

19. October 2024

‘As the master, so the disciples’

Mt 28:16-20

Gospel for the memorial of St. John of Brebeuf and companions

*The eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw him they worshiped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.*

What is the motivation that can lead a man to undergo terrible hardship and suffering for the salvation of souls, so that they may receive the message of Christ? It is that ineffable love which moved God Himself to come into this world and expose Himself to suffering in the person of His Son in order to wrest His prey from the powers of darkness and lead men into His eternal Kingdom.

We could never understand the life and death of Saint Jean de Brébeuf (1593-1649) if we did not regard him as the disciple of a Master who commanded His own: "*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations*".

Together with his heroic companions of the Society of Jesus, John de Brebeuf had the audacity to preach the Gospel to the Indian tribes of North America. He lived among the Hurons for fifteen years. At first, his missionary efforts seemed to bear little fruit. However, he devoted himself to learning the Huron language, which gave him better access to their religious beliefs and enabled him to use them as a springboard for evangelisation. He translated a catechism from French into Huron. He compiled dictionaries and translated prayers and biblical passages. This work would be fruitful for all future missions.

Gradually, though not without setbacks, his efforts began to bear fruit by God's grace. The Hurons trusted him more and more, but there were still no conversions. When it

came to accepting Christian teachings, he was told that he probably had a different God from them and that the tradition of his tribe was different.

The problem was clear: the Hurons were very dependent on what their sorcerers said, and the sorcerers were generally opposed to the missionaries. Jean de Brébeuf was aware that it was the forces of evil that were fighting against the spread of the faith, and he fought them with spiritual weapons.

He found it easier to gain the trust of children and hoped to reach adults through them. Then a situation arose that helped the saint in his apostolic zeal. It turned out that the Europeans were infecting the Indians with diseases that claimed many lives. Since the Huron healers could not cure them, while the missionaries were safe from disease, his reputation among the natives began to grow. As a result, the natives gradually got rid of the witch doctors. The Lord also granted that the rain they had been praying for, and which all the healers' rites had failed to bring, would fall after Jean-Brébeuf's prayer. In this way, the openness became greater and greater. The first indigen to become a Christian took the name of Joseph. He was followed by others, and a Christian community was born among the Hurons.

But then, when a new wave of diseases appeared, the sorcerers accused the missionaries of being responsible for these diseases, of dividing the tribe and the families by preaching the Christian faith, etc. The atmosphere changed: Jean de Brébeuf and his brother Lalemant were now seen as a threat, even as demons. Their lives were no longer safe. They were often persecuted and beaten, but this did not prevent them from continuing to go everywhere, with great apostolic zeal and under great hardship, to proclaim the faith. In these circumstances, the number of Christians continued to grow, and some missions had already been established where the baptised could practise their faith.

Jean de Brébeuf knew that martyrdom awaited him. He prepared himself with these words: *"I promise You, my Saviour Jesus, that I will never shrink from the grace of martyrdom, as far as it depends on me, if ever, by Your infinite mercy, You offer it to me, Your most unworthy servant. I pledge myself for the rest of my life that I will not shrink from the opportunity of dying and shedding my blood for You, unless I consider it more just for Your glory at the given moment to act otherwise"*.

Let us look at his missionary heart, aflame with love, ardently longing for the conversion of the Indians entrusted to his care:

*"My God, how it grieves me that you are not known, that this pagan region has not yet been completely converted to you and that sin has not yet been eradicated here! My God, no matter how harsh the tortures of the prisoners in this region, no matter how cruel their death sentences, if all these were to fall upon me, I would gladly offer myself for them and suffer them all".*

What can be added to this fervent prayer?

Only to end his story by saying that when the time came and the hostile Iroquois attacked the Christian mission of the Hurons, John de Brébeuf did not go to safety, although it was offered to him. He was captured and ritually killed according to Iroquois custom, but not before being mocked for his faith.

From such a master, such disciples...

But the seed of the martyrs bore fruit, for nothing suffered for the love of Jesus is in vain.