as carrying a pair of scales for balancing the souls of the dead. In Tintoretto's famous painting, *The Last Supper* (1594), there are several winged angels adding to the confusion of the scene as Jesus feeds his disciples on the night of his betrayal. Much later, the mystic William Blake (1757–1827) painted *Christ in the Sepulchre Guarded by Angels*, with two huge, hovering white figures, their wings joined in a kind of cradle over the still-sleeping Jesus.

In Victorian churchyards, like in our own present parish of Short Heath, Willenhall, there are several large stone angels, their grey wings outspread somewhat eerily as they point us back to a different age. Once magnificent, they are now neglected, guarding family graves that no longer have people to visit or tend them. They remind us that our great-grandparents had a particular attitude to death, and to mourning, giving these aspects of life a central place in their society.

Nowadays, plastic windmills, photographs and even soft toys have taken the place of graveside angels, but there is no less interest among the general public in these celestial beings. To enter the word

'angel' in an internet search engine is to discover some 364,000 sites in the UK and Ireland alone. Go into any gift shop, and you will find angels for everything, on pins and pictures, ornaments, clothing and statuettes. There are angels for aunties, angels for drivers, angels for just about every person and every occasion on the planet. Some people—obviously a lot of people—are laughing as they wing their way to the nearest bank!

But do angels really exist? Does God still send messengers and guardians to guide and protect us through our life on earth? Are there still heavenly presences hovering, ready to be instantly at hand when we need comfort or consolation? And when we travel, is there someone unseen always travelling with us, just waiting to be summoned by prayer, right up until the last journey we ever make—the journey from this earth and through the gates of heaven? In the words of the Victorian writer Samuel Butler, 'All reason is against it, and all healthy instinct is for it.'

The sceptic's view, of course, would be that to believe in such things is totally crazy. No one in their right mind would consider even for a moment that angels really exist, especially in our technological 21st century. But Paul says that our Christian faith is foolishness to the 'wise' of the world (1 Corinthians 1:18–24), and Jesus himself has told us that we should be prepared to believe in the pure and lovely way of children: 'Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it' (Mark 10:15). Meanwhile, there are thousands of people all over the world who believe that they have seen and sometimes talked with angels. A recent ITV poll states that one in three British people believes in angels, while a US Gallup poll suggests that more than 60 per cent of Americans also believe wholeheartedly in them.

Book after book has been written about angelic experiences, and some of the stories are truly wonderful and inspirational, especially when they point us directly back to God as the source of both the wonder and the inspiration. Many of the encounters described in these books are uncannily similar to one another. Complete

strangers give information that changes people's lives. Silent combatants stand guard over a potential victim until a potential mugger or rapist gets 'cold feet'. Unforgettable doctors and nurses appear at bedsides at the most critical times, and are then not owned by hospital staff or authorities. There are also characters who appear out of nowhere when a journey is to be made, or give directions without being asked, and there are travelling-companion angels who, many people swear, come to collect us when our life on earth is done, taking us with them to a heaven where there will be worship, and also judgment.

As a priest serving in Black Country parishes of the West Midlands over the past 14 years, I also have been privileged to meet face to face many people who claim that their lives have been touched and transformed by angels. Although I myself cannot claim to have seen an angel, there was one night, many years ago, when I definitely heard them singing; and there have been certain times in my own ministry when I have known that God's angels were very near.

The truth is that it is all a mystery, but one thing I do know for certain is that *Assist Our Song* is a book that God definitely wanted me to write. Ever since I began to think about the project, there have been 'holy coincidences': angels in every magazine and newspaper, and in Sunday morning readings from the Bible, which have changed my preaching topic. I wasn't at all surprised that the contract arrived from the publishers on 29 September, when the Church celebrates Michael and All Angels.

The day I started writing the book, both of my daily devotional passages were about angels, and a funeral booked next day in church included a special song: 'Goodnight, my angel' by Billy Joel. In the evening, for a little light relief, I rang my friend. 'You just caught me,' she said, unknowingly. 'I've been busy all afternoon—cutting out angels for next week's Sunday school!'

Everlasting God, you have ordained and constituted the ministries of angels and mortals in a wonderful order: grant that as your holy angels

always serve you in heaven, so, at your command, they may help and defend us on earth; through Jesus Christ you Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

COLLECT FOR 29 SEPTEMBER, MICHAEL AND ALL ANGELS¹

ASSIST OUR SONG

Angels then and now

'A brilliantly written look at what the Bible says about angels, brought right up to date with fascinating stories of recent angelic encounters. Not only an inspiring Bible study but also a grippingly good read!'

JENNIFER REES LARCOMBE

Interest in angels has always been strong, even among those with no religious faith. From stories of mysterious encounters with helpful strangers to fascination with the idea of guardian angels, people are attracted to the ideas of divine intervention and protection.

In this absorbing book Carol Hathorne looks at what the Bible has to say about angels and also shares a host of stories of 'angelic experiences', many of which she has personally gathered in the course of her ministry in a local church. Who are angels and what do they do? In what ways can they help us as Christians? Are they always shining beings with wings—or can ordinary people in some way be angels too?

The Revd Carol Hathorne is Assistant Minister at an Anglican church in Short Heath, West Midlands, and is also married to a vicar. She has written 18 books, including most recently *The Accidental Church* (Kingsway, 2003), *Christian Dance* (Monarch, 1999), *Angels Keep Watch* (Christina Press, 1997) and *A Ferret in the Vestry* (Monarch, 1995).



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