I wonder whether anybody in your house ever says to you the words ‘Oh go on, be an angel!’

In our family this is usually the prelude to one person asking another person to stop doing what they are inoffensively getting on with in order to carry out a task that the questioner would like them to undertake.

So common invitations to so called angelic activity include requests such as

‘Be an angel, make me a cup of tea!’ or ‘Be an angel, find my car keys!’ or ‘Be an angel, we’ve run out of milk, will you pop out and get some?’

Now, the Biblically alert amongst you will by now doubtless have registered that such encouragements to angelic emulation are to say the least odd -

given that in scripture there does not seem to be any record of Michael, Gabriel, Raphael or indeed any other member of the heavenly host ever having engaged in tea making, key finding or nipping out to the Co-op.

None of these are the tasks of angels. In fact, you might rather better argue that in scripture, angels have just one principal task. This is to live up to the meaning of their name which simply means messenger. So in today’s Gospel, we see angels at their ronseal best, doing what it says on the tin, acting as messengers from God.

First an angel greets the shepherds, bringing them a message of great joy, telling them that the longed for Messiah is born in Bethlehem, and instructing the shepherds where to find him.

Then a whole light show of angels give out to the shepherds God’s message of peace and goodwill that the birth of the Saviour implies:

‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!’

All classic, messenger driven, non domestic task orientated angelic stuff.

But what intrigues me in this story is not so much what happens to the angels. They are simply fulfilling their job description. What intrigues me is what happens to the shepherds.

Shepherding you see was not exactly a high class, high status occupation in first century Palestine. Shepherds were not social influencers. Their work involved antisocial hours – as our Gospel said all that keeping watch over their flock by night business. It involved having a working environment that was rudimentary at best – all that abiding in the fields. And as anyone who’s ever worked with sheep will tell you, it involved daily contact with animals, manure and following flying insects.

Let alone all the cuts and scrapes that are attendant on caring for a species of animal that seems so often to be born with its own special death wish.

Not exactly what you’d expect as the prelude to assuming a role of astonishing dignity. Which is exactly what happens to be the shepherds. Because they listen to the angels’ message these humble, working, everyday people are accorded the honour of being the first to visit the new born king.

And then something extraordinary happens. The shepherds become angels themselves. If you don’t believe me, listen to what Luke says:

‘When they, [the shepherds] saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them’

Night time watchers became messengers. Working people became witnesses. Shepherds become angels.

What message will you give to those you meet about the encounter you have had with the Christ you have found here in this Cathedral today? What will you tell people about how, once again, you have celebrated the Saviour’s birth? How will you witness to the glory and peace we’ve encountered together as we’ve met in worship of the Christ today? What message will you share about the ways in which your experience of the Christ in this place and elsewhere have touched your heart and your mind.

For the transformation we are all invited to undergo is exactly the same as that experienced by the shepherds in today’s Gospel reading. To be changed from observers to participants. To be transformed from hearers to speakers. To move from being watchers to messengers.

Because you all know the invitation I’m going to put to you, don’t you?

‘Go on. Be an angel!’ Amen