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Swine ethics?

I have been pondering recently the imminent demise of my first pigs, dubbed 'Sausage' and 'Bacon' by my children. They have been with us for around seven months, but their arrival was part of a much longer internal wrestle with the ethics of meat-eating.

I teach a module on 'environmental ethics', which regularly leaves me feeling culpably cavalier about the process of eating meat. The issues are well known: the conditions of cheap, factory-farmed animals are often extremely poor, and the industry pays little heed to any intrinsic value that animals may have.

For Christians, who have been charged with the stewardship of creation, this cannot be acceptable. Eden, interestingly, was a meat-free zone. On the other hand, the ancient tradition of animal sacrifice in the Old Testament regards it as desirable for animals' lives to be given up as part of showing reverence to God. Their meat is then eaten in a spirit of gratitude.

There is no hint that Jesus avoided meat-eating himself, which seals the argument for many Christians. The point of sacrifice, though, is that something of significant value is given up to honour God, not something dispensable and unimportant, which is how animals are too often treated.

We won't be 'sacrificing' my pigs in the Old Testament sense, but we will attempt to approach their end in a way that regards them as a gift, and as something of real, God-given value, whose loss should be felt, but for which gratitude is due.