Treasure in jars of clay

4: Boniface – Apostle of the Germans

With Elijah-style boldness, Boniface exposed a not-so-sacred oak and planted Christianity in the place of paganism

In this occasional series **Jon Garvey** looks at some of the great upholders of the Gospel over the last 2,000 years, what they taught, what they mean for today – and sometimes their faults, too.

Wynfrith, for his time, was a Bible man

In a series on great Christians it is tempting to jump from the death of Augustine in 430 to the start of the Reformation a thousand years later. After all, Luther himself referred to that long period as 'The Babylonish Captivity of the Church'. It was a period marked by the increasing worldly power of the Pope, by the split of the Eastern Church from the Western, by monastic orders and most of all, by the decay of Gospel truth into the superstitious quagmire that was mediaeval Catholicism.

Yet it is always important to remember that the Church is not man's faulty attempt to follow Christ – it is the Lord's project, and He is its King. Even in its failures it serves His strategies and His Spirit is active in its growth. I want to illustrate this in one area, that of Mission, and particularly in the life of one Englishman who was God's instrument in bringing Christ to Germany.

Wynfrith of Crediton

Crediton, in Devon, is not the sort of place you'd consider as the base of a major world mission. But here, about 680, Wynfrith was born the oldest son of wealthy parents. It is unlikely that being a Christian in Saxon England was any easier than it is now. People generally were worldly and half-pagan, and the Christian faith of the nation, though promoted by the rulers, was largely concentrated in the monasteries where it was taught to those who chose to follow Christ.

Wynfrith is said to have sought God from the age of 4 or 5. His interest was encouraged by the itinerant monk-priests who were the traditional bearers of the Gospel in the West, and whose names are immortalised in the towns and churches of Devon and Cornwall, like St Austell and St Just. To be taught as a Christian then meant living in a monastery, and Wynfrith's father was having none of that until his final illness, when he relented, and allowed the boy to go to the monastic school at Exeter.

There were features of the Catholic faith he learned there alien to what we hold dear. It was overly ascetic, hierarchical in subordination to the Pope, and emphasised baptism and turning from the trappings of paganism more than heart-conversion.

And yet within this context arose true faith. Wynfrith's biographer Willibald points out that *'from the early days of his childhood even to infirm old age he imitated in particular the practice of the ancient fathers in daily committing to memory the writings of the prophets and apostles, the narratives of the passion of the martyrs and the Gospel teaching of our Lord… whether he ate or drank or whatever else he did, he always praised and thanked God both in heart and word.'* In fact, Willibald points to his love of the Scriptures as the motivation for his learning, his life and his teaching. Wynfrith, for his time, was a Bible man, and dedicated himself to minister the Gospel.

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The Birth of a Missionary

At 14, Wynfrith moved to the monastery at Nursling, near Southampton, where he eventually became abbot.

The Church at that time had a strong influence in political matters. It was not a mere puppet of the state, but neither was it an underground organisation. The reasons for this were simple: educated Christians tended to come from the same class as secular rulers. It was they who led the missions to new lands, where it was logical to reach the rulers first both because they were their natural peers, and because the conversion of the king was the key to being free to work amongst the people.

So when a rebellion was afoot in Wessex, in which Church interests were affected, it was the king who asked Wynfrith to go as representative to the Archbishop in Canterbury. His success in this broadened his experience in both Christian and secular areas.

But at this time, aged 40, he began to feel led to minister overseas. As the conviction grew he eventually, with the blessing of his monastery, sailed from London to Holland (Frisia). The Frisian king Radbod was persecuting the Church and encouraging the return of paganism. Yet despite danger Wynfrith met him in Utrecht, seeking a chance to evangelize. He saw the need, but no opportunity, and returned home later in the year, determined however to try again.

This time he went first to Rome, with letters of introduction, and obtained the authority of Pope Gregory II for his work. This was useful because some areas still had a nominal allegiance to the Roman Church, and in any case the Pope's position carried some weight amongst even pagan kings. So Wynfrith crossed the Alps, traversed Bavaria, and established the Gospel in Thuringia, in central Germany.

On the death of the pagan king Radbod, he returned to Frisia and spent three years assisting the archbishop, Willibrord, in re-establishing the faith and reaching new areas. Then he extended his work in the heart of Germany, converting 'many thousands' as far as Saxony.

Boniface – the Well-doer

Eventually he was recalled by the Pope to report, which he did apologising for his poor Latin! Hearing of his great success, Gregory appointed him bishop and renamed him Boniface – the well-doer. On his return he performed the deed for which he is most remembered – the destruction of the giant sacred Oak of Thor at Geismar in Hesse. Though surrounded by pagan locals reviling and cursing him, he had the courage simply to start cutting this object of false worship down.

This may seem to us religious vandalism – like torching a mosque – but paganism had to do with power, not religious sentiment. This was a power encounter – no more, no less. His biographer says that he had only made a superficial cut when lightning split the trunk into four. Whether this is true or not, the tree came down and the lack of any reaction from the gods, as in the story of Elijah on Carmel, turned the curses into faith and blessings on the Lord Jesus.

So Boniface extended and consolidated his work in Germany, organising bishoprics in Freising, Passau, Ratisbon and Salzburg. He also did great work in reforming the Church in the supposedly Christian Frankish kingdom, amid political upheavals. In his last years the call to mission became strong again, and he abandoned administration and returned to the evangelization of Frisia. He was finally martyred with 50 companions by a pagan mob as he went to an outlying district of what is now northern Holland to baptize believers.

Mainland Europe at that time was in political turmoil, often with pagan rulers persecuting the Church, and a general decline in Spiritual life. Much earlier mission had been by Celtic missionaries, who had unfortunately failed to develop a stable infrastructure, so that their labour was lost. It was actually Anglo-Saxon missionaries who were largely responsible for re-evangelising Europe, for spreading the Gospel further, and establishing structures linking their Churches with mainstream Christianity centred at Rome. In other words, these Anglo-Saxon pioneers established the Christian Europe we know today. Of these Boniface was one of the most important.

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Sources

There's a good and brief account of Boniface's life in Stephen Neill, A History of Christian Missions, pp.64-66. You can download his 8th century biography from www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/willibald-boniface.html.

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