

Reflection on St Boniface of Crediton

Readings Acts 20. 24-28; Luke 10. 1-10

Next year, 2025, will be the focus of our 1350th Anniversary of the founding of St Andrew's by St Wilfrid. If we were German Christians, we would also be preparing for a big 1350th celebration. And what is more, as German Christians we would be celebrating an Englishman!

For in 675 in Crediton in Devon, or as some other sources say, in Exeter, a child called Wynfrith was born. He had a remarkable intellect which was nurtured by the Benedictine Abbey at Exeter, and came from a prosperous family. He was an excellent linguist, mastering Latin, and a talented poet. But, despite the wishes of his family for a secular career, he felt called to become a monk and later, he was also ordained as a priest. He could have stayed in England and simply been one of many gifted monks who, like the original monks of Corbridge, simply wished to establish and build up the fledgling Church. Instead, he felt called to cross the Channel to be a missionary monk. He went first to Utrecht where he came under the influence of another Englishman, the famous Northumbrian Bishop, Saint Willibrord, known as the Apostle of Frisia, an area covering northern Holland and north-west Germany. His success as an evangelist brought him to the attention of the Pope, who made Wynfrith a Bishop, and he adopted the name *Boniface* which means 'doer of good', and sent him to work in what is now Hesse and Bavaria in central and southern Germany. Most of the people were pagans but Boniface in an act of faith and courage felled a famous oak tree, dedicated to the Germanic god Thor. They thought that Thor would slay him, but nothing happened, and so many, many people became Christians. Boniface, like St Wilfrid, founded monasteries and churches, and trained many monks and priests. Like St Wilfrid, he was very committed to the Roman Church and deplored the customs and missionary approach of Irish monks who also had gone to help evangelise Europe. Boniface, like Wilfrid, was zealous to unify the monasteries under the Rule of St Benedict. In 732 he became Archbishop of Mainz, effectively the Bishop of Germany. He appointed new missionary Bishops and so sought systematically to spread and establish the Church. He became known as the Apostle to Germany. He is also the Patron Saint of Devon.

In 754, at the age of 79, he was teaching the Bible to those preparing for baptism and confirmation at Pentecost, a pagan gang found him and executed him along with 50

of his companions. He is thus revered as a martyr. It is said of him that he had a deeper influence on European history than any other single Englishman.

The 20th century German Lutheran martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, executed by the Nazis in 1945 for resisting Hitler, made a famous plea for what he called 'aristocratic Christianity'. By this he didn't mean rich or stuck-up Christianity; he was using aristocratic in the sense of being secure in who you are, comfortable in your own skin, of being unapologetic for what you say. Bonhoeffer was commending a confidence in God, in Christ, in the gospel, that didn't apologise for or water-down what we profess. This confidence we see in St Paul – he knew he was facing martyrdom but as he addressed the Church leaders at Ephesus for the last time, he was determined to preach Christ to the very end, and to encourage others to do the same. Jesus, sending out the 70, charged them to preach that the Kingdom has come near and invite people to respond. So, we are called to recover this confidence, this commitment to teaching and preaching and living the faith whole-heartedly, without apology, with full conviction and assurance of faith.

As next year, we in union with the Church in Germany celebrate our big anniversary, may Wilfrid and Boniface inspire us, and please God, may the Church in this place grow to the glory of God.