

Chapter xxx:

Bread is offered to God

WE HAVE SEEN THE SACRED VESSELS laid on the altar, and now we're watching bread and wine being offered in them. Meanwhile, all about, the diligent business of the Offertory continues, with servers and ministers and choir and congregation steeling themselves for the great Sacrifice by offering music and money and prayer, with many adroit movements.

We step outside history.

NEXT WEEK WE CONCLUDE AT LAST our immense account – seven weeks' worth! – of the Offertory. What matters more than any of the details of the offering of bread and wine is the mood or spirit of what we about. The rite has turned exotic, and primitive. The dominant emotion now is awe, lifted to the pitch of fear. We are not now coolly preparing for God, as we were at the beginning of Mass; nor coolly listening to wisdom about God, as we were during the 'ministry of the Word'. Now, in the Offertory, we are offering Heaven loaves and wineskins, as we might have done thousands of years ago.

Our urban world, with its banal comfort, security and calm, recedes now. Here is man as he has always been, naked and trembling before the Being Who made him.

We are nearly passive now: we wait the gift of God to man without which we cannot thoroughly live, and we prepare for it by giving Him was is His anyway, so that He can give us incomparably more. Here is great magic and the melding of worlds, our one absolutely significant business in life. It is very ancient, and it will always happen, long after everything we think modern has passed away. If the world falls to bits, still there is this: the river of life, rushing out to mankind wherever the Blessèd Sacrament is offered.

*Turbabitur terra
et transferentur montes in cor maris
sonaverunt et turbatae sunt aquae
eorum conturbati sunt montes in fortitudine eius diapsalma
fluminis impetus lætificat civitatem Dei
sanctificavit tabernaculum suum Altissimus.*

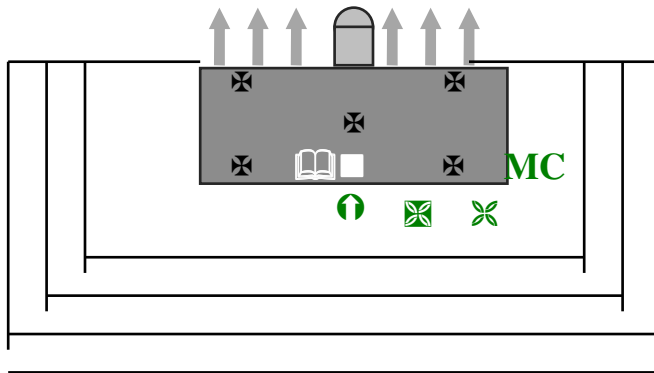
Though the earth be moved,

*and though the hills be carried into the midst of the sea;
 Though the waters thereof rage and swell,
 and though the mountains shake at the tempest of the same :
 There is a river, the streams whereof make glad the city of God;
 the holy place of the tabernacle of the Most Highest.¹*

The offering of bread.

LAST WEEK THE BUNDLE of chalice, paten, and some other equipment, arrived at the altar (*sanctificavit tabernaculum suum Altissimus, the holy place of the tabernacle of the Most Highest*). It was borne thither by the subdeacon. It began to be unpacked.

While the subdeacon was being wrapped in the shawl called the humeral veil (102 inches of splendid green silk), while he using it to scoop up the bundle, the deacon was laying the corporal and propping the burse. This done, he bowed to the celebrant, who resumed his usual place at the centre of the altar, thus:



Here we have them: celebrant (the arrow) in front of the corporal (□), with the Missal (📖) conveniently at his left hand. The deacon (⊠) is to his right, the subdeacon (⌘) further right still.

The deacon takes from the subdeacon the top layers of the bundle: pall, Host, paten. He flips off the pall, which comes to rest at the top corner of the corporal, and gives the celebrant the silver-gilt plate with the huge wafer on top of it. And immediately the celebrant gives this to God.

This flabbergasting act requires a slow approach. Let's begin with the paten; then think about the audacious act of gift.

¹ Psalm xlv³⁻⁵ (Vulgate), xlv²⁻⁴ (Prayer Book).

The paten.

PATENS ARE BREAD-PLATES. The word is both Greek – *πατανη* – and Latin – *patina*. The Latin word also gives us the English words *patina*, meaning *surface*, and *paten*, meaning (sometimes) *tiles*.

You may remember the gut-wrenchingly beautiful moment in *The Merchant of Venice*, on a starry night outside Portia's villa at Belmont, when Lorenzo (that little creep) takes the hand of Jessica (that unpleasant little whore) and exclaims:

*Sit, Jessica. Look how the floor of heaven
Is thick inlaid with patens of bright gold!
There's not the smallest orb which thou beholdst
But in his motion like an angel sings
Still choring to the young-eyed cherubins.*²

Shakespeare, aloof and god-like, lets his best lines fall alike on the just and the unjust. And his perspective is so detached that he seems above religious opinions, even in the age of the Wars of Religion. Was he or wasn't he a Roman Catholic? My own impression is that he really was aloof, believing and disbelieving nothing. But he does tease, and these *patens of bright gold* which hold the stars (each with its tutelary angel, singing Alleluias from amazed delight at creation) aren't just clay tiles: they also suggest liturgical patens, made of gold to hold the brightness of the divine glory,³ which is Christ. The night sky is a black altar-cloth, speckled with uncountable patens, as if the starry folk were saying Mass.

In the first few centuries of Mass, patens were huge silver (or glass!) affairs, weighing twenty or thirty pounds. At the Offertory two deacons would heave one down from the altar, and receive on it the offerings of the people of bread. The loaf, or loaves, to be consecrated, were taken from the paten and placed on the altar; after consecration, the Body of Christ was replaced on the patens and carried to the people, who each reached in a tore out a portion of the Sacrifice. This last detail sounds to us a bit crude, but no doubt it was done reverently enough.

Soon after the Empire became Christian, people began to shrink from receiving Communion, and by the ninth or tenth century usually only the celebrant would [communicate](#), which is the official Church term for *eat or drink the Body or Blood*. We'll discuss this odd state of affairs when we get to Communion in seven chapters' time. The motive for avoiding communication was not indifference but dread. The awful Presence of

² *The Merchant of Venice*, V, i, 58-62.

³ Hebrews i³.

Christ alarmed people: they felt unworthy to receive Him, and preferred merely to [assist](#) (which is the official Church term for *being present and prayerful at Mass*). The Church of England, in this as in other things the most advanced part of Catholic Christendom, began to recover [frequent Communion](#) in the mid-nineteenth century, the Roman Church a few generations later. But for a millennium, half the history of the Mass, it was normal for the celebrating priest to be the only [communicant](#). (Obviously – or perhaps it isn't obvious – there must always be at least one communicant, to consume the Body and Blood consecrated in the process of celebrating Mass.)

Patens for that long era of infrequent Communion stopped being big. When there *were* many communicants, an entirely different vessel, the [ciborium](#), was used (and we'll come to *it* when it comes to us, at Communion). Patens shrank from being chargers to being saucers of gold, or gilded silver. Against the usual rule of steady liturgical *elaboration*, patens became simpler as the centuries of faith wore on. Medieval models usually had a depression in the middle, but ours is a perfect geometric concave circle. The simplicity of the paten is a foil to the elaboration of the chalice. The chalice is festive; the paten is content to serve as its cover.

But just wait to hear of the paten's adventures over the next few minutes.

Offertory of the Host.

THE PATEN WAS CONSECRATED as a sacred vessel by a bishop, who anointed it with chrism and blessed it *for the administration of the Eucharist of Jesus Christ, that the Body of our Lord may be broken upon it, and that it may serve as the new sepulchre of the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ.*⁴ In other words, the paten has three functions: it is used to offer the Body; it is used in the breaking of the Body (and therefore recapitulates the Cross); and on it the broken Body rests (so it recapitulates the tomb). The offering occurs now, at this moment of the Mass. The paten will then vanish until it is needed for the breaking and the holding.

Here is our manner of offering God bread. The paten holds the large priest's Host, which we contemplated a few weeks ago when we were discussing altar bread. The priest's Host is a thickish wafer, about seven inches across, stamped with radiant lines so that it can later be broken up (into twenty-four pieces, as it happens). The priest lifts up the paten with the

⁴ Herbert Thurston, 'PATEN', in *The Catholic Encyclopædia*.

Host on it – a few inches off the corporal, and all the way from finity to infinity, because he is now presenting it to the omnipotent Unity Which was before the worlds began. As he makes the gesture of proffering, he recites the first of the [Offertory prayers](#).

Here is this week’s freeze-frame, our frozen moment of ritual: the priest lifts up his saucer of bread, imparting it to the unseen, performing for all of us one of mankind’s most essential acts.

Offertory Prayers.

WHAT ARE THESE OFFERTORY PRAYERS, exactly? –You’ll remember that at this point the *Apostolic Constitutions* (that ancient first draft of *The Freeze-Frame Mass*) simply prescribes: *Let the high priest . . . pray by himself; and let him put on his shining garment, and . . . say: ‘The . . . Lord . . . be with you all.’ And let all with one voice say: ‘And with thy spirit.’* The reason the ‘high priest’ or bishop is to *pray by himself*, and then launch into the Canon of the Mass (*Sursum corda, Lift up your hearts*), is that while the deacons lug up the offerings to the altar, the congregation is simultaneously busy singing a psalm. This *sotto voce* prayer was called the *Secretum* or [Secret](#) because it was said ‘secretly’. We still have the Secret, but the Offertory has meanwhile evolved into greater complexity – a polphony of gesture, with many simultaneous gestures. It is not just a matter of presenting the gifts of bread and wine: the choir and then the congregation are singing anthems and hymns, and offering money; the actual carrying up to the altar up to the altar of the elements is now delegated by the people to the subdeacon and servers.

The celebrant thus has some time on his hands, and to fill the gap, and make the offering more explicit, prayers were developed during the Middle Ages. This development was fixed until the Missal of Pius V, the so-called Tridentine Missal, which prescribed seven.

These Offertory prayers are not in our weekly bulletin, so I’m reproducing the text of them here, even though it makes this week’s chapter and next week’s chapter a bit chunky. On the right is an English translation (not quite the translation in the *American Missal*, the Mass-book which sits on the altar at Ascension and St Agnes); on the left are the Latin originals. As always, even if you have as little Latin as I have, do read these prayers in their original, magnificent, rolling language. Latin remains the basic language of the Church, and in the Mass prayers are always known by their Latin names, even when recited in the vernacular. So the first of these seven prayers is called the *Suscipe sancte Pater*.

Suscipe sancte Pater : the flawlessness of matter.

*SUSCIPE SANCTE PATER
omnipotens æterne Deus,
hanc immaculatam hostiam,
quam ego indignus famulus tuus
offero tibi Deo meo vivo et vero,
pro innumerabilibus peccatis
et offensionibus et negligentis meis,
et pro omnibus circumstantibus,
sed et pro omnibus fidelibus Christianis
viviis atque defunctis
ut mihi et illis proficiat
ad salutem in vitam æternam. Amen.*

*RECEIVE, O HOLY FATHER,
almighty and eternal God,
this spotless host,
which I, Thine unworthy servant,
offer unto Thee, my living and true God,
for my countless sins,
and trespasses, and negligences;
as also for all here present,
and for all faithful Christians
both living or dead,
that it may avail both me and them
to salvation, unto life everlasting. Amen.*

THE SURPRISING AND SIGNIFICANT word here is *immaculatum*, which means *immaculate*, or *spotless*, or *flawless*. Of course the Altar Guild wouldn't put a wafer out on the credence table if it were mouldy or misformed; is that the point of this prayer? Is it an advertising boast?

No; the point is that the Host, which is still just bread – simply an elegant circle of stamped bread – is from God's point of view flawless. You might remember that, when we began to discuss the Offertory, we reflected that we “cannot decently venerate the Host . . . unless we descry that ordinary bread is such a marvel that it might indeed play host for Christ's Body. If we aren't staggered by the incomparable world out of which Christ has ascended, we will not understand how wonderful fitting are the ways (sacrament, Holy Ghost) by which God remains in it. The paten and the chalice are capable of containing What they contain because bread and wine are, like all material things, innately holy.”

There's no reason why you *should* recall this meditation, which you read a month back if you read it at all. But the Church never forgets her conviction that physical reality is not (as most religions suggest) contemptible and trifling, but inherently sacred and immaculate. When in the thirteenth century a new religion arose in Europe, the religion of the Cathars, despising matter and preaching escape from it, the Church defiantly inserted the word *immaculatum* into her Offertory prayers. Bread, mere bread, could properly be offered to God because He made the material world and loves it. It is spotless. The wafer consecrated in Mass stands for the whole of physical reality, and in the wafer matter is solemnly pronounced without reproach.

Flawless and timeless sacrifice.

IMMACULATAM HOSTIAM, the provocative title Christianity gives to mere bread, occurs later in the Canon of the Mass, when God is beseeched to gaze with His *gracious, tranquil face (propitio ac sereno vultu respicere digneris)* on this *immaculatam hostiam*, this *spotless victim*, and to accept it because it is *flawless* –

even as Thou wast pleased to accept the offerings of Thy just servant Abel;

the sacrifice of our patriarch Abraham;

and that which was offered unto Thee by Thy priest Melchizedek.

I want us to jump ahead now, and meditate on this invocation of Old Testament worthies: Abel, Abraham and Melchizedek. They aren't mentioned just to give the Mass antique gravity. These names plunge us into the timeless, utterly worthwhile human business of offering God *things*: of making a material offertory to Him. (The idea is outrageous, but only because it is so fundamental.)

According to an ancient myth, Abel, son of Adam, offered God the first of his lambs; God accepted this lamb, but Abel died for the sacrifice, since Cain, who was of a vegetarian bent, jealously murdered his brother. Abel's lamb's blood, ritually drizzled over his rough altar, was satisfactory to God – who created matter and love matter. Abel's own blood, splashed over the earth, cried out for vengeance, and God heard the cry.⁵

Here we have the two aspects of the Christian sacrifice of the Mass. Men, sons of Adam, can offer God material thing and be accepted; but it is human blood that is precious enough to provoke God's anger, or (for the blood of Christ *speaketh better things than that of Abel*⁶) His forgiveness. How can we offer God blood not of fratricide? – only through offering Him the Blood Christ voluntarily gave us at the Last Supper. We offer, in the form of wine, immortal Blood.

I know that this talk of placating God with lamb's blood or Son's Blood is a scandal. Nonetheless, the idea is outrageous only because it is so fundamental. We slip out of our own age and our own sensibility now: we are of every century and none. We confer on God the best we have, for there is nothing we can do better than offering God our best; and we necessarily offer Him material things. Very well, if material things are acceptable (*immaculatum hostiam*), then our offering can come before Him; and therefore we stand before Him now along with the ultimate figure of

⁵ Genesis iv²⁻¹⁰.

⁶ Hebrews xii²⁴.

priesthood, *sacerdos tuus Melchisedech, Thy priest Melchizedek*, and that ultimate figure of faith, Abraham.

Abraham, father of us all.

WE SHOULD THINK MORE OFTEN than we do Abram *alias* Abraham, the legendary figure (but he must surely have some historical reality too) who in, perhaps, the **XXXth** century before Christ wandered away from the cities of Mesopotamia, which is now called Iraq, and sojourned for the rest of his long life in the deserts and hill-pasturage of Syria, and Egypt, and Palestine.

When we are contemplate Abraham we are gazing down a well, so deep the bottom is beyond the reach of history or archæology; but the face we see staring up at us is still our own, or at least our father's.

Abram was, if he existed historically, essentially just a prosperous *sheikh*, a sumptuous nomad. The annals about him in the Book of Genesis are rambling tales of desert luxury. Scores of white milch camels stand stupefied in the noon-day heat, while nearby concubines, barbarously hennaed, heavy with copper-bracelets, sprawl in scarlet tents. Far away are the cities of the ancient world; against these cities Abraham brushes rather awkwardly. For him, although he was city-bred, life was the free changeless life of the sandy wilderness – the long siesta under the terebinths, feasts of spit-roasted lamb and raisin-wine and honey-cakes, the world of immense solitudes, or of the desert clans (*Bethuel begat Rebekah: these eight Milcah did bear to Nahor, Abraham's brother. And his concubine, whose name was Reumah, she bare also Tebah, and Gaham, and Thahash, and Maachah . . .*⁷).

Father Abraham, in other words, is the raw material of swoony Orientalism, and we are either not interested, or merely charmed. This is the realm of the *Thousand and One Nights* and T.E. Lawrence and *The Sheltering Sky*. We can hardly be expected to take seriously such exoticism, such pungency. What to us is this ancient, equivocally existent bedouin, brooding alone by sizzling embers of sandalwood under the desert stars – those fierce bonfires speckling the awful purple dome, as if the gods were nomads too, encamped about the desert sky?⁸

⁷ Genesis xxii^{23f}.

⁸ As you see, I am enjoying writing like this and could go on for pages. For I am very taken with a certain strain of Oriental romance; one of the best moments of my life has been watching the scarlet sun melt away into the valleys of the High Atlas from Zagora, a date-palm oasis in Morocco beyond the mountains, out in the ocean of sand. I am innocently entranced by the whole

romantic blur we westerners think of as ARABY – and remain puzzled that certain prejudices in American foreign policy rely on an unexamined contempt and loathing for such people.
But we are digressing.

Abraham and God.

WHETHER BEDOUIN CHIEFTAINS happen to thrill your imagination or not, you are obliged to take Abraham seriously. For he is venerated as their spiritual ancestor not only by Jews, but by Christians and by Moslems. The world's monotheist faiths all claim *the faith of Abraham; who is the father of us all* (says St Paul), the *Imam of men* (says the Koran); the Jews still call themselves as *the people of the God of Abraham*.⁹ Abraham is the font – or (since perhaps he never existed), his is the name associated by legend with the first stirrings of the One God in the human mind.

Of course monotheism also arose in the cool white porticoes of Athens, and Alexandria, and Rome, quite independent of what was happening out in rural Syria. But it existed in those urbane places only as a private intellectual speculation advanced by cultivated chaps with independent incomes. The God of the Philosophers, the God discussed in Athens, could never become a popular God, and was not meant to.

Christianity is perfectly rational and urbane. It can talk the language of those marble porticoes more lucidly than Socrates or Aristotle or Plotinus or Seneca ever did. Yet as a matter of history, our deepest roots lie elsewhere – amongst the ass and camel nomads of the Near East. It was in that remote region that the human spirit (and not just the *intelligensia*) first grasped that the uncanny quality of the world comes, not from a multitude of little gods haunting it, but from the empire of a single Mind, infinite, creative, serene, mysterious, concerned with man's history, purposeful, loving, and eager to reveal Itself to Its creatures.

Plato believed in the One God, and communed with Him alone. There are earnest, virtuous, high-minded persons in our own society who believe in the One God, and commune with Him alone, beautifully (they say; He is discreet about them, but then perhaps He's a bit wearied with their high-mindedness). There are people who still try to get by on the God of the Philosophers, the God Who can be discerned by reason. But they are mistaken. Reason knows its own limits. Human thought does not tell us enough to get by on. Serious monotheism requires faith as well as reason, since direct relations with God require faith (that act of will, choosing to accept *the evidence of things not seen*¹⁰ as if they had been seen). Direct relations between finity and infinity demand more than intense talking on our part, and intense listening on His. Love requires touch. There must be a

⁹ Romans iv¹⁶; *The Koran*, ii ('The Cow'), 124; xtext.lib.virginia.edu/koran/html; Psalm xlvii⁹.

¹⁰ Hebrews xi¹.

mingling of our things and His. There must be an exchange of gifts. There must be, on our part, public sacrifice.

Real religious faith, authentic monotheism, needs sacrifice as well as prayer, a public offering as well as a private devotion. We must assemble – becoming a people with a public cult, distinct from humanity as such, a religious nation – and we must offer the One God some token. Serious religion begins at the moment (whether in history or legend) when *the Lord ... said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country . . . unto a land that I will shew thee: And I will make of thee a great nation . . . in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed.*¹¹

Abraham and Melchizedek.

THE ANNALS OF ABRAHAM once he's quit his ancestral town and begun his wanderings are somewhat inconsequential. He acquires many donkeys, many concubines, many camels, and, after a dangerously late start, many descendents; then he dies.

But on the way a number of creepy things happen to him which presage what serious monotheistic faith will be like, and show that Abraham *has* it. I mean, to begin with, the amazing incident of the mock-sacrifice of Isaac, when God seems to experiment with the idea of reconciliation between divinity and humanity through an only son's blood.¹² I mean the even creepier moment when God playfully hints to Abraham His own Trinitarian nature: *the Lord appeared unto him in the plains of Mamre: and he sat in the tent door in the heat of the day; And he lift up his eyes and looked, and, lo, three men stood by him . . .*¹³ I also mean the incident where Abraham was caught up in a war. (Please read through these names slowly and without skipping. The outlandish music of these names is the point):

it came to pass in the days of Amraphel king of Shinar, Arioch king of Ellasar, Chedorlaomer king of Elam, and Tidal king of nations; That these made war with Bera king of Sodom, and with Birsha king of Gomorrah, Shinab king of Admah, and Shemeber king of Zeboiim, and the king of Bela, which is Zoar. All these were joined together in the vale of Siddim, which is the salt sea. . .

¹⁴

¹¹ Genesis xiii1-3

¹² Genesis xxii17-18.

¹³ Genesis xviii¹.

¹⁴ Genesis xiv^{1-3, 5}.

In other words, there was a clan vendetta somewhere out in the wilderness (since a prolonged American presence in Afghanistan seems certain, we'd better get used to such clan vendettas out in the wilderness). Swirling horseman charge at each other, whistling their scimitars, robes fluttering, ululating terribly under the burning sky. Chedorlaomer – whom, you'll remember, was the chief baddy – *and the kings that were with him, . . . smote the Rephaims in Ashteroth Karnaim, and the Zuzims in Ham, and the Emims in Shaveh Kiriathaim . . .*¹⁵ But in the end (you'll be glad to hear) Abraham and his allies won. Loaded with booty, Abraham returned

*from the slaughter of Chedorlaomer, and of the kings that were with him, at the valley of Shaveh, which is the king's dale. And Melchizedek king of Salem brought forth bread and wine: and he was the priest of the most high God. And he blessed him, and said, Blessed be Abram of the most high God, possessor of heaven and earth: After these things the word of the Lord came unto Abram in a vision, saying, Fear not, Abram: I am thy shield, and thy exceeding great reward.*¹⁶

In the midst of all this antique carnage and quaint looting comes, like the abrupt clang of a bell, a sharp little phrase: *Melchizedek king of Salem brought forth bread and wine: and he was the priest of the most high God.*

Who was Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the One God? Salem (which means *peace*) is Jerusalem, and these odd ringing words inspired a Psalm which declared that the coming Christ would be *a Priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek*.¹⁷ The New Testament develops this idea: Melchizedek was *Without father, without mother, without descent, having neither beginning of days, nor end of life; but made like unto the Son of God*.¹⁸ In other words, He was Christ, suddenly and oddly appearing to the Father of Monotheism to give him bread and wine.

This all happened, if it did happen, **XXX** centuries ago. But what is history, after all? We think of the Mass as the last word in human worship, and so it is. But God the Son has never changed, has always been approached through sacrifice, has always been waiting to take a human sacrifice of bread and wine and render it into His own human flesh. There was instant of time that did not prepare for the Mass. There was no moment

¹⁵ Genesis xiv^{1-3, 5}.

¹⁶ Genesis xiv¹⁷⁻¹⁹, xv¹.

¹⁷ Psalm cx⁴.

¹⁸ Hebrews vii³.

in human history which did not point to our giving to God the immaculate host.

Shaveh Kiriathaim.

SHAVEH KIRIATHAIM, WHERE THE FATHERLESS, motherless King of Peace appeared to Abraham, bearing bread and wine, was no doubt a desert canyon where a *wadi*, or seasonal stream, ran between walls of ochre rock. But *Shaveh Kiriathaim* is delightfully glossed in our English Bible as *the king's dale*; and is even more delightfully transformed into a mossy Flemish valley by the Renaissance painter Bouts. Here is Abraham pictured as Burgundian knight, in damask tunic and velvet cap – almost a biretta. Behind him you can make out his squire, holding his horse, and his leading clansmen (Tebah, and Gaham, and Thahash, and Maachah, presumably). Melchizedek is very wonderfully attired both as an Oriental king and as a slightly orientalisised Pope; was he not *the priest of the most high God*? And he carries what are obviously *eucharistic* offerings: a perfect cruet of altar wine, a round flawless loaf as Host.

Abraham rubs in his head in bemusement and shyly half-genuflects. But our imaginations, I hope, quicken with recognition. If there *is* One God, only partly knowable to human reason; if He *must* be reached, not just with prayer but also with the giving of gifts; if matter *is* spotless, so that material things are acceptable gifts; if the most serious gift is a *living thing*, surrendered so totally that its blood is shed; if the most precious gift is an *only son*; if the only adequate gift to God must itself be divine – then our only hope is the hope, apparently impossible, that we can give God His own Son's Flesh and Blood. It will be many centuries after the meeting at Shaveh Kiriathaim before mankind has been readied for God's unspeakable gift to us which will allow us to make the unspeakable gift to Him at every Mass. But already, with Abraham, God's experiment with man is under way. Almost slyly the King of Peace appears to the father of all believers to show him the bread and the wine. Here: one day you will offer *this*; and it will be entirely accepted by God.



This week's freeze frame.

ALL THIS IS ANCIENT NEWS (even if it did happen). Yet what is history, after all? We feel at home in our age and we assume that what we think and do must be normal. But human life is never really normal. The world is extraordinary, our existence in it a standing marvel. Things are never other than they were then in the desert canyon of Shaveh Kiriathaim, *the valley of the shadow of death*, where we languish, longing for *green pasture . . . the waters of comfort*.¹⁹ Whatever changes in human affairs, this does not change, *though the earth be moved, and though the hills be carried into the midst of the sea*. There remains *a river, the streams whereof make glad*. This river is God's gift of Himself through the material universe: through creation itself; then, with far greater focus, through the incarnation; and, most immediately – since it is happening now –

*Quick now, here, now, always –
Ridiculous the waste sad time
Stretching before and after*²⁰

– in this particular Mass.

Whatever changes in human affairs, this does not change. We are children of Abraham. Our most solid business in life is to touch infinity through the exchange of gifts. The twelve pages of this week's chapter thus turn back to this one inexhaustible instant, this week's freeze-frame. The priest (*a priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec*)²¹ lifts up a paten with a circle of bread on it, and murmurs *Suscipe sancte Pater, Receive, O Holy Father! omnipotens æterne Deus! almighty and eternal God! hanc immaculatam hostiam, this spotless Host*.

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¹⁹ Psalm xxiii^{4,2}.

²⁰ T.S. Eliot, 'Burnt Norton' v, *Four Quarters*.

²¹ Psalm cx⁴; Hebrews v^{6,10,20}, vii^{11, 17, 21}.