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## **Peace on Earth (Luke 12: 49-56)**

Sarah Bachelard

According to biblical scholar, David Neville, Luke is the recognized evangelist of peace,<sup>1</sup> and Jesus is identified in this gospel as the one who brings peace.

His birth is prophesied in these terms by Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist: 'By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace' (Luke 1: 79). Jesus consistently speaks peace to those he heals (eg. 7:50, 8:48, 10:5), and the theme of peace brackets the whole middle section of the gospel. As he sets out on his long journey to Jerusalem, Jesus rebukes his disciples for wanting to call down fire from heaven to consume an inhospitable Samaritan village (9: 54-55). And as Jerusalem finally comes into view, Jesus weeps over it, saying 'if you ... had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace!' (19.42) So, Neville suggests, 'the peace theme, prominent at both beginning and end of this distinctively Lukan journey narrative, encloses and thereby holds together all the teaching material in these ten chapters – whether on discipleship, the mercy of God, money or prayer'. It's as if, he continues, the whole point of Jesus' mission is to bring peace to 'an unreceptive, violent and often cruel world'.<sup>2</sup>

All of which makes what Jesus says in the reading we had tonight even more striking and puzzling. Because in the midst of his journey to Jerusalem, a journey supposedly encompassed by and in the service of peace, Jesus says what looks like the

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<sup>1</sup> David Neville, 'The Spirit of the Lord is Upon Me: Preaching from Luke in Year C', *St Mark's Review*, No. 213 (3) (July 2010), pp.57-70, p.63.

<sup>2</sup> Neville, 'The Spirit of the Lord is Upon Me', p.65.

opposite: 'Do you think that I have come to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division' (12: 50). What on earth then is going on?

Tonight's passage belongs in a series of sayings to do with judgment and the need to be ready for the coming crisis. The crowd has been warned against hypocrisy. They're told not to store up an abundance of possessions without being 'rich toward God', and the disciples are warned, be 'dressed for action and have your lamps lit ... 'be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour'. These are words concerned with the fundamental orientation of life. The crowds and disciples alike are called to choose God's way over illusory security and corrupt religion. The genre is apocalyptic, for the end is nigh.

In this context, it's natural to assume that the divisions Jesus speaks of – father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother – are to do with individual choices for or against God. In apocalyptic literature, judgment 'works by way of the separation of good from evil',<sup>3</sup> the division of the righteous from the unrighteous. Jesus seems to be suggesting that some in a single household may follow him, while others will refuse. On this reading, Jesus may be bringing peace on earth, but it's a peace secured only once the ungodly are identified and rooted out, purged by fire. Commentator I. Howard Marshall concludes: 'The general tone of Jesus' teaching may well have led people to think that his message was one of unqualified peace ... But such peace cannot come without war preceding it'.<sup>4</sup>

I am troubled by this interpretation. I can't help feeling the peace that comes from war is an uneasy peace at best. It's a peace always vulnerable to being broken, and essentially dependent on an underlying threat of violence. Is this really what Jesus is about? Is this really the nature of God's judgment?

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<sup>3</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978), p.547.

<sup>4</sup> Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, p.548.

I want to suggest an alternative reading of this difficult passage, which is offered by Rene Girard and further developed by theologian James Alison. On their view, the notion that God's peace issues from necessary 'war', or from a violent and purifying separation of so-called good from so-called evil, is false. In fact, it belongs to a vision of God and God's holiness that is precisely what Jesus came to subvert. So let me explore this with you.

I've spoken before at Benedictus about what Girard calls the scapegoat mechanism. He noticed, as an anthropologist, that in the mythology of every human society, it's possible to discern traces of a mechanism which both shores up group identity and displaces group conflict. The mechanism is sacrifice – the sacrifice of someone who's suddenly seen to be a problem, the cause of everyone's difficulties, and whose difference or marginal status threatens the well-being of the rest of us. So what happens is that the troubled or fragile group unites against the sacrificial victim (all against one), anxiety is appeased and peace restored – at least for a time. This, Girard argues, is the basis of primitive religion – it is God who is said to be appeased by this violent sacrifice, because the peace which comes from the group's unanimity against the designated transgressor 'is misperceived by the participants as peace flowing from divinity'.<sup>5</sup> We all feel better – stronger, more secure – we must have done the right thing. We see this process still – in office politics, in ethnic cleansing, and religious fundamentalism.

Well, into this world of unstable peace maintained by violent sacrifice, Jesus comes. And what he does is to keep pointing out, to keep re-including those who have been excluded, sacrificed for the sake of the identity and unanimity of the group. He touches lepers, he eats with prostitutes and tax collectors, he lets everyone and anyone associate with him. It's a bit destabilising for those around him. He's undermining

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<sup>5</sup> James Alison, 'Wrath and the gay question', *Broken Hearts & New Creations: Intimations of a Great Reversal* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2010), p.40.

consensus about who's in and who's out; he's subverting the authority of those who get say. No surprise that he himself eventually becomes a target of the mechanism – too blasphemous, too divisive to tolerate.

But here's the surprising bit. Where any of us will do almost anything to avoid becoming victims of the mechanism, Jesus appears to realise in advance what's going on. According to the gospel accounts of the Passion, he gives himself knowingly into this dynamic. This is the 'baptism' he must undergo. As James Alison says, he substitutes himself 'for the victim at the centre of the lynch sacrifice'.<sup>6</sup> Why? Not because God demands a sacrifice to appease *his* wrath, but because Jesus is showing us *our* wrath. He's unmasking, making visible the murderous logic of the mechanism on which so much of our common life is founded, and seeking to liberate us from entanglement in it. He's showing us that this kind of 'sacred' violence is nothing to do with God. In the process, he's enabling us to stop creating peace by violent means, and inviting us to inhabit a wholly different order of peace, the peace as he says 'that the world cannot give' and which we access only as we participate in Jesus' way of being – hospitable, forgiving, merciful, undefended.

The catch is this. Jesus warns that his subversion of the world's way of making peace will lead, at least in the medium term, to more violence and division. This is because when he unmask what's really going on he makes it harder for us to keep doing it. Gradually all the ways we had of creating peaceful in-groups and displacing our conflicts by excluding and demonising others become less believable and lose their power. And that's how it's true to say that Jesus, the Prince of Peace, brings division. Not because war must be fought to win peace. Not because the unrighteous must be violently rooted out. But because division is a consequence of the collapse of our false peace, as we find we can no longer truthfully secure our in-group identity over against some designated other. And that's also why the ultimate in-group, the family, may find

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<sup>6</sup> Alison, 'Wrath and the gay question', p.42.

itself at odds with itself. It's not that some are believers and some aren't. It's that they can no longer secure their togetherness over against that other family over there, that other tribe, that other nation. A different basis for their unity, for their peace, must be lived into. That basis is Christ, and him crucified.