

“You have come to Mount Sion and to the city of the living God.”

Heb 12:22

We Catholics come to Mass every Sunday. Many people here also come during the week, some every day. So much a part of our life is the Mass that we could easily fall into the trap of taking it for granted, perhaps, and failing to see the extraordinary beauty of what happens on the altar of God day by day, week by week.

By a very long margin, the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is the single most important thing that happens in the world every day. The fact that many thousands of Masses are said each day across the world does not take away from importance of each and every Mass. We are obliged, under pain of mortal sin, to go to Mass every single Sunday and every Holy Day of Obligation, but even if we went just once in our lives, it would still have been the single most important thing we would ever have done.

Why so? because the Mass is not earthly minded. The Mass is not of this world. The Mass is something wholly and utterly rooted in the supernatural reality of a world beyond this life, of world we cannot see.

When we come to Mass, we come ‘to Mount Sion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.’ In the Book of the Apocalypse at the end of the Bible, St John says that in his vision he saw ‘the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God’ (Apoc 21:2). And this is exactly what happens at Mass. As the priest offers the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, and pronounces the words of consecration, ‘This is my Body... This is my Blood,’ the royal courts of God are brought down upon the altar and the heavenly Jerusalem, the holy city of God, is made present in the sanctuary before us.

And all at once, everything described in today's Second Reading is made present in our little church of St Pancras: 'innumerable angels in festal' array gather around the altar, even though we cannot see them; 'the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven,' that is, all the gathering of the saints; and God Himself, 'the judge of all'; and Our Lord Jesus Christ, 'the mediator of the new covenant,' who is made sacramentally present in the Most Holy Sacrament of the Altar.

If we could see the whole panoply of the spiritual world that comes down upon and around the altar every time Mass is said in our church, we would faint as Sts Peter, James, and John fainted on Mount Tabor at the moment of the Transfiguration (Mt 17:6) and the church would be filled with bodies lying all over the aisles and pews. The heavenly beauty, were it to shine forth visibly and for all to see in all its splendour, would leave us awestruck and overwhelmed. Its radiance would be such that we would fail miserably were we to try to describe it to our friends the next day, much as St Bernadette of Lourdes scorned attempts to capture the beauty of Our Lady in the statue that was made of her according to the saint's own description of what she had seen.

Is this mere pious fantasy? Is this the priest just getting carried away? No, these are the words of Holy Scripture. The Letter to the Hebrews is all about Our Lord's redeeming sacrifice, and about the heavenly ritual and ceremony that surrounds Christ's death on the Cross, and the beauty of that sacrifice, and the value of that sacrifice on our behalf. And as the Letter begins to draw to a close, we have these wonderfully descriptive words: 'You have come to Mount Sion and to the city of the living God.'

Well, all of this may be very lovely but what difference does it make? The difference it makes is largely up to you. What will you now do with what has been said today? Let me make a couple of suggestions. First, try to arrive early for Mass, and leave yourself time to gather your thoughts before Mass begins so that you can spend some time

not chatting to your friends but in prayer ahead of such an extraordinary event. We all know what the traffic can be like, but take that into account before you set out, and try to get here early.

Second, spend time kneeling down in prayer after you have received Our Blessed Lord in Holy Communion. Remain kneeling at least until the ciborium is reposed and the tabernacle door is closed again.

And third, don't hurry away at the end of Mass as if you'd just finished your shopping or had just gobbled down a McDonald's before rushing off to your next task. Pause, and stay behind in church in quiet prayer and thanksgiving. Don't fill the church with chatter as soon as the priest leaves the sanctuary. Remember, this is God's house, and a house of prayer. So if you must talk, talk to God!

The angels who gather around and above the altar at every single Mass do not rush away as soon as Mass is over. Stay awhile in their company until you can bring yourself back down from such dizzying heights and are ready to go about your earthly life once more, because what you have come to is 'Mount Sion and the city of the living God.'