

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C  
Jer 38:4-6, 8-10  
Ps 40 *passim*  
Heb 12:1-4  
Lk 12: 49-53

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Wow! That's some Gospel. "I have come to set the earth on fire, . . . I have not come to establish peace on this earth, but rather division." Fathers divided against son, mothers set against daughters, in-laws against in-laws. . . . Aren't we supposed to keep peace in the family?

What is going on here? "Peace on earth." Every year don't we celebrate Christmas as the season of peace and good will? "Peace on earth, good will to all, . . ." We sing it over and over. What is going on with this Gospel?

Lots of times, the Scriptures offer words of comfort, encouragement, and consolation.

*My yoke is easy and my burden light.*

*Come to me all you who labor and are heavy burdened, and I will give you rest.*

*I will not leave you orphans.*

*Like a shepherd he feeds his flock and gathers the lambs in his arms.*

These are verses we cling to, like warm fuzzies that make us feel good in times of trial. But sometimes, like today, the Gospel message is a cold prickly. "Sorry, no peace on earth. In fact, I have come to set the earth *on fire*."

Human relationships are very important. We develop rules to govern how we behave with each other. Don't make waves. Don't cause offense. Go along to get along. Never discuss money, politics, or religion at the dinner table. *Family* relationships are especially important, today as well as in Jesus's time. Jesus lived in a society that was in large part driven by considerations of honor and shame. A son would hesitate to oppose his father under *any* circumstances and would never ever oppose him in the presence of outsiders. And yet, we just heard Jesus say, in effect, that in this new world he was proclaiming, this Kingdom of God, family relationships come second.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century there was a theologian named Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He was a German citizen and a Lutheran pastor. He died in a German prison camp in 1945. They hanged him because he opposed Hitler and the Nazi regime. Among the things he is remembered for is a book he authored called *The Cost of Discipleship*. The cost of discipleship. . . . Bonhoeffer taught (in keeping with Lutheran principles that are also part of our Catholic doctrine) that it is through faith that we become righteous—right with God. Faith is our response to God's gift of grace. And grace is truly a gift. God *gives* it to us, and there's nothing we can do to deserve it, so there's no way we can *earn*

God's grace on our own; all we can do is accept it. So, grace is free. But, Bonhoeffer pointed out, it's not cheap. It costs something to be a faithful follower of Jesus. It costs a lot. That's what he meant by the cost of discipleship.

God became human to show us, in the face of unspeakable evil, how much goodness humanity is capable of. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us in order to demonstrate that it is possible to live a perfect human life, to live a life of perfect integrity. The mystery of the Incarnation is what the Christmas season is all about. And the wood of the manger, the feedbox Baby Jesus was laid in – the wood of the manger led to the wood of the Cross. Jesus could have talked his way out of the crucifixion. He could have compromised. He could have explained away his teachings: "I was misunderstood. I was taken out of context. Can't you tell when I'm exaggerating? I really don't want to make waves." We can imagine all of that. . . . But doing that would have cost Jesus his integrity. So, in today's Gospel, as he is heading toward Jerusalem, where he knows what's in store for him – the Cross – he says, "I have come to set the world on fire, and how I wish it were already blazing! I've gotta a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my anguish until it is accomplished." "I can't wait," he says, "to do what I was sent to do!" And in the war of good versus evil, evil fights back.

We get another example in our first reading, the one from the book of the Prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah was warning the people of the danger that lay ahead. The big shots were upset with him, but Jeremiah kept on preaching his message of doom and gloom. The big shots prevailed on King Zedekiah, and King Zedekiah gave in to their pressure. Why? Probably, just like we do today, King Zedekiah was thinking, "You gotta go along to get along."

Each of us has a cross in our life. Being a faithful Christian costs us something. Jesus says, "Take up your cross and come follow me." But if you do, the go-along-to-get-along crowd aren't going to like it. You'll get in trouble. You'll suffer embarrassment and pain and scorn and ridicule. Go along to get along, ok, but not at the cost of your integrity. Avoid hassles and don't make waves, ok, but not at the cost of your integrity. Jesus paid the price for his integrity. Pastor Bonhoeffer paid the price. King Zedekiah didn't.

By the way, King Zedekiah was the last king of Judah before King Nebuchadnezzar and his troops rode into town and carted everybody off to Babylon. Jesus, on the other hand, found Easter glory on the far side of the Cross. And so did Dietrich Bonhoeffer. And so can you and I.

So, each of us has a choice. Do we follow the example of King Zedekiah? Or do we follow Jesus, and do the right thing, come what may?