

**The Twenty-second Sunday of Ordinary Time**  
(Year C)

<i>First Reading</i>	Sirach 3:17-18, 20, 28-29
<i>Response</i>	God, in your goodness, you have made a home for the poor.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 68:4-5, 6-7, 10-11
<i>Second Reading</i>	Hebrews 12:18-19, 22-24A
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Take my yoke upon you, says the Lord, and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart.
<i>Gospel</i>	Luke 14:1, 7-14

The 22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time continues our journey through the letter to the Hebrews and brings us to the end, the climactic end of Chapter 12, which is focused on the heavenly Jerusalem. So let's hear how the letter to the Hebrews describes this mystery. Chapter 12, Verses 18 and 19, and then 22 to 24, are the verses for the lectionary today. The author of Hebrews says:

For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers entreat that no further messages be spoken to them.

You can skip down to Verse 22:

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven, and to a judge who is God of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks more graciously than the blood of Abel.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

Beautiful, powerful passage there. What's Hebrews talking about here? Okay. Well, in this case, I think it actually might be helpful here to speculate a little bit more about the audience of the letter to the Hebrews. So if you look at the letter to the Hebrews as a whole, and you take the title seriously, one of the first things you'll notice is that the letter to the Hebrews seems to have been written to the Hebrews. Sorry, I couldn't help that.

No, what does that mean, to the Hebrews? Remember, if you go back to the Acts of the Apostles in chapter six, you have a debate that breaks out in the early Jerusalem church between two groups of believers, the Hellenists and the Hebrews. And if you look at that passage in detail, scholars have pointed out that what this appears to be is a division between Greek speaking believers and Semitic speaking believers. Now there's some debate about whether they're speaking Hebrew or they're speaking Aramaic, because that's still a scholarly debate. Let's just go with Hebrew, because that will keep it more straightforward. And you can see how, even to this day, when you have linguistic divisions within a single church, it can be a cause of conflict and miscommunication and confusion.

So there's a conflict that breaks out between the Hebrew speaking Christians and the Greek speaking Christians. And as a result, you have the seven men who are chosen to be deacons to begin assisting the Apostles in their ministries, in order to solve this problem in the church. If that passage is describing a group of Hebrew speaking Christians, then a strong case can be made that the title of the letter to the Hebrews, the fact that it's dedicated to the Hebrews, means that this letter was addressed to a similar group.

Now the big catch, the big problem with that hypothesis, is that the letter to the Hebrews, the letter called the letter to Hebrews is written in some of the most sophisticated Greek, the most sophisticated Greek, of any other letter in the New Testament. So it's a little strange. If you were writing to the Hebrews, meaning Hebrew speaking Christians, why would you write in Greek? Not just any Greek, but very sophisticated Greek. And there are different solutions to this that have been given. One of the most ancient solutions that goes back all the way to the 3rd and 4th Century among some of the Church Fathers, is some of the Church Fathers believe that the letter was actually originally written in Hebrew, but it was later translated in Greek. So for example, one Church Father suggested that Paul wrote the letter in Hebrew, in a very sophisticated Hebrew to members of the Jerusalem

church, and that Luke later translated it into his very fine Greek, for which he is known.

The answer to that question is outside the boundaries of this particular video, but for our purposes here, whatever language the text was originally written in, it seems to have been written to Christians who are being persecuted, facing some opposition, and not just opposition, they seem to be facing a temptation to go back and participate in the sacrifices of the Jerusalem temple. That's why so much of the letter to the Hebrews is focused on showing that Christ is the true high priest, not of the earthly temple in Jerusalem, but of the heavenly temple in the heavenly Jerusalem. And that's where the true sacrifice is, the sacrifice of Christ who's crucified, died, rose, and ascended into the heavenly sanctuary, the heavenly Holy of Holies.

And so if that's correct, if the letter to the Hebrews is meant to help Christians not fall back, not to help Jewish Christians not begin practicing the sacrifices of the Old Testament temple, the earthly Jerusalem temple, but to participate in a new covenant, rather, then this final chapter makes sense, because the section for today, what Hebrews is doing is drawing a contrast between two mountains. One of them is Mount Sinai and the other is Mount Zion. Zion is the mountain on which the temple of Jerusalem was built. But in this case, the Zion in question is not the earthly Zion, but the heavenly Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem.

So let's go back and look at the passage with that contrast in mind. First, he begins by saying:

you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers entreat that no further messages be spoken to them.

Now that's an allusion to the book of Exodus 19 and 20, when God appears in the cloud of glory on top of Mount Sinai, speaks out of the cloud, and the people become terrified at the voice that they hear coming from the cloud. And they don't want to even go near the mountain of Sinai, but they send Moses to be their mediator, to be their intercessor on their behalf, to go between them and God. What the author of Hebrews is saying here is that his readers have not come to a visible mountain that can be touched, namely the earthly visible mountain of Sinai,

the mountain of the old covenant. Instead, they have come to Mount Zion and the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering.

So pause there. What the author to the Hebrews is assuming here is that his readers will know, and this is very important, that in ancient Jewish tradition, the earthly temple was viewed as being a pattern, a visible symbol, of the heavenly temple. So if you go back to the Old Testament in Exodus 25, when God tells Moses to make a tabernacle, he says, "Make it according to the pattern of what you saw when you were on the mountain." So even the earthly tabernacle in the Old Testament was patterned on a heavenly invisible tabernacle that only Moses was able to see, namely the heavenly tabernacle.

In the same way, the author to the Hebrews is saying:

you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering,

And here's the key line:

and to the assembly of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven

Now the Greek word here for assembly in the RSV, the Revised Standard Version is *ecclesia*, which is ordinarily translated as what? Church. So literally what it says is you've come to the church of the firstborn who are in heaven. Now why does that matter? It's because what Hebrews is doing is showing that the Church Triumphant is the actual assembly, so to speak, of believers. It's where the believers come whenever they worship, whenever they're gathering together in worship, they're not going to the earthly temple in Jerusalem. They're not going to the visible mountain of Sinai. They're actually being gathered together in communion, not just with the invisible angels, but also with the invisible saints, the *ecclesia*, "the assembly of the first-born" from the dead "who are enrolled in heaven." And they are in communion with the "spirits of just men" who have been made what? Perfect.

So what is this? This is a vision of what would later go on to be called the Church Triumphant, the church in heaven. And I cannot stress enough just how important it is to understand that when we talk about the mystery of the Church, we're not talking first and foremost about the Church Militant, the church on Earth. A lot of us, when we talk about the Church, we tend to refer primarily to the earthly institution. And of course it's true that that is the Church. But remember there are always three aspects, three dimensions, three distinctions, within the one mystery of the Church. There's the Church Militant, the church on Earth, the institutional visible Church we have here. There's the Church Suffering, which is the Church of the souls of those who are in purgatory, who are united with Christ, but have not yet entered into the beatific vision. And then there's the Church Triumphant, which is what Hebrews 12 is describing her. The souls of righteous men made perfect. Which by the way, sometimes people will respond to the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus says, "Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." They'll say, "Well, that's impossible." Well, you better hope it's not impossible because that's what heaven is. In heaven, the saints no longer sin. They are perfectly just or perfectly righteous, through God's grace having made them perfect. It's not through their own effort, but through the gift of grace.

And so what Hebrews is saying here is when you worship, where are you going to choose to go? Are you going to go to the visible mountain of Sinai? Are you going to go to the visible temple in Jerusalem? Or are you going to realize that through the blood of Christ, the mediator of the new covenant, we've been given access to the assembly of the firstborn, who are enrolled in heaven, to commune with the souls of just men made perfect and to the enumerable angels in heavenly array who worship God, not in the earthly, but in the heavenly Jerusalem? That's the city to which you actually belong.

Now for my money, I can't help but wonder here, if the reason Hebrews ends this passage for today, not just with the Church Triumphant, but with the blood of Christ, is because this isn't just about worship in general, but about the Eucharistic assembly in particular. Why does he shift all of a sudden from talking about the heavenly Zion to blood? Well, as any 1st Century Jew would've known, the reason you go to the temple is not just because God's there. It's not just because it is the dwelling place of God, but it's because it's the sole place of sacrifice. The temple is where the blood of the animals is poured out on the Day of Atonement, on the sacrifices of Yom Kippur, in order to reconcile Israel to God. Well, here, in the

same way, Hebrews is saying that in the heavenly Jerusalem, when you come to the heavenly Jerusalem, you're coming to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, "and to the sprinkled blood that speaks more graciously than the blood of Abel."

So what is this sprinkled blood of Jesus? How do you come to the sprinkled blood of Jesus? I would suggest that the way you come to the sprinkled blood of Jesus is by coming to the Eucharist. In other words, Hebrews 12, I would suggest, climaxes with an implicit reference to the Eucharistic blood of Christ as the way that we have access to the liturgical worship of the heavenly Jerusalem and the Church Triumphant. And if you have any doubts about that, you can actually just keep reading, although it's not in the lectionary for today, but in Hebrews 13, very next chapter. We have these powerful words in verse 10:

We have an altar from which those who serve the tent<sup>[c]</sup> have no right to eat.

So here Hebrews is contrasting the altar of the Christians with the altar of the priests serving in the Jerusalem temple. And he's saying, "We have a different altar. And from this altar, the earthly priests in Jerusalem temple have no right to eat." What is that altar? I would suggest to you that it is the altar of the Eucharist. And so that the letter to the Hebrews climaxes with a reference to the sacrificial banquet, which should be the source and summit of the lives of its audience, rather than the consumption of the earthly sacrifices and of the blood of animals that was offered in the Jerusalem temple. It's a powerful, powerful way to end the letter, especially if that letter was being written to help deter Jewish Christians from returning to the temple sacrifices and losing focus on the sacrifice of Christ, His body and His blood on the altar of the Eucharist. And if that is by the way, if this is a reference to the altar of the Eucharist, and what else would it be? This perfectly illustrates that already at the time of the New Testament, in the letter to the Hebrews, the Eucharist is conceptualized, not just as a meal, but as a sacrifice.

So in closing, I would just end with one quote from the Second Vatican Council, which in its Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, emphasized the heavenly nature of the Church, that the Church is not just an earthly institution, but a heavenly mystery, when it wrote these words:

*The Church, further, which is called “that Jerusalem which is above” and “our mother” (Gal. 4:26; cf. Apoc. 12:17), is described as the spotless spouse of the spotless lamb (Apoc. 19:7; 21:2 and 9; 22:17)... While on earth she journeys in a foreign land away from the Lord (cf. 2 Cor. 5:6), the Church sees herself as an exile. She seeks and is concerned about those things which are above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God, where the life of the Church is hidden with Christ in God until she appears in glory with her Spouse.<sup>2</sup>*

So keep that in mind as you continue to reflect on the mystery of the Church. Always remember that the Church is not just the body of Christ, the Church is not just the institution built on the Apostles. The Church is the heavenly Jerusalem and the bride of Christ.

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<sup>2</sup> Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium* no. 6.