

Boniface (05 June 2013)  
*Archbishop of Mainz, Missionary to Germany, and Martyr, 754*  
Psalm 31:1-5  
Acts 20:17-28  
Luke 24:44-53

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Today the church remembers the martyrdom of Boniface, missionary to Germany and the first Archbishop of Mainz. He was martyred by pagans on this day in 754—and, as legend has it, while reading the Gospel to catechumens on Pentecost.

Early in life, he was professed a monk and ordained to the priesthood. At the age of 40, he began his missionary work in present-day Germany and the Netherlands. Eventually he was consecrated bishop to the German frontier by Pope Gregory II. A legend of one of Boniface's first acts as bishop was to chop down the sacred oak tree of the pagan god, Thor. After chopping down the tree and not being harmed by the pagan god, many pagans converted and Boniface used the wood to build a chapel in honor of St. Peter. Though we would probably disagree, one could see this tale as support for us to fulfill the command in Genesis to 'fill the earth and subdue it,' chopping down pagan forests and building churches. And of the things we remember about Boniface – we do not remember him as the church's first environmentalist. Although he is a patron saint of brewing.

I do think it would be better to understand this tale of Boniface as a way the church remembers the communion of saints as exemplars of faithful living. To help us remember the story that we love to tell, that is, the story of Scripture and of Jesus, the church sets the stories of saints alongside Scripture. The story of Boniface and the oak tree of Thor remind me of last Sunday's Old Testament lesson from 1 Kings. Think about it. Elijah had the altar soaked three times with water and calls upon the Lord to answer him. The fire of the Lord comes down and consumes the sacrifice, the altar, and even all surrounding water. Upon witnessing this, the priests of Baal recognize the Lord

and exclaim, "The Lord is indeed God; ... The Lord is indeed God." In a similar way, Boniface faithfully follows in the tradition of the prophets before him. He trusts the Lord in a foreign land and, in the story of Thor's tree, reveals the true God to the Germanic tribes.

Next, let us look at the readings for Boniface and how they may form us as the people of God within the tradition handed down to us. To help us fit within the tradition, we read the story of Boniface alongside today's scriptures. The prayer book mentions three descriptions of Boniface: bishop, missionary, and martyr. Let's remember these descriptions as we read the Scriptures. The story of Paul from the Acts reading, and of Jesus from the gospel, illumine characteristics and ways of being that mark the lives of bishops, missionaries, martyrs, and in a way all Christians.

In the Acts passage, Paul's speech is presented as a way for others to remember him. This was his last speech to the Ephesian leaders before going to Jerusalem. And in placing Paul's speech alongside the martyrdom of Boniface, the church recalls that tradition of faithful saints who served the Lord with all humility and endured trials. Paul proclaimed the good news and taught publicly from house to house. And Boniface trekked the German frontier, teaching the gospel and living among the pagans. Possibly 'from house to house,' like Paul. Imagine the toil, the patience, the endurance of Paul and Boniface as they each worked, 'captive to the Spirit,' testifying about repentance towards God and faith towards our Lord Jesus.

Finally, Paul urges the Ephesian leaders to 'keep watch over yourselves and over all the flock.' The message is clear: watch over ourselves; watch over others . We cannot separate our own benefit from others. In attending to ourselves, we must attend to others and vice versa. To remind us of this, the church celebrates this unity in the

Eucharist where we all made one in the body of Christ. And this unity of the body is guarded by the bishops—like Boniface.

Turning to Luke, let's remember Boniface and his martyrdom. Immediately before his ascension, we read about Jesus' last words with his disciples. First, he presents himself as the key to reading Scripture. "Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you – that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled." At the end of Luke's gospel, he invites us to return to the Old Testament and read Moses, the prophets, and the psalms with Jesus in mind. Then Jesus says, "You are witnesses of these things." Witness comes from the Greek μαρτυρ, or martyr. The disciples, and Boniface, were witnesses to the story of Jesus. Most of the disciples, including Boniface, were witnesses until their very end. Martyred in the name of our Lord Jesus.

In the words of the selected psalm, Psalm 31, we hear the cry of one who takes refuge in the Lord. The psalmist's words were even recalled by Jesus on the cross before he breathed his last, "Into your hands I commit my spirit." We are reminded of these words each night in the prayer of Compline, the office to close the day. Remembering Jesus and the faith and witness of Saint Paul and Saint Boniface, we may pray to the Lord: *Into your hands I commend my spirit, for you have redeemed me, O Lord, O God of truth.*

AMEN.