Literalism that kills

It made a lot of sense for Jesus to use the metaphor of animal sacrifice—at least, it did in the first century.

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Imagine that a being from another planet was church shopping at your place this Sunday. What would he make of this?

> Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink.

He would be pretty sure we were all cannibals. He would steal wondering glances at the kind older lady who had helped him find his place in the prayer book; could such a sweet person possibly be in on all this? He would probably not stay for coffee hour.

We know that the ancient mists of our own sacred history conceal a fair amount of blood. We know, from the frequent admonitions against sacrificing young children to the god Moloch, for instance, that some of the people of Israel were doing just that. We have a memory of Jephthah's sacrifice of his own daughter, and nowhere in that story do we hear even a hint of editorial disapproval of the father's bloody act. Instead we hear only a sad shaking of the writer's head at the story's dread irony, an admiring portrait of the young victim's dutifulness and an explanation of a yearly observance of it all by Israel's virgins.

Against this backdrop, the substitution of doves and lambs in temple worship comes as a relief, but it is important to remember that the temple in which Jesus walked was soaked in blood. Daily sacrifices of animals happened there. If one day someone perfects time travel and then asks you to be on the altar guild in the temple, don't

do it.

Everyone in the first century knew about animal sacrifice, whether it was in the temple at Jerusalem or in pagan temples in Corinth or Rome. It was natural for Jesus to speak of his own coming death in those terms, and it made sense for the first Christians to memorialize his death in the bread and wine of the Eucharist, using language that identifies it with the sacrificial ritual they all knew.

It made sense to *them,* that is: in this passage from John we hear an echo of the earliest estrangement between Christians and Jews. Our worship supplants yours, the Christians say, and triumphs over it. It is interesting that Jews and pagans alike would come to distrust the Christians' Eucharist. It is even more interesting that medieval Christians would hurl accusations of human sacrifice and cannibalism at medieval Jews.

Refusing to acknowledge metaphor can be deadly—literalism can kill you. We must allow the poet Jesus to speak his piece, and the actor Jesus to play his part. He gives us a way of sharing his life and his death, again and again, in whatever era and whatever place we may inhabit, for as long as there is a church.

If it is true, as scholars say, that the earliest pieces of the Gospels are the passion narratives, then we can assume that it was this story that bound the first Christians together. Even the resurrection comes later, and remains mysterious. They could share in the death of Jesus because they understood what death was, but the hope of resurrection would first pass through its shadow.

A good communion bread

3 cups all-purpose flour
1 1/2 cups whole wheat flour
3 teaspoons salt
1/4 cup oil, plus a little more
2 cups water
1/4 cup honey

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees F. Lightly grease a baking sheet.

Sift the flour and salt into a large mixing bowl. In a separate bowl, dissolve the honey in the water. Pour the honey mixture into the flour along with 1/4 cup oil to form a sticky dough. The rest of the oil will be used for the tops of the loaves. When the dough is too stiff to stir, turn it out onto a well-floured surface, and knead for 8 to 10 minutes, until smooth.

Divide the dough in half, then in quarters. Divide each quarter into quarters, to make a total of 16 pieces, and form each one into a flat round. Place the loaves on the greased baking sheet. Score each round with a knife, making the shape of a cross. Brush with oil.

Bake for 20-25 minutes in the preheated oven, brushing the tops of the loaves with oil once in the middle of baking and again after removing the loaves from the oven.