

The peace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all!

Dear brothers and sisters,

Angels seem to be in fashion these days. I had a conference in Berlin last week and usually take the opportunity - no, not for shopping! - for visiting one of the many great museums. When I looked up the special exhibitions in the internet, I found out that there is a new exhibition in the museum for traditional art (Gemäldegalerie) on "Angels in Art" (Flügel Schlag – Engel in der Kunst). You can see how angels throughout the centuries are seen mediators between heaven and earth. They announce and they mourn, they rejoice and they make music. They save and they rescue, they fight against evil and bring God's message to human beings. And with the ages the images change. Until the middle ages they quote like an early form of comic the biblical passage to which the picture relates. Later their gestures and the expression of their faces interpret what is described in the picture. It is incredible, when you look at the pictures, how many images of angels there are in traditional art.

But, and that is the great surprise, angels are not only a memory of former culture. This very December in Berlin there is also a new exhibition on angels in modern movies (Flügel Schlag – Engel im Film, Deutsches Filmmuseum). I was astonished, how many films there are with angels playing a decisive role or even being the topic of the movie. The images differ extremely, too. While in "La Biblia" Pasolini makes the heavenly messenger cover his face, Bruno Ganz in "Heaven over Berlin" falls as an angel in love with an artist. Angels can even be sinners like in Lubitsch's movie of 1943 "Heaven can wait". You can realize that Romy Schneider acted as an angel as well as Holy Hunter, there are angel movies by Charlie Chaplin as well as by Jean Cocteau.

Why are people so fascinated by angels? We find them in art and in movies, in pop music as well as in literature. Even the internet testifies that. If you search with the German term "Engel" within 0.09 seconds you have 2.420.00 results. Fifty percent of

the Germans think that the existence of angels is possible, every tenth German believes that he or she has already met an angel. An angel seems to be a messenger between this world and the other world, is seen as a guardian, a guide.

So let us go back to the roots this morning. We are in a Christian church and there in good tradition the time of advent is known the time of angels. In the New Testament angels announce the arrival of God, God's coming to this world. The apostle Luke tells us about Zechariahs, a priest, whom an angel appears in order to announce the birth of his son, John the Baptist. Later on the shepherds will be told in the fields by an angel about the birth of the godly child.

And certainly there is the angel Gabriel foretelling the birth to Mary. Luke chapter 1 we read: "And the angel said to her: Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son and you will name him Jesus."

The announcement of the arrival of God's visit with human kind through the angel always takes place with the same introduction: "Do not be afraid!" This "Do not be afraid" is so to say the visiting-card, the identification of the angel. God comes to visit: do not be afraid! You are not alone. God does not ignore this world. God does not leave us behind and goes far away to a more peaceful place. No, God comes to you and to me, God wants to be here, right among us, God is in relationship with us. And the angels tell us about it.

This is why in the time of Advent all over the place we meet angels. There are small and fat little angels, sweet and golden boys and small and aesthetical women. Angels who teach with their finger up high, angels playing the harp and if you start to look at the way angels are described all over the world we can almost start to laugh. There are angels on the napkin in the restaurant, angels in the toilet of the autobahn, angels at the cash-desk in the supermarket. Poor angels – one could almost feel sorry for them! - they have to be everywhere and do not always look really happy. Even though I am sure they know about the Lutheran teaching about the justification by faith alone...

Through the centuries the images of angels have changed not only in art, but also in the reflection of people. And very often there is some humour in the description and in the expectation. Karl Valentin writes: "In former times the angels have been human beings whose souls have flown to the Beyond. There they got wings. But this will only mean female beings from their first to their thirtieth year of age. Because I could hardly imagine master baker Meyer as a heavenly figure, naked, with two large wings fluttering among the clouds. I would rather prefer him invisible." Or: very famous in Germany is a description by Ludwig Thoma of Alois Hingerl from Munich who comes to heaven. It's a wonderful story how Alois just doesn't fit into heaven. He has a Bavarian accent, he sings too loud and wrongly and actually he wants to be at the "Oktober-Fest" and have a beer. So at the end of the story, God says: "Send him back to earth, we cannot make use of him here." These are the funny stories about angels and maybe there is the truth in them, that God has a sense of humour and angels witness to that. Or as Martin Luther said: one cannot preach the Gospel without humour.

You can find songs about angels, prayers and whole books about angels. And we could even say that in the last few years the interest in angels has grown again. But what is an angel? Really God's messenger until today? Is an angel somehow an experience of God being close? Are angels sent to us for consolation? And in the 21st century does it make any sense anyway to believe in angels? Hasn't the age of enlightenment put an end to that?

In a famous poem by Rudolf Otto Wiemer it says about angels:

"They do not have to be men with wings, the angels.
They walk quietly, they do not have to shout loudly, the angels.
They are old and ugly and small the angels. ...
Maybe there is one living next door to you, the angel.
He brought bread to the hungry the angel,
he made the bed for the sick one the angel.
And he listens when you call him at night, the angel...!"

That means an angel can be somebody I meet, or a moment in my life that I cannot explain. Suddenly you know: this is the right man, this is the woman I want to marry.

Or a sudden feeling of happiness watching the sky. Or an experience of having been saved – from an accident or from a stupid thing I would have done. Or meeting somebody who gives the decisive hint to a solution. Or someone who brings a smile to our face and gives us a feeling of happiness for days or just hours. I think we could say that in moments like this an angel of God touches us. We sense afresh the reality of God amidst our world. God is present. This corresponds to Jesus saying in Matthew 25 that when we visit the poor and the sick we visit him.

I really think that we are in a time in which we do not leave enlightenment behind, but realize that behind everything that is so visible, so scientifically analysed and proved, so easy to explain, there is still a great secret of God. The secret of our own life, the secret behind the visible world.

In Germany in former times many children prayed at night:

In the evening, when I go to sleep
there are fourteen angels surrounding me,
two at my right side,
two at my left side,
two at my head,
two at my feet,
two that cover me with a sheet,
two that will wake me up
and two that will show me the way to heaven's paradise.

There was a time, when people thought this to be just kitsch. But to many children this prayer gave a feeling of security. It expressed a possibility to confide in God. And it showed: an angel means, God is with us. God wants to say: "Do not be afraid". God gives us peace even when our lives seem to be torn apart. Even when we have to face suffering and pain and death, God offers us his hand.

We have to remind ourselves that this is not only the message for Mary but also the message for the women coming to the empty grave: "Do not be afraid. Why do you look for the living at the place where the dead are?" That means, death doesn't have the last word. The angel is so to say the bridge between this world and the other

world where God one day will wipe off all tears. No, there is no scientific proof in angels. No, I do not more than you do. But if we say that the bible is our book of reference in the Christian faith, angels cannot be a deniable phenomenon to us.

A believe in angels means also the thorough trust that God holds people we have loved over the step of death. The famous German fairy teller Christian Anderson says: "Every time when a good child dies, there comes an angel of God down to earth, takes the dead child in his arms, spreads his white great wings and flies with the child over all the places that it has loved, when it was alive.

Looking back at the last year we would have longed for an angel many a time. An angel of peace when we prayed that war in Iraq wouldn't be started. An angel of reconciliation in Israel and Palestine. May be an angel of love in a marriage that is torn apart by fighting in silence. A guardian angel for the two children that have been murdered in such a cruel and brutal way. An angel of trust between friends who have quarrelled. Yes, we probably need angels, to overcome fear and sorrow, to find new contact to God, to have the courage to overcome anger and hurt. Our world is in need of angels. Others can be angels for us. We can be angels for others. What a challenge, what a responsibility, what a great gift!

I think that too often in Christianity and especially in Protestantism we deny any religious experience. Religion has to do with the one book, the Bible. Yes, that is true. But our religion is one not restricted to our brain. Christianity is perceived and lived with all our senses, we can sense religion. It is not a matter of our head and mind and reading and understanding alone. In the Gospel of John it is said that the word became flesh. That means the word of God is Jesus himself, this is where we meet God: in the experience of Jesus. And the arrival of Jesus in the Bible was announced by angels. So if we say that all our preaching and teaching has to be in accordance with what the Bible says, angels are nothing foreign to our religion. I think we could say that angels mean: experiencing God's presence, God's touch. Very often in life we experience God's distance. It is dark around us, we cannot see God's hand reaching out towards us. But if we are open with all our senses, with mind and heart, if we take time and silence maybe we can feel, hear God.

Some time ago a woman sent me a little present with the angel of composure. This angel is on my desk since then. I found out that you can order 32 different angels: the angel of hope for instance, the angel of patience, the angel of wisdom. The woman who designs them from pottery by hand says that she needed a process for every angel that was a mixture of intuition, emotion and intellect. And that then in a long process of talking with others she found the right name for every angel. I think there is something fascinating about this process. We meet God in a mixture of intuition, emotion and intellect. Otherwise we cannot be open for God. That is exactly what the reaction of Zechariahs and Mary and the shepherds and the women at the grave is. They are afraid, they are moved and they listen. So let us take the time of Advent to be in a positive way afraid of meeting God, preparing for it. To use our intellect in order to understand what God asks of us, what God tells. And let us give time for emotion, for opening our hearts in order that we can joyfully celebrate God's arrival on this earth. God does not leave us alone, there is light in the darkness. We can trust God, we may believe in angels, we might meet an angel today. Do not be afraid!
Amen.

**May the Lord bless you and keep you
The Lord make his face to shine upon you
And be gracious to you
The Lord lift up his countenance upon you
And give you peace

Amen**