

“Unless a wheat grain falls on the ground and dies, it remains only a single grain; but if it dies, it yields a rich harvest.” (John 12:24)

I have never seen it but the largest living tree on Earth is the General Sherman Redwood tree in California. It's nearly 100m tall, has a base circumference of 31m, diameter of 11m, and branches more than 2m thick! When Jesus walked the roads of Palestine, taught his parables, worked his miracles, died on the cross was buried and rose from the dead two thousand years ago, this giant tree was already about 500 years old slowly growing heavenward, a living example of Jesus' words.

Two and a half thousand years ago this giant of a tree was a seed no larger than my little fingernail. That seed was buried and died to give life to this enormous and beautiful tree. It serves as an illustration for one of life's greatest paradoxes: that death is the source of life; we come to a greater life only by dying to a lesser one. We see it every time a child is born; every time a butterfly emerges from its cocoon; every time a forest springs to life after a bushfire.

As well as being a natural phenomena, that death is the source of life is also one of the great paradoxes of the Christian life: We see it every time a sinner repents; every time a good person dies; and every time we choose the good and well being of another person over our own self-interest. Dying to myself always leads to something greater.

In today's Gospel Jesus speaks of his death and resurrection in terms of a wheat grain that is buried and dies in order to yield a rich harvest. He died on the cross and was buried in the earth. But on the third day, like a seed that pushes through the soil, he rose to new life and ascended into heavenly life and glory. The rich harvest he yields is a human one: those who look upon his cross and believe in him; who take up their cross and follow him; who are baptised into union with him; who die to sin and selfishness. By his death and resurrection he won this new and eternal life, not only for himself, but for us too.

The General Sherman Redwood is a giant of a tree. Saint Gianna Molla is a giant of a woman. Born in the 1920's she practiced as a doctor in Milan Italy in the 1950's and 1960's. She was known for her love of life: singing, painting, sport, and for her strong Catholic faith and service to the poor and sick of Milan. Despite her active life she herself suffered from poor health, and when she married, every pregnancy held a certain risk for her. After several miscarriages she and her husband eventually had four children.

During her final pregnancy, Gianna was diagnosed with a fatal tumor in her ovary. She could have undergone a morally permissible surgical procedure to save her life but which would have led to the unintended but certain death for her daughter. Instead, Gianna chose a different surgical procedure which was more risky for herself but which would give her unborn daughter a chance to live. Mother and daughter both survived the operation but the delivery was going to be difficult. Gianna told her husband, “If they are not able to save both our lives don't hesitate ... save the life of the child.” Gianna died and her daughter, also named Gianna, lived and still thrives today. She literally died to give life to another.

Gianna was a heroic woman. God and the Church don't demand such heroism from us, but God does desire it and the Church does recognise and applaud it as an imitation of Christ's self-sacrificing love for us. Gianna was beatified in 1994 and canonised a saint in 2004 at St. Peter's in Rome by Pope John Paul II. Her husband and four children were present. Imagine the thoughts of her youngest daughter, knowing that her mother in imitation of Christ literally gave her life so that she might live.

Gianna's death was no doubt very painful for her husband and family. Death, whether it be actual physical death or the death to oneself in the struggle to leave behind selfish ways and sinful habits, always is painful. But when we die like this we too like Christ become a grain that dies in order to yield a rich harvest. Every good death leads to something bigger and greater!

