

There is in the Jewish mind a vast minefield of awe around the word *blood*. All religions have shared it to some extent. Blood is a secret presence in us, and we are only able to keep our composure and self-possession if it remains secret. The word *secret* is the same word as *sacred*: the one is an ancient form of the other. But blood is intimately necessary to life, and makes its presence felt in every operation that belongs to living. We speak of the beating of the heart as an intimate awareness of our life; the rhythm of the pulse, and the torrent of the blood whose speed and pressure determines our powers and our sensations.

The shedding of the blood is therefore a moment when this sacred reality is laid open, and it is no coincidence that the ritual of sacrifice should be the highest dramatisation of religion. Every Jewish man, a nomad living in the ancient world, would know how to kill an animal, and would do it himself frequently. But the slaughter of the Paschal Lamb, all carried out together under divine ordinance, is no mere daily trip to the butcher. It sets at the heart of the Jewish experience this encounter with blood, this life-and-death signing, in which the obedience of Israel is consecrated to God through ritual. The massive flow of blood actually released on this day symbolises God's possession of Israel, his freedom to determine the fate of the blood that pulses in the hearts and arteries of his holy people.

The shedding of human blood is forbidden; and the ritual of sacrifice therefore treads a dark margin between good and evil, between life and death. This is the margin Jesus speaks of in the Gospel, where the Temple priests solemnly break the Sabbath *without being blamed for it*. He is preparing our minds for the unthinkable moment when, as a man *formally* condemned even by the High Priests, and given over to the dark side of that margin, he will enter through the veil and inaugurate a new Temple in his own dying body. The Temple priests' ministry will then be annulled, and the worship that is offered to God will find its true heart in the Holy Trinity itself, where the Son of God's offering to his Father will truly take the form of a human body, yielding up its last blood at the point of a spear.

It is in the depths of this mystery that we will understand the words that dominate the Church of the New Testament, where the final sacrifice has been consummated, and the covenant has been made eternal:

*What I want is love, not sacrifice;
knowledge of God, and not burnt-offerings.*