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"Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them."

That was a very politically incorrect thing to say there in the midst of first century Jewish culture. It cost Jesus a good many supporters. But then Jesus was no politician. He didn't regret making that awkward statement. He didn't try to walk those words back - for with Christ, the truth was always prioritized over popular public opinion.

It was indeed deeply offensive to talk of drinking human blood.

But it seems to me, that the central issue at play here in this passage is not about drinking blood, but about the literal interpretation of words. Jesus seemed to be surrounded by followers who took his words more literally than spiritually.

So much so that those people seem a bit shallow to us today. I mean they couldn't seem to grasp the simple concept that something could be absolutely true and not be literally true.

For example, Good nutrition is so vital to our health and so, while not a Bible quote, I truly believe that tired old cliché, "You are what you eat." I believe it's true --- and yet, as I look at you this morning I don't see waffles, pancakes and warm blueberry muffins. I see people.

What about Scripture; How literally should we interpret it? There is much of it that I interpret literally. When I read the simple words from the book of Exodus: "Thou Shall Not Steal," I think that means precisely - literally what it says.

But then - when I read in Titus, "Cretans (people native to the island of Crete) are always liars, evil brutes, and lazy gluttons," -- I don't interpret that passage literally. It must serve some truthful purpose, I just don't know what that purpose could be.

Then too, I've never met even the staunchest literalist who interprets every word of the bible literally - we all draw the line somewhere. I've never met anyone who literally believed Christ's plea, "Let the dead bury the dead." That statement isn't reasonable if taken literally and isolated from its context.

We all draw the line somewhere. The problem is: you draw your line over there and I draw my line over here and before you know it we have our lines drawn all over the place. That's OK we Episcopalians like our lines drawn freely. We do find a wideness in God's mercy and a freedom in God's Spirit!

But how do we know which passages of scripture to interpret literally and which to interpret spiritually or otherwise? I think that's the crucial question of Bible Study.

I would suggest that - in order to know how to interpret the bible for ourselves we must first know the bible, and to know the Bible we must read and study it. It is indeed a good thing, from time to time, to read a good book about the Good Book, but we must also read the Good Book.

So how do we know which passages to interpret literally? --- We use reason and tradition. You see Holy Scripture is the first and foremost leg of our three-legged Anglican theology. Reason and then tradition are the other two legs which bring balance to scripture - the first leg.

Unlike our brothers and sisters from other Christian traditions that embrace Sola Scriptura (Scripture Alone), we believe that we ought to at least try to use our God-Given minds to reasonably assess the application of scripture to our daily lives and worship.

Consequently, most of us find the literal consumption of the biological blood and flesh of Christ to be unreasonable. But at the other extreme, we also find mere symbolism or tokenism to be equally as unreasonable. And so we embrace a very real presence of Christ in the consecrated bread and wine without the literal flesh and blood.

We have the scripture itself and we have God-Given reason, and then we have our common experiential history - our tradition.

For centuries now folks have been prayerfully asking God for guidance in interpreting scripture, and we believe God answers prayer. That guidance and those answered prayers are still out there for us to use - we call that tradition. Yes, we do need to confirm it all with scripture and reason, but tradition certainly has its God given place in legitimate Christian spirituality.

Our Prayer Book collect for Proper 28 reads, "Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them."

?? Inwardly digest the word of God? Digesting scripture - Eating Words? But then Christ is the living word, isn't he? "Whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven." Indeed, our lives are nourished by the reality, the spirituality and the mystery of both word and sacrament.

The flesh and blood of the living word is our bread. We eat that worded flesh and drink that worded blood. Reason and tradition are means by which we digest it.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us.