

Readings for Today: Acts 26: 19 – 23; Psalm 117 (116); John 10: 11 – 16.

Boniface has been described as ‘having the greatest effect of any Englishman on the history of Europe’, which – to those who think of Winston Churchill’s part in World War II – will probably seem an extravagant claim: But it’s supported by the fact that he’s the only English saint who is universally celebrated in the calendar of the Western Church.

He was born about AD 675 in or near Crediton in Devon and baptized Winfrith. He became a monk and teacher near Southampton, and was ordained priest about 705. In 716 (aged about forty) he followed other Anglo-Saxons in going as a missionary to the Germanic peoples. He began his work in Frisia, but militant pagans forced him to return to England. Almost at once he went to Rome and received papal authority to work in Southern Germany, and there probably took the name Boniface. For the next thirty-six years he travelled widely over mainland Europe, on foot, or on horseback, proclaiming the gospel and establishing Christian congregations.

He was consecrated as a bishop on St Andrew’s Day 722, and made archbishop in 732, with authority to consecrate bishops for Germany east of the Rhine. He founded, or re-founded, sees in what is now Austria and Germany, as well as monasteries and churches throughout the region.

In 738 he wrote to the English people, asking for their prayers and for help in the conversion of those who “are of one blood and bone with you”. They responded with gifts of books, vestments, relics and, above all, by sending more missionaries – priests, monks and nuns.

Between 741 and 751 he was also involved in the reform of the Church in what is now France.

In 754, now approaching 80, he set out to continue the task of converting, baptizing and confirming the people of Northern Frisia. He had agreed to meet some candidates at Dokkum near the North Sea in what is now the Netherlands, but instead he and his companions were attacked and killed by a band of pagan warriors in search of treasure. His body was eventually taken to his monastery of Fulda, where it is still enshrined. On hearing of his death the archbishop of Canterbury wrote “We in England lovingly count him as one of the best and greatest teachers of the true faith”, and a synod agreed that his feast should be celebrated as a patron of the English Church, equally with S. Gregory and S. Augustine. We should not forget him.