

Solemnity H. Willibrord, November 6th 2021, Ben Frie SJ

Faith has to be given to you, you don't just get it. And what is very important: someone must want to give you faith. The transmission of faith is very personal, and preferably live. And how do you come to faith? I think you start looking when life asks you questions. It starts with the child: why is this and why is that? Why is my guinea pig dying and why is the sea level rising? Gradually it becomes more serious: why is my mother dying, or my father, why is there a deadly virus? Why is childbirth so difficult, and why is life so hard? Why are we here at all?

Hopefully it is your parents who can give you the right answers, or your godparents if you have any. Or a teacher at school, or someone else in the family, often it is grandpa or grandma who know how to deal with it wisely. Then, slowly, the world of meaning can open up, of learning to understand what is essential in our lives, and how to take responsibility for it. Maturity goes hand in hand with the ability to deal well with what we encounter as human beings: a world full of possibilities, but also full of pitfalls and deceptions. What do you choose?

Willibrord was a monk in the English monastery of Ripon, but switched to a monastery in Ireland. He was looking for a greater challenge. The religious experience in Irish monasteries included not only the high esteem for monastic life, but also the urge to undertake a peregrinatio per Christum, or wandering for Christ through foreign lands to win pagan peoples to the gospel by an ascetic life and bold preaching. Based on this ideal, Irish missionaries between the 6th and 12th centuries christianised large parts of Europe. They must have had enormous faith, courage and a spirit of enterprise.

It was around 690 when Willibrord, it is said, set out with eleven or twelve companions - not a random number - on the peregrinatio to the mainland. He was appointed by the Pope as Archbishop of the Frisians, then the population of the Northern Netherlands. Utrecht became the support centre for his missionary work, which was far from easy. In the mission area around the Zuiderzee there was much decay in the church, there was idolatry and all kinds of superstition, but strong people like Willibrord and Boniface managed to lay a good foundation for the church by founding new faith communities and bringing them together in a good diocesan structure. Willibrord managed to build many churches and wherever he could he baptised the people he managed to convert to the Gospel, if necessary by smashing their idols. Miraculously, he himself remained unharmed; we know that his co-worker Boniface had to pay for this preacher's courage with his death.

Their influence on the development of church life in our countries has been enormous.

Proclaimers of faith like them had to show that the Christian God was stronger than the pagan gods. Willibrord and his followers did this by convincing preaching and by the splendour of the ecclesiastical culture they brought with them with costly liturgical books, vestments and liturgical vessels. His pioneering work was not without success: Willibrord was named 'apostle of the Netherlands'. After almost 50 years of work on the continent he died in 739 in the abbey of Echternach, where his grave is still honoured today.

Again that question, which Willibrord seems to pose to this day with his boundless zeal: what is the most important thing in life? What gives real depth? It sounds like the question of the scribe: what is the greatest commandment? Then immediately comes that difficult word 'God', to love your neighbour as yourself and the question of who is my neighbour. It is un-learning what a culture can offer: good investments, profit, economic growth, a

prosperous life, being able to do everything your heart desires. To bend reality to your will: there are still idols in our midst.

Religious awareness can help you find another way to be happy, perhaps more real, deeper and longer-lasting than today's culture suggests. Much of what Willibrord initiated has also been lost, but his figure has become a strong symbol of Christian life and the strength it can give. His statue in Utrecht shows an impressive figure - a building in itself. On his shoulders rests the Church of the Low Countries.

We need to reflect on how we got our faith, but just as much on how we pass it on. We obtain happiness and spiritual wellbeing from our faith and it follows that we must act in the spirit of Jesus: proclaim, spread the kingdom of God, lead in faith. And that is not only the work of professionals like Willibrord, but the work and duty of every Christian. Go and proclaim.