

Homily for the 12 Sunday in Ordinary Time

“Life’s Secret”

Zechariah 12:10–11, 13:1

Psalm 63:2–6, 8–9

Galatians 3:26–29

Luke 9:18–24

Maurice Baring was a friend and G.K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc. Baring and Belloc met in 1898 and theirs was a friendship that would last until Baring’s death in 1945. Although not as well known, Baring was a man of letters whom Chesterton and Belloc, two of the most respected writers of the earliest 20th century, very much admired. Baring’s last novel is entitled *Darby and Joan*. In this novel one of the characters comments:

“One has to accept sorrow for it to be of any healing power, and that is the most difficult thing in the world. . . . A Priest once said to me, ‘When you understand what accepted sorrow means, you will understand everything. It is the secret of life’.”¹

Baring’s obituary in the Times of London on 17 December 1945 regretted that “many English readers” saw his novels as “a form of Roman Catholic propaganda” but maintained that he was “above all concerned to express a passionate conviction that belief in God can alone bring storm-tossed humanity into harbour”.²

In today’s homily I want to pick up on this theme that it is only belief in God that can bring storm-tossed humanity into harbor because it is belief in God that helps us to understand how to accept sorrow and so discover the secret of life.

This is the idea at the heart of today’s Gospel reading. Here our Lord asks the disciples two questions. The first “who do people say that I am?” and the second, “But who do you say that I am”.

It is interesting that from Christianity’s origins people have had all sorts of answers as to who Jesus is. A great man in line with godly prophets, indeed. The reiteration of the greatest prophet of them all, John the Baptist. For sure. Down through the ages people have concluded that Jesus is a great teacher, a great prophet, a man of God.

¹ Pearce, Joseph. Literary Giants Literary Catholics (p. 40). Ignatius Press. Kindle Edition.

² Pearce, Joseph. Literary Giants Literary Catholics (p. 40). Ignatius Press. Kindle Edition.

But this does not get to the heart of the matter. People out there have always had all sorts of ideas about Jesus, or increasingly in our day, don't think about Jesus at all.

But here is the more important question. Jesus is not so much interested in what others think of him. What most matters to Jesus is what you think of him. For you are here at Mass today. And because of this, Jesus asks you, as he asked the Twelve, "Who do you say that I am?" It is this question and the answer you give to it that matters most. And the answer goes deeper than we sometimes realize.

Peter in answering for the Twelve, clearly stated that Jesus is the anointed one of God, the Messiah. In giving this answer Peter was thinking of a Messiah who would usher in Israel's golden age. They were about to ride on the wave of the liberating revolution where finally centuries of suffering at the hands of foreign rule would now lead to the supremacy of Israel as the super power of the Middle East. After all, as the Son of David, the Messiah would, like his name sake, be a great king whose reign would provide for a kind political domination and economic prosperity like in the days of King David of old.

So often we too can equate the Messiah with a life in this world that should be easier and that, if God is for real, would surely be a freed of hardship, heartache and harrowing anxiety.

However when we see who Jesus really is, and accept him, he then begins to help us change our perspective from the one I have just described to the one expressed by the priest who said:

'When you understand what accepted sorrow means, you will understand everything. It is the secret of life'.

It is this secret Jesus gives to the Twelve in response to Peter's declaration. St. Luke writes:

He sternly ordered and commanded them not to tell anyone,²² saying, "The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised."

Why did Jesus want them to keep it quiet and tell no one that he was the Messiah? In part because Messiah was a name Jesus would not accept and he had to re-orientate the Twelve to reconsider who Jesus is.

Notice what Jesus does. He substitutes another name: the Son of Man, whom he describes as one who must suffer, be killed, and then raised on the third day.

The Son of Man is a name we read of in the Book of Daniel. The Son of Man was itself a welcome title for this was the name of one who was to come at the end of the world in glory and majesty. But the Son of Man to whom Jesus refers is one who will suffer and die before he comes into his glory. He would accept sorrow as the key to life and then call his disciples to do the same.

What Jesus would not accept was responsibility of being a political savior, so he rejected Peter's nomination as Messiah. God was going to do something new through him, and central to this plan was the suffering he would endure.

Jesus, then, gave himself a new name: the suffering Son of Man. And he takes it even further.

If we are to be named as his followers, then it means a willingness to deny ourselves and take up our cross *daily*. Whatever form the cross takes, dying of some kind is involved, a giving up, a surrendering. Within our most important relationships we often find the cross waiting. In all our efforts to love in a way that gives life, freedom, mercy to others, a dying to self is needed, and out of that dying new life comes.

The cross you see is what happens to those who persist in righteousness in an unrighteous world. Jesus taught his disciples about the cross in words on the way to Jerusalem, and indeed from a cross on a hilltop outside the city.

In him we find the Messiah who redefined his role: not slaying those who opposed him but loving them into new life, if only they would accept him with the eyes of faith.

With this in mind let me return to the words written in Baring's obituary.

he was above all concerned to express a passionate conviction that belief in God can alone bring storm-tossed humanity into harbour”.

Belief in not just any God. Not belief in the God of popular opinion, not belief in a God who had a political agenda to fulfill. But rather belief in Jesus Christ, the suffering Son of Man. He is the one who can bring our storm tossed humanity into harbor. A humanity tossed by the horror of Orlando's gun shots. A humanity where the political theatre of US electioneering sees Clinton and Trump vying to be America's next Messiah. Our own personal humanity marked by challenges of difficult family relationships, untimely and premature death, the hardships that come with the economy. Anxiety, depression, and all of those things that so rock our boat.

Storm tossed, indeed.

It is into this kind of world that we as followers of the suffering Son of God are learning life's deepest secret. Accepted sorrow, as we take up our Cross daily. This is what will bring us safely into harbor.

But says the Baring character this is the most difficult thing in the world. It is for this reason that we need the one who came from that other world, heaven to this world so that he would show us the way to accept sorrow and discover life's deepest meaning.