

A SERMON ON HEBREWS 12:22–24

2004

Don't let your eyes fool you! You are involved in something unseen, a great mystery whenever you gather here Sunday by Sunday. St Paul says in 1 Tim 3:16: "Great indeed is the mystery of our religion."

Everything here points to that mystery! This building, the font, the pulpit, the altar, and the sanctuary. Most of the time, it looks like an empty stage without any actor on it. That's how it's meant to look, because it shows us that something mysterious is happening right here and now, even though we can't see it. Jesus is present here, invisible and unseen. Here heaven breaks in on each of us earthlings. We have a foretaste of heaven in this place. We have unseen access to heaven right here on earth. Here in this plain building we join a heavenly assembly engaged in heavenly worship.

But all that is hidden from the naked eye. It is a matter of mystery which God's word discloses to you in this text from Hebrews. Apart from his word, you would never know anything about it nor could ever experience its richness. So it reveals what is otherwise hidden from us. It says that this mystery involves you in the seven unseen realities, seven invisible dimensions to the divine service.

1. **You gather here for worship in an unseen place**

God's word declares: 'You have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, heavenly Jerusalem'.

Under you is heavenly ground

Here, you are in two places at one and the same time. On the one hand, you have gathered together as a congregation in this place of worship. There's nothing very special about it, except that this is where you hear the word of God and receive the holy sacrament. On the other hand, you are also in heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God, which is not located anywhere on earth.

You may remember that Solomon built his temple on Mount Zion in Jerusalem. There in the Holy of Holies heaven overlapped with earth. Only the high priest had access to God's heavenly presence there once a year on the Day of Atonement. But you have not gathered there. When you came here to church today, you entered heaven itself. You are now in the city of the living God, the place where God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit reside. This place is in this world, even though it does not belong to this world. Here you have unseen access to the heavenly presence of God. Here you by faith enter the heavenly world, without

leaving planet earth. Here you join in the performance of the heavenly liturgy.

2. You receive unseen assistance in your worship.

God's word declares: 'You have come.... to innumerable angels in festal assembly'.

Over you are all the angels.

You are not just surrounded by members of this congregation as you worship here; you are surrounded on all sides by thousands and thousands of angels. More than you could ever count!

The angels are God's heavenly servants. The writer of the Hebrews calls them 'liturgising spirits' (1:14). Their main occupation is the performance of the heavenly liturgy. They gather in a festal assembly to praise and adore the risen Lord Jesus. They tell us of God's glory and his holiness. Amazingly, they invite us to join with them in their praises as they sing: 'Glory to God in the highest' and 'Holy, Holy, Holy'. In fact, they act as a kind of spiritual choir for us; they assist us in our praises. They help us to adore and to glorify the Triune God. As we lift up our hearts and our spirits to the Lord, they carry us along and blend our song with their song. In the liturgy for Holy Communion, we therefore join the angels and archangels and all the company of heaven as we adore and magnify the living God.

3. You assemble as part of an unseen congregation

God's word declares: 'You have come... to the assembly (church) of the first born who are enrolled in heaven'.

With you is the one holy, catholic and apostolic church.

Here in heavenly Jerusalem you are part of a huge assembly, a supernatural, international congregation. It includes this congregation as well as every other congregation on the whole wide world. Like us, they all assemble in the same place, the presence of the Triune God. So then, you do not just gather for worship with the members of this congregation, but with all Christians everywhere on earth; you worship together with them, no matter how far you may be separated from them in time and space. You join the whole church of God as it assembles in his holy presence.

As members of that assembly you have special status. On the one hand, you are citizens of heaven. The Triune God is your divine King, and you enjoy all the rights and privileges of citizenship in his royal city. You enjoy the life of heaven already here on earth.

On the other hand, you have the status of God's first born Son. This is almost too good to be true! In the ancient world the firstborn son

inherited the position and property of his father. Well, since Jesus is the firstborn only Son of God, he alone is God's heir. Yet he has shared his position and his status with you in your baptism. Each of you, therefore, has the same status as Jesus; you all stand to inherit everything that belongs to Jesus. None receives more or less than the other, for, unlike material possessions which can only be owned by one person or group of people, spiritual blessings are always shared and held in common. But you don't have to wait until you die to enter your inheritance. In fact, here today you all already receive and enjoy your common spiritual inheritance. You are therefore far more privileged and spiritually rich than you could ever imagine. Everything that belongs to Jesus is freely available for you!

4. You stand here before God the unseen Judge.

God's word declares: 'You have come... to God the judge of all'.

In front of you is God the gracious Judge.

Here in heavenly Jerusalem we meet with God the divine Judge. And there is no escaping from his judgment. Now that should scare us all, because you have a guilty conscience. We know that we are not as we should be and have not lived as we should have. We therefore fear God's accusation and condemnation more than anything in this life. It's bad enough that we have to face God on judgment day. Who of us would wish to face God before we had to?

But God is present here as a judge with a difference. He isn't out to disapprove of us, belittle us, and reject us as worthless and useless and ugly. No, he wants to get the last judgment over and done with. That's why he comes to free us from the burden of guilt and to undo the awful damage of sin; he comes to pardon us, as he did at the beginning of this service when he spoke the word of absolution to us. We therefore have no reason to be afraid of contact with him. We don't have to wait until we die to discover where we stand with God. We can settle your accounts with him now, so that we need no longer fear his judgment and condemnation. So why live evasively with a bad conscience and the fear of eventual punishment? Welcome God's gracious judgment and receive his pardon now! Only those who are forgiven have access to heaven here on earth!

5. You have unseen contact with deceased Christians

God's word declares: 'You have come... to the spirits of the righteous made perfect'.

Around you are all Christians who have left this life and are now with their Lord.

Imagine yourself as a runner in a relay race! The Christians who have left this life have run in the race before you. They have passed on the baton to you; they now sit in the stadium and urge you on as you run your lap in the

race. They wait for you and the people who come after you to finish the race, so that they can celebrate together with you once the race is over. They have already reached the end of the race, but you are still running in it. You now sing the songs that they once sang. They depend on you to be faithful in worshipping the Triune God and in handing on what you have received to those who come after you.

Even though you are separated physically from them by death, you are still linked with them spiritually through Jesus. He keeps you in touch with them and them in touch with you. You can, therefore, more properly remember your dead relatives and friends here at the Lord's table rather than at the cemetery. They surround you, as Hebrews says, like 'a cloud'; they support you invisibly, just as all the other people here do. Since you are connected with them in the communion of saints, they are involved together with you in the adoration of the Triune God.

6. You have Jesus as your unseen liturgist in this service.

God's word declares: 'You have come.... to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant'.

Beside you is the risen Lord Jesus who is our mediator

Our worship centres on the risen Lord Jesus. He is the key to our involvement in the heavenly assembly. Without him, we remain earthbound and without access to the heavenly realm. He has bridged the great gap between heaven and earth for us by his death and resurrection. He is now our high priest, our mediator in the heavenly sanctuary. Through him we can come God the Father and receive everything from him. He links us with all the angels, Christians all over the world, departed believers, and our heavenly Father. Our extraordinary position and status depends on him and his unseen presence with us.

Jesus has set up a new covenant for us by the institution of Holy Communion, a new way of worship, in which he gives us his body and blood. In his holy supper he reaches out to us earthlings, and joins us where we are here on earth. By giving himself to us, he unites us intimately with himself. In the celebration of the divine service which revolves around this sacrament, he acts as our high priest, our chief liturgist. He not only brings the gifts of God the Father to us; he also leads us in our prayers and praises. We can therefore approach God the Father through him, together with him, standing, as it were, in his shoes.

Jesus comes to us here in this place, so that we can stand together with him in the presence of his heavenly Father. He brings heaven down to earth for us and takes us earthlings up into the heavenly sanctuary, so that we join him and all the angels in the presence of his heavenly Father. What could be more wonderful than that!

7. You have been consecrated for unseen service in heavenly Jerusalem

God's word declares: 'You have come... to the blood for sprinkling that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel'.

In you is the blood of Jesus that speaks a good word to you.

What a surprise! The heart of Christian worship is not the presence of the risen Lord Jesus, but the gift of his holy precious blood in the sacrament, for only through his blood do we have safe access to all the other things: heaven and the angels and the universal church and God the judge and the faithful departed and Jesus.

In the Old Testament only the priests were allowed to approach God and officiate in the divine service of the temple. Before they could officiate, they had their bodies sprinkled with blood at their ordination into the priesthood to cleanse them from impurity and to make them holy. The right ears of the priests were smeared with blood, so that they could hear the holy word of God; the thumbs of their right hands were smeared with blood, so that they could handle the holy things of God; the big toes of their right feet were smeared with blood, so that they could walk on holy ground. Then some blood that mixed with the holy anointing oil was sprinkled on them and their vestments to consecrate them. In this way God purified them and shared his holiness with them.

Here in heavenly Jerusalem each of you can do what no priest ever did in Old Jerusalem. In faith, you can approach God the Father in heaven itself and serve there together with Jesus. Jesus does not just sprinkle your bodies with his blood; he sprinkles it on your hearts, your conscience. Amazingly, he gives you his blood to drink in Holy Communion. And that blood speaks something really good to you. It doesn't speak of vengeance and banishment, as the blood of Abel did to his brother who had murdered him. No, it speaks of grace and pardon and acceptance. It speaks forgiveness into our hearts. By giving you his life-giving blood to drink, Jesus cleanses you entirely from all the sins that you have committed as well as all the sins that others have been committed against you. Through his blood he shares his own purity and holiness with you. He makes you as holy as he is holy, holy through and through. His blood consecrates you, so that you can serve as holy priests together with all the angels in the heavenly sanctuary. You can therefore approach God the Father, safely, boldly and unafraid, because you have been sprinkled with the blood of Jesus. You can bring others and their needs to your heavenly Father, so that you, in turn, can also bring him and his blessings, unseen, as his secret agents, to the people around you as you go about your daily work.

The blood of Jesus comes last in this list of invisible gifts because apart from it we cannot come to Jesus, our mediator, or to our spiritual ancestors who are now with the Lord, or to God the gracious Judge, or to

the angels, or to Zion the heavenly city. We have access to all these unseen things through the speaking blood of Jesus.

Don't let your eyes fool you! Here you are involved in a wonderful mystery! You have come to a strange mysterious place where you get an invisible preview of heaven here on earth. You are holy people because you are involved here and now in the divine service together with Jesus and all the angels. You are people who live double lives as citizens of heaven here on earth. Wherever you go, the Triune God goes with you. Wherever you happen to be, you have open access to God's presence. Treasure this privilege and live as in God's presence while you go about your daily business! Don't fix your eyes on what is seen, but on what is unseen! For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.
Amen