

HEBREWS 12:22–24

St Pauls, Glenelg, 11 Pentecost, 222

The arrangement of this building is meant to show us where we are and what happens here. The nave, the auditorium, symbolizes this visible world, and the sanctuary, the area around the altar, symbolizes the invisible heavenly world.

Human sight is very limited. We can see only a small part of our physical world and next to nothing of the spiritual world around us. So we need to be told about it to understand it with our mind's eye and see it with spiritual eyes.

In primary school one of my teachers held a show and tell lesson each week when we students would bring something that fascinated us and tell the class about it. Today the writer of Hebrews has a show and tell time with us. He shows us the invisible side of this and very service of worship by telling us about seven invisible things that we experience here, seven blessings that are hidden from our physical sight but shown to us by God's word and his Holy Spirit.

1. The writer of Hebrews tells us: **'You have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, heavenly Jerusalem'**.

Here, we are in two places at one and the same time. On the one hand, we have gathered together as a congregation in this place of worship here in Glenelg. There's nothing very special about it, except that this is where we hear the word of God and receive the holy sacrament. On the other hand, we 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 but in heaven itself. You are now in the city of the living God, the place where God resides with his people. This place is in this world, even though it does not belong to this world. Here you have invisible access to the presence of God. Here by faith you enter the heavenly world, without leaving planet earth. Here you are involved in heavenly worship.

2. Hebrews tells us: **'You have come.... to thousands of angels in joyful assembly.'**

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 heavenly

worship. They gather with us in a joyful assembly to praise and adore the risen Lord Jesus. Amazingly, they invite us to join with them in their praises as we 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. They share their joy with us. In Holy Communion we join the angels and archangels and all the company of heaven as we praise the living God.

3. Hebrews tells us: **'You have come... to the church (the assembly) of the first born whose names are written in heaven.'**

Here in this place you are part of a huge assembly, a supernatural, international congregation, the one holy, catholic and apostolic church. It includes this congregation as well as every other congregation on earth. 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 present and absent 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 worldwide 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 have a foretaste of the life in heaven already here on earth. On the other hand, you all have the same status and inheritance as God's firstborn Son. Since Jesus is the firstborn, only Son of God, he alone is God's heir. Yet he became a man so that he could share his status with you by his union with you in baptism. Each of you has the same status as Jesus. You are all sons and heirs of God the heavenly Father. 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 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 spiritual inheritance. You are therefore far more privileged and far richer spiritually than you could ever imagine. Everything that belongs to Jesus is freely available for you!

4. Hebrews tells us: **'You have come... to God, the Judge of all.'**

Now that should scare us, because 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 is here 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 his judgment. We don't have to wait until we die to discover where we stand with God. We can settle our accounts with him now, so that we need no longer fear his eventual condemnation. Since he has forgiven us we now have access to heaven here on earth.

5. Hebrews tells us: **'You have come... to the spirits of the righteous made perfect.'**

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 struggle as they once struggled, pray for help as they once did and sing the songs that they once sang. They call 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 through Jesus. He keeps you in touch with them and them in touch with you. So you can more rightly remember your dead parents and children and relatives and friends here at the Lord's table rather than anywhere else by thanking God for them. They surround you, as Hebrews says, like 'a cloud' (Heb 12:1); they support you invisibly, like the other members of this congregation. Since you are connected with them in the communion of saints, they are involved together with you in your worship of the Triune God.

6. Hebrews tells us: **'You have come.... to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant.'**

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. But 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 with God in heaven. Through him we can come to God the Father and receive every spiritual blessing from him. Jesus 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 invisible 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 this celebration 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.

He brings heaven down to earth for us and takes us earthlings up into the presence of his heavenly Father. What could be more wonderful than that!

7. Hebrews tells us: **'You have come... to the blood for sprinkling that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.'**

What a surprise! The heart of Christian worship is not the presence of the risen Lord Jesus, but the gift of his speaking blood in the sacrament.

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. In this way God purified them and shared his holiness with them.

Here each of you can do what no priest ever did in Old Jerusalem. By faith, you can approach God the Father in heaven itself because Jesus does not just sprinkle your bodies with his blood; he sprinkles it on your hearts, your conscience, by giving you his blood to drink in Holy Communion. And that blood 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 mercy, 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. 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.

The blood of Jesus comes last in this list of invisible gifts because apart from it we can't 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 the one holy church around the world, or to Zion the heavenly city with all its citizens. We have access to all these invisible blessings through the blood of Jesus.

So listen to Jesus who speaks to you and shows you what is otherwise hidden from you. Through him and his blood you have a preview of heaven here on earth. Come to him in Holy Communion and receive that speaks a better world to you than the blood of Abel. And rejoice with the angels that by faith all this is available to you here and now.