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by Mary M. McGlone

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Today we hear Jesus cry out that he came to set the Earth on fire and cause division. This is hardly the sweet, gentle Jesus portrayed in children's Bible books. Have you ever seen a holy card that depicts Jesus preaching with fearsome passion? (Maybe at the cleansing of the temple.) Have you ever pictured him causing such division that families are torn asunder?

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

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Jeremiah 38:4-10

Psalms 40

Hebrews 12:1-4

Luke 12:49-53

As a way to know this Jesus better, St. Ignatius of Loyola would invite us to recreate all the details of the scene in our imagination. How would you stage this scene? As a movie, it would probably earn a PG rating — or worse. How do you think you would you have reacted if you had been there?

We might well share the incredulity of Jesus' hometowners and ask, "Isn't this the son of Joseph and Mary? What's gotten into him?" We might be surprised at hearing such a fierce Gospel right after the Aug. 15 celebration of Mary's assumption! Then again, if we're tempted to ask what his mother would say about this outburst, we need look no further than the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55) where Mary sang the praises of God who feeds the poor and sends the rich away empty while throwing rulers down from their thrones.

Maybe Jesus came by this attitude at his mother's knee. Mary herself came out of a long tradition of fiery rhetoric. The writings of the Hebrew prophets depict plenty of fire and brimstone, not to mention persecution and division. Jesus was cut from the same cloth as God's Hebrew prophets; his story would have to exhibit the same pattern as theirs.

In teaching others about discernment of spirits, St. Ignatius teaches that when a good spirit touches a soul inclined to evil, the result is discord. The evil person becomes greatly disturbed by the influence of goodness, just as good people are disturbed by evil. When prophets speak for God to a sinful people, conflict ensues. That means that if our churches only offer us comfort and peace, we ought to ask if they are centers of Christianity or just spas with uncomfortable chairs.

The Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar warned Christians about the danger of getting involved with God. He said that God offers us the impossible. While we might be quite content to seek a simple, peaceful life, God always wants more. Balthasar writes that if God had been satisfied with the chasm that separates us from the divine, we could please God simply by standing in awe of the divine majesty, singing songs of praise. But, says Balthasar, "that is not what God wants. God presents [Jesus'] victory over death as an example to be imitated, God draws us beyond our limits into the divine adventure, which is always fatal."

This is what Jesus was talking about when he said he wanted to set the world on fire. He taught that we must lose our lives in order to save them — just as he himself did. That was the baptism he had to go through. He knew well that his mission had to cause division. He would foment conflict among the people of the Covenant, among people from his hometown and even in his own family.

This is one of those weeks when the readings won't let us off the hook. Jeremiah's people got so angry with his prophesying that they were ready to let him rot in a muddy cistern — it took a pagan foreigner to talk the king into letting him live. Jesus puts it right out there — following him will lead us into the life-death-resurrection mystery of baptism in his name.

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Our best comfort, the genuine consolation this week's readings offer us, comes from the "cloud of witnesses" mentioned in the Letter to the Hebrews. While Jesus and Jeremiah may have felt alone in their mission, our belief in the communion of saints offers us the universe's largest extended family for encouragement. These sainted witnesses are like a cheering crowd of elders who know what we are facing because they have been through it themselves. They want nothing more than to see us

succeed and join them in cheering others on.

Unless we are zombies, life is going to present us with conflicts. Today's Scriptures call us to discern how grace and God's Spirit are at play in the conflicts that come our way. Some are nothing more than a clash of preferences and call for charity and generosity. In others, the values of the reign of God are at play. That is when Christians must be prepared to play with fire.

[Mary M. McGlone is a Sister of St. Joseph currently writing the history of the Sisters of St. Joseph in the U.S.]

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