



Diocese of Plymouth
From the Office of the Bishop

St Boniface – Model of Courage and Mission

A reflection by Bishop Mark for the Solemnity of St Boniface, Patron of the Diocese of Plymouth, 5th June 2020

Happy Solemnity of St Boniface! It is good to be able to greet you today as we keep the memory of this great man, who grew up in our diocese and who received his Christian formation here. You will know St Boniface perhaps better than I, but I just wanted to share some reflections with you as we invoke his patronage.

Today, he speaks to us across the centuries. Life in the mission field in Germany, in the eighth century, was not easy. A monk from Glastonbury who went out to work there described his first experiences when he wrote to tell the monks of Glastonbury Abbey of his safe arrival:

“I wish you to know, beloved Brothers, that when our Archbishop, Boniface, heard that we were coming, he was good enough to come himself a great distance along the road to meet us and welcomed us very warmly. Know that our work in the Lord is not in vainalthough it is very dangerous and difficult to carry on in almost every way, with hunger and thirst, and the cold, and the raids of the pagans on each other. Therefore, I earnestly ask you to pray for us ... “.

Boniface himself, as well as suffering these privations, also had problems and responsibilities as leader of the mission. Sometimes these weighed so heavily on him that he would have gladly given it up, as he wrote to his fellow-Archbishop, Cuthbert of Canterbury. It was the example of earlier Church leaders, such as St Clement and St Cornelius of Rome, St Cyprian of Carthage and St Athanasius of Alexandria - who had guided the Church during plagues and persecutions - who all showed Boniface that he should persevere.

In this time of pandemic, it is helpful to remember some advice that Boniface wrote to a local Abbess (Abbess Bucge) when she was going through some difficult times. He writes;

“I have heard from the reports of many people about the stormy troubles which have come upon you..... I have been deeply saddened and grieved as I reflected that after you gave up the greater responsibilities of the monastery to seek the quiet of the contemplative life, troubles have come upon you with greater frequency and strength. But now, revered Sister, mindful of your kindness and our long-standing friendship, and out of sympathy for your distress, I am sending you a brotherly letter of encouragement and consolation. ... Remember the words of the Apostle when he said, ‘Let us glory in our sufferings knowing that suffering brings about patient endurance, and endurance God’s approval, and approval hope, a hope which will not disappoint us’ (Romans 5: 3-5). In this hope, dearest Sister, be glad and joyful all the time

because you will not be disappointed. Scorn the hardships of this world with all your mind, for all the soldiers of Christ of both sexes have despised the trials and tribulations and afflictions of this world and regarded them as nothing, as St. Paul shows in saying, '*When I am weak then am I strong*' (2 Corinthians 12: 10) and elsewhere, "*Can anything separate us from the love of Christ? Can tribulation?*" (Romans 8: 35).

I think we all feel something of what that Abbess felt, and occasionally, too, the burden that Boniface felt in leadership. It is good for us to be encouraged by our own dear Patron at this time, and to allow ourselves to be addressed by him. Also, to come to know him a little more. I hope you will not mind if I remind us all of something of his life and try to draw from it some wisdom for our lives today.

You will know that Boniface – known as Winfrid at that time - was first evangelised as a boy by holy missionaries who were entertained in his home near Crediton. The faith in these islands was less than one hundred years old when various priests came to this part of the country in the mid-seventh century. Boniface was struck by their humility and their goodness. Their witness became the source of his conversion.

We should never doubt the impact of our witness to the Gospel, and what it can bring to those around us, even when this witness seems not to bear immediate fruit. Boniface knew the effect of silent witness. He also knew the reality of failure in his own proclamation of the Gospel. For his first mission to Friesland – in the modern Netherlands - went nowhere. He returned to England after two years, seemingly with his dreams of being a missionary in tatters.

But he did not stop. After several years, and comforted and sustained by a visit to Pope Gregory II, and with the Pope's support, Boniface embarked on the preaching of the Gospel in Germany. He fought against pagan worship and reinforced the foundations of human and Christian morality. With a deep sense of his call, and it has to be said, of ours, too, he wrote in one of his letters: "We are united in the fight on the Lord's Day, because days of affliction and wretchedness have come.... We are not mute dogs or silent observers or mercenaries fleeing from wolves! On the contrary, we are diligent....who proclaim God's will to leaders and ordinary folk, to the rich and the poor... in season and out of season..." (cf. *Epistulae*, 3,352.354: mgh).

Here is a Shepherd after the heart of the Lord, who encourages us never to doubt that we are called to evangelise, nor to underestimate the power of our witness in the faithful offering of our lives. We do so, 'in season and out of season'.

Another important element that emerges from the life of Boniface is his faithful communion with the Apostolic See. The Successors of Pope Gregory II held him in the highest esteem. Gregory III appointed him Archbishop of all the Germanic tribes – the Bishop of the whole of Germany! He sent him the pallium and granted him the faculties to organize the ecclesiastical hierarchy in those regions (cf. *Epist.* 28: *S. Bonifatii Epistulae*, ed. Tangl, Berolini 1916). Pope Zachary confirmed him in his office and praised his dedication (cf. *Epist.* 51, following). In a letter to this Pope, Boniface writes, "I never cease to invite and to submit in obedience to the Apostolic See those who desire to remain in the Catholic faith and

in the unity of the Roman Church and all those whom God grants to me as listeners and disciples in my mission" (Epist. 50: in *ibid.*, p. 81).

Now, more than ever, we must hold true to the centrality of our esteem and love for the Holy Father as successor of St Peter. How vital we have seen his ministry is during this time of pandemic, as he has led us all in prayerful intercession to God, and in practical service of our neighbour.

One result of this commitment in Boniface's life, was the steadfast spirit of cohesion around the Successor of Peter which he transmitted to the Church in his mission territory, uniting England, Germany and France with Rome. These Christian roots of Europe were to produce abundant fruit in the centuries that followed. It is good for us to know that those links were strong in Europe, well before the creation of the European Union, and they can remain strong for us, post-Brexit, too, even if we live in a time when Europe has in many ways become tired, or lost touch, with its Christian roots.

But Boniface can help us here, too. For he encouraged the encounter between Christian culture and the local cultures in which he lived, even if they seemed at first to be far from the Gospel. You will know the story of the oak tree well. It is said that one winter he came across some men who were about to offer up a child as a sacrifice to the pagan god Thor, represented by a large oak tree. Boniface stopped the murder of this child by going over to the tree and striking it. We often see that depicted in images or statues of him. The tree fell to the ground.

In the snow nearby they could see a small fir-tree. Boniface pointed to the tree, which was green in the dead of winter, and announced, "That is the tree of life and this boy is to live, not die." He then pointed at the tree again and said, "This tree does not die in winter like others, but lives and it symbolises the eternal life offered to you through Jesus Christ." He then noted that the shape of the fir-tree is triangular and thus represents the Trinity of God. It is reported that upon this declaration, those who were going to sacrifice the child repented. They gave their hearts to Jesus, and they spared the boy's life.

Well a nice story, we might think, but what does it say to us? Surely, it's a reminder that we must look for the presence of Jesus and the marks of Trinitarian love, wherever we find ourselves. Boniface saw the eternal life of Jesus in that evergreen and the shape of the Trinity, because he was looking for them. His mind and his heart were totally set on God. Therefore, when he found himself in an environment which seemed to be anti-Christian, he did not lament and give up. He did not complain about how awful his non-believing society was. Rather, he sought what was in the culture and in the environment, which could point the way to Christ.

This is the heart of our witness, too. We have seen so much love, and self-sacrifice, goodness and generosity during this terrible time. Could that reality, and those experiences provide possibilities to point people to the love and sacrifice of God Himself, shown in His Son, Jesus? For He is the only One who gives true meaning and purpose in life, and most especially in the face of death.

Boniface knew that the humanizing power of the Gospel was an integral part of his mission. He even composed a book of grammar – called the *Ars grammatica* - in which he explained

the declinations, verbs and syntax of the Latin language! That may seem very strange to us. But this was, for him, not some heady intellectual exercise. It was a means of reaching more people. It meant that ordinary people could be educated, so that all encountered a deeply Christian spirit and sensibility which helped them live in a more human way. In passing on the ancient Tradition of Christian values, he grafted onto the Germanic populations a new, more human life. As a true son of St Benedict, he was able to combine “prayer and work, the pen and the plough” (Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI)

We must ask ourselves what book of grammar, what tools or vehicles, can we use today? It is significant, that in this time of pandemic, we have all seen how important the new forms of communications are. Engagement with the different platforms has been vital as a means of communicating with one another, and of praying and worshipping, too, using these different tools. I know that many priests and people are using the telephone also, as a means of keeping in touch with those parishioners who have no access to the other platforms.

Boniface would commend that, so that nobody is left behind. There are countless examples of him assisting those in need - providing practical help for the education of the young, homes for the sick and the elderly. We know, too, that he invited communities of men and women to the new missionary territories in Germany to provide practical assistance to the people as well as catering for their spiritual needs.

Always, the spread of the Gospel, the communication of the faith, has meant having an eye for those who are on the margins, those who are poorest and most in need. It means challenging what Pope Francis calls our "throw away" culture, especially when this means ignoring the needs of the elderly, the sick or the unborn. So, the fruit of our faith in Jesus is shown in our practical outreach to those most in need. Our love of God has concrete, practical manifestation in our love of neighbour.

In one of his very moving letters, St Boniface writes about the hardship of the Christian life and of being a Shepherd of Christ's flock. He speaks of his own struggles and of the comfort he takes from placing his hope only in Jesus Christ. I repeat his words today, that they may be an inspiring encouragement to us all, and not least to me:

"In her voyage across the ocean of this world, the Church is like a great ship being pounded by the waves of life's different stresses. Our duty is not to abandon ship but to keep her on her course. Let us stand fast in what is right and prepare our souls for trial. Let us wait upon God's strengthening aid and say to him: 'O Lord, you have been our refuge in all generations'."

I think of this most especially in these days of global pandemic, and especially for us Catholics as we continue to experience the continued closure of our Churches. We hope and pray that the Government will see sense soon, and give us permission to open, at least some of them, for personal prayer, within a few weeks.

There is one last reflection about Boniface which moves me very deeply. Boniface's ardent zeal for the Gospel stayed with him his whole life long. Indeed, we know that the pull of Jesus' teaching and example never fails to impress whatever our age. At the age of 41 he left a beautiful and fruitful monastic life, the life of a teacher and man of prayer, in order to proclaim the Gospel to the stranger and the simple. Yet again, almost at the age of 80, he

went to a region in which he foresaw his martyrdom, and indeed it happened. He was slain with a sword by local robbers, as he was about to celebrate the Sacrament of Confirmation, in the area where he had first attempted to preach the Gospel and failed, so many years before. But upon his death, his blood became the seed of the growth of the Church in that part of northern Europe.

My dear friends, by comparing his ardent faith with our own often lukewarm faith, we see what we must do. We see how we are to renew our faith by drawing close to Christ. We must do so in order to give the precious pearl of the Gospel as a gift in our time.

And so, I conclude these reflections with a prayer of St Boniface, which I had on my ordination card when I became Bishop here in this lovely Diocese of Plymouth. I pray it for us all at this time:

Eternal God,
the refuge and help of all your children,
we praise you for all you have given us,
for all you have done for us,
for all that you are to us.
In our weakness, you are strength;
in our darkness, you are light;
in our sorrow, you are comfort and peace.
We cannot number your blessings;
we cannot declare your love;
for all your blessings we praise you.
May we live in your presence,
and love the things that you love,
and serve you in our daily lives.
Amen

St Boniface pray for us.

Pray for me.

God bless you.

+Mark O'Toole
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