



St Boniface

Boniface was born at Crediton in Devon, England, in 675 AD and baptised with the name Wynfrith (Winfred). The name means “Friend of Peace”, possibly because his father was a Saxon and his mother a Briton, to show that the two peoples had come together.

He entered a monastery at Nursling near Southampton and became a monk and a priest. He had a strong desire to become a missionary abroad. Finally his abbot let him go, and in 716, he set out for the land of the Frisians (in the Netherlands). In 718, he set off for Rome to ask the pope for his commissioning and blessing. On 14 May, 719, he threw himself at the feet of Pope Gregory II who gave him the new name “Boniface” (one who does good). He then went north across the Alps and embarked on 35 years of missionary work in various parts of Germany. On his return to Germany as bishop, Boniface decided to tackle heathen superstitions head-on. At a place called Geismar in front of hostile tribesmen he chopped down a sacred oak tree, where they worshipped Thor, the god of thunder (after whom Thursday is named), and laid the foundations of a flourishing new church there.

According to tradition, when he chopped down the pagan Thor’s Oak, Boniface claimed a tiny fir tree growing in its roots as the new Christian symbol. He told the heathen tribes:

This humble tree’s wood is used to build your homes: let Christ be at the centre of your households; its leaves remain evergreen in the darkest days: let Christ be your constant light; its branches reach out to embrace and its top points to heaven: let Christ be your comfort and your guide.

So the fir tree became a sign of Christ among the German peoples and eventually a world-wide symbol of Christmas.

Boniface went on to establish many new churches and monasteries. At the age of nearly 80, when most archbishops would have retired, he had other ideas. He still wanted to take the Gospel to Frisia, where his first efforts had failed nearly 40 years earlier. He set off with 52 companions on an evangelising mission. At Pentecost, on 5 June, 755, near the modern town of Dokkum in The Netherlands, the whole party was massacred by heathen brigands. Boniface was himself struck down by a sword which pierced the bible he had raised to shield his head. As requested in his will, his body was taken back to his monastery at Fulda, where a magnificent cathedral now encloses his tomb and where the Catholic bishops of Germany hold their meetings every year.

Boniface was the Patron of England for 300 years and is still Patron of Germany and The Netherlands.