

**Reflection on the Gospel-20th Sunday in Ordinary Time C
(Luke 12:49-53)**

-Veronica Lawson RSM

Prophets can get a hard time, as today's first reading demonstrates (Jeremiah 38:4-6, 8-10). This is almost certainly because they tend to disturb the peace of the complacent as we find in the gospel reading. Jesus, the Lukan prophet, seems to be contradicting so much of what he has stood for to this point in the gospel story. At his birth, he is presented as the bringer of peace (1:79 and 2:14). He tells the hospitable woman of 7:50 and the faith-filled woman of 8:48 to "go in peace". He instructs his disciples to bring peace to the homes they visit (10:5-6). He refuses to be a divider (12:13-14). And now he declares that he has come not to bring peace but division: his hearers can expect members of families to be divided one against another. How can this be?

The Lukan Jesus is probably describing the status quo rather than prescribing what ought to prevail. In other words, by the time Luke is writing, it is clear that some have accepted the gospel way of peace and justice and compassion and others within the same families have not. Acceptance of the gospel and of Jesus as the Christ or Messiah would have involved a monumental shift for Jews on the one hand and for adherents of the diverse philosophies or faiths of the Roman world on the other. Today's families of mixed faith might be able to get inside this experience and to understand the suffering involved when a family member makes a life choice that other members of the family find hard to accept.

There is a sense of urgency in the text. Jesus feels constrained or under stress until the "fire" he has come to cast on the earth is kindled and the baptism of fire that John the Baptist foreshadowed in 3:16 takes effect. Elsewhere in Luke's writing, fire is associated with judgement (3:9, 17; 9:17; 17:29), and with the presence of the Holy Spirit (3:16), especially in the Lukan story of Pentecost (Acts 2:3) where "tongues as of fire" appear and rest on all those assembled in the upper room. Fire is a sign of the end times when the Spirit of prophecy descends on all God's people, young and old, female and male, slave and free (Acts 2:18-19). Those who have experienced the effect of the all too frequent bush fires in our part of the world can appreciate the power of this image. Fire can take all before it. It can also bring the most astonishing new life in its wake. This is not an easy text to understand or even to accept. We need to struggle with its ambiguity.