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From the Selected Works of Reverend Lawrence E. Frizzell, D.Phil.

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Peace in God's Terms

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Peace in God's Terms

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Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Sunday Readings for August 18, 2013 for Cycle C:

Jer 38:4-6, 8-10; Ps 40:2-4; Heb 12:1-4; Lk 12:49-53

PEACE IN GOD'S TERMS

Lawrence E. Frizzell

Like other parts of the world, our society faces several life-and-death issues whose solution requires application of moral principles. On the numerous occasions when political leaders have addressed the questions relating to abortion, AIDS, environment, etc., how often have we heard about the individual's rights calling for concomitant responsibilities? What of the relation between private and common good? The hierarchy of rights wherein the right to life takes precedence over the ambition to achieve a certain "quality of life?"

Although specific problems that we face are novel in some ways, the pattern whereby political leaders evade responsibility can be traced over the millennia. Going back to early sixth century Judah at the time of Jeremiah, we find King Zedekiah, the puppet of King Nebuchadnezzar, being told by advisors that all will be well in short order. Jeremiah alone warned that the idolatry and acts of injustice by Judah's leaders would bring disaster. With a persistent and ominous message, Jeremiah provoked accusations of treason; confrontations and conspiracies of his opponents finally brought the prophet to solitary confinement at the bottom of a cistern. The only friend with the courage to stand up for Jeremiah was a foreigner, an Ethiopian courtier. Thus was God's promise to the prophet fulfilled: "Judah's kings and princes, priests and people will fight against you, but will not prevail over you, for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD" (Jer 1:19).

The advisors to Judah's rulers often mouthed messages that the latter wanted to hear. Today politicians may be tempted to promise what "the people" want to have. But what side effects will come in the wake of the cheap and easy solutions? "Peace, peace", they say, though there is no peace" (Jer 8:11). The term *shalom* (peace as wholeness and prosperity for the community) became as hollow in Jeremiah's ears as Neville Chamberlain's "peace in our time" after the Munich agreement with Hitler in 1938.

The Gospel according to St. Luke proposed that Jesus brings peace and care for the poor as promised gifts of the Messiah (see Isa 9:5-6; 61:1-3, etc.). The angelic hymn at Bethlehem proclaimed that peace is God's special blessing (2:14), yet Jesus asked: "Do you think that I have come to establish peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!" (2:51). What a shock to the disciples and to those who hear these words after singing "Gloria in excelsis Deo" on Sunday!

Until recently, our leaders have spoken of peace in terms of coexistence based on mutual fear. Not very creative, you say. It did provide lucrative contracts for suppliers to the military and jobs for millions of young people -- and it created pollution problems that will plague us for a long time. Were we searching for peace at the cost of compromise of principles?

While Jesus challenged his followers to find a non-violent solution to personal confrontations (Lk 6:27-36), he also demanded resolute adherence to the commandments, even when fidelity might mean persecution and death (Lk 9:23-26; 21:12-19). The same refusal to compromise fidelity to Jesus and to the Father's will may indeed bring disruption of family life. "Behold, this child is destined for the fall and the rise of many in Israel, and to be a sign of contradiction..." (Lk 2:34).

What did Jesus mean by coming to set the earth on fire? Certainly one might think of the consuming flames of divine love, but the prophets linked fire with divine judgment (see Isa 10:16-17). John the Baptist proclaimed that Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire, a symbol of punishment after judgment (Lk 3:16-17).

However, Jesus would first take the baptism of judgment upon himself so that all people would be offered the gift of peace and the vocation of becoming peacemakers in his name. The "division" (Lk 12:51, see "sword" in Mt 10:34) which Jesus brings is the acute sensitivity of conscience whereby Christians should be able to discern the cheap compromises and the false logic that underlies so many merely human efforts to bring peace to families and nations.