

## Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time C - "I have come to set the earth on fire, and how I wish it were already blazing

August 14, 2022.

***I have come to set the earth on fire, and how I wish it were already blazing.***" (Luke 12:49) The readings this Sunday present us with the challenges to our faith. In the first reading Jeremiah was thrown into a cistern because he refused to tell the king what the king wanted to hear. He proclaimed the truth that God told him to do, even though it cost him severely. The second reading (Hebrews 12:1-4) was addressed to the people who were tempted to give up their faith because it was too difficult, too demanding for them. Further on in the letter, the author of Hebrews would tell them to lift up their drooping hands, and firm up their shaking knees, and stop complaining. They had not yet resisted sin to the point of shedding blood. They should keep their eyes focused on Jesus, and not be so concerned about their present lives.

No doubt Luke knows that his readers would be startled by this Sunday's Gospel reading (Luke 12:49-52). But he sees these statements of Jesus as important for the Church community of his time that was facing great difficulties: not only from persecution from outsiders, but also from internal disputes that sometimes ended up in the civil court, disputes that divided the Christian community itself and even the families that belonged to it. Such a situation calls for stern measures. The whole story of the Scriptures tells us that evil, or 'sin', is real. God's designs for the human family have been continually frustrated by selfishness and destructiveness – sometimes motivated by the evil in human hearts; sometimes caused by ignorance and foolishness, but destructive nonetheless. Jesus did not come to provoke dissection; but the decision to live by the ways of God, that was essential to the message he preached, inevitably led to disagreements. If selfishness and destructiveness are to have their way unchallenged, the peace Christ came to bring - as a foretaste of the final 'kingdom' - will never become a reality. **This Sunday, Jesus speaks about the cost of discipleship. Families may even be divided over the following of the Lord, but nothing is worth sacrificing the Life of Jesus within us.**

We are watching a 2004 Hong Kong TV drama Last Breakthrough (天涯俠醫). It is about two doctors, a cardiologist and a gynaecologist risking their own lives and sacrificing their well paid jobs in Hong Kong, teaming up with other doctors and nurses, joining a non-profit organization called "Life Force" to go to different countries in Africa, volunteering to offer their medical expertise to help and support clinics in war torn and dangerous places like Kenya, Nairobi, etc. to serve with firm faith, joyful hope and enduring love to save lives, especially women and children even under gunfire and opposition from elders of the aboriginal tribes, who don't believe in modern medicine but practice tribal, superstitious witchcraft. The drama reminds me of St. Gianna Berretta Molla, a modern saint, the patron saint of mothers, physicians, and unborn children. The feast day is celebrated on April 28. Gianna Beretta Molla was born in Magenta in the Kingdom of Italy on October 4, 1922. As a young girl, Gianna openly accepted her faith and the Catholic-Christian education provided to her from her loving parents. **She grew up viewing life as God's beautiful gift and found the greatest necessity and effectiveness in prayer.** She was a diligent and hardworking medical student in Milan and was zealous in her faith. As a member of the St. Vincent de Paul Society, Gianna applied her faith in an apostolic service for the elderly and needy. She received degrees in both medicine and surgery from the University of Pavia. Gianna specialized in pediatrics and was especially drawn toward mothers, babies, the elderly and the poor. Gianna considered the field of medicine to be her mission. She increased her generous service to Catholic Action, a movement of lay Catholics dedicated to living and spreading the Social Teaching of the Catholic Church in the broader culture. The Catholic Action movement is still at work today, throughout the world. Gianna originally hoped to join her brother, a missionary priest in Brazil, where she intended to offer her medical expertise in gynecology to poor women. However, her chronic ill health made this impractical, and she continued her practice in Italy. She chose the vocation of marriage and considered this to be a gift from God and completely dedicated herself to

"forming a truly Christian family." Gianna met Pietro Molla, an engineer who worked in her office. They married in September 1955. Gianna wrote to Pietro, "**Love is the most beautiful sentiment that the Lord has put into the soul of men and women.**" In the next four years the Molla had three children: Pierluigi, Mariolina, and Laura. Two pregnancies following ended in miscarriage. Early in her final pregnancy, doctors discovered that Gianna had both a child and a tumor in her uterus. She allowed the surgeons to remove the tumor but not to perform the complete hysterectomy that they recommended, which would have killed the child. She sought comfort in her prayers and her living faith that the child's life will be saved. After the operation, complications continued throughout her pregnancy. A few days before the baby was to be born, Gianna prayed the Lord take any pain away from the child. She recognized she may lose her life during delivery, but she was ready. Gianna was quite clear about her wishes, expressing to her husband, "**If you must decide between me and the child, do not hesitate: choose the child - I insist on it. Save the child.**" On April 21, 1962, Gianna Emanuela Molla was successfully delivered by Caesarean section. The doctors tried many different treatments and procedures to ensure both lives would be saved. However, on April 28, a week after the baby was born, amid repeated exclamations of "**Jesus, I love you. Jesus, I love you,**" Gianna Berretta Molla passed away from septic peritonitis. She was 39 years old. Gianna was beatified by Pope John Paul II on April 24, 1994, and officially canonized as a saint on May 16, 2004. Her husband and their children, including Gianna Emanuela, attended her canonization ceremony, making this the first time a husband witnessed his wife's canonization. **During Gianna's canonization ceremony, John Paul II described her as, "a simple, but more than ever, significant messenger of divine love."** Gianna Emanuela, followed in her mother's footsteps and is now a medical doctor and consultant to the Saint Gianna Berretta Molla Society. St. Gianna is also the inspiration behind the first pro-life Catholic healthcare center for women in New York, the Gianna Centre.

Brothers and sisters, was Gianna foolish for making the decision to allow her death rather than the death of her child? Shouldn'tt, she has considered staying alive for the sake of her other three children, her husband, and even her medical practice? These arguments were presented to her by those whom she had respected, doctors, family members, etc. But their thinking was the thinking of the world. Gianna knew that she would accomplish nothing in killing a child to keep her own life. The child that was saved. The cost of discipleship seldom makes the demand on us that it made on Gianna Molla, but we are all continually confronted with the choice of standing up for our faith or joining the world that rejects the Lord. The tempters themselves often claim to be modern day Christians, but in fact they are promoting the works of evil. But nothing outside of us can quell the fire that Jesus lit in our hearts. Only we can put the fire out by giving in to the pagan world. We cannot do this. We cannot let anything, any situation put the fire out. We cannot drown it with our own selfishness. So, we keep our eyes focused on Jesus, and as we run the race of our lives, we draw Him who leads us closer to ourselves. For the fire that he has set is worth infinitely more than all the so-called reasonable demands of the world. The 'fire' he brings can symbolize destruction or purification. The fire that Jesus lit is the light that exposes the darkness of a crooked world. Whether we are followers of Christ or not, we must make a choice. It is a serious decision not to be taken lightly. If the teachings of Christ do not cause us to question the way we are living, we are falling short of being whole-hearted Christians. When we recall Luke's account of the message preached by John the Baptist, that the one who came after him would '**baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire**' (3:16), and we link this with reference to the ordeal that awaits him in Jerusalem as a 'baptism', we can conclude that his is a purifying fire. His standing up to the forces of violence and destructiveness in opposition to him are to be a healing and reconciliation for a world unable to overcome its divisions and antagonisms. The true disciples of Jesus have understood the paradox. St. Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:19: **God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself**; in Ephesians 2:14: '**For he is the peace between us.**' St. Paul also wrote in 1 Corinthians 1:18: **The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.**" St. Gianna Molla, pray for us. Amen.