

NINIAN: 16 September

Like many of those early missionaries of the British Isles, Ninian is a rather shadowy figure. He seems to have been British, the son of a Cumbrian nobleman, born a Christian; as a youth, he received an education in Rome; he returned to work on the conversion of Scotland, being made a bishop in 394, with his episcopal seat and centre of operations in Galloway; he worked particularly among the Britons and Picts who occupied Southern Scotland and Northumbria. He may have died in Ireland.

Like so many heroic missionaries he took to heart the words of Jesus from the end of St Mark's Gospel: 'Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation;' and the declaration of Paul and Barnabas, quoting Isaiah, after they'd encountered severe opposition from the Jews in Antioch: 'The Lord commanded us saying, I have set you to be a light to the Gentiles so that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.'

To have been remembered as he was, Ninian must have made some impression on those he encountered and preached to. He is said to have met St Martin as he travelled through France – that Martin who kindly cut his cloak in half to clothe a poor beggar; Martin's Christian

charity no doubt rubbed off on him. And I trust that the object of Ninian's mission was to make known the love of God, and to establish Christ's reign of peace – as far as he could, among difficult warring tribes. They were, I hope, good missionary encounters.

But Christian dealings with non-believers have often been unkindly, even brutal. A horrid and extreme example occurred when the joint monarchs of Spain, Ferdinand and Isabella (given the title 'Catholic' by the pope), set about reconquering and 'Christianising' the country after centuries of Islamic occupation; they resorted to the cruellest policies of *forced* conversion of Muslims and Jews – the alternative being expulsion or death; there was nothing of 'love' there – Orbán of Hungary has something of the same mind-set..

And then there were the scandalous wars of religion in the heart of Europe and our own country; when Christianity was divided, and Catholic or Protestant factions saw it as their 'mission' to impose their own interpretation of 'true religion' on nation or community; with much suffering and many deaths.

Aggressive mission still occurs: where a Christian group seeks to convert people of other faiths in ignorance of their

religion and culture and with utter insensitivity; and inducements to convert are not unknown. And divisions within Christianity persist, like the old Catholic / Protestant divide in Northern Ireland.

I *personally* would very much like to 'convert' some of my fellow Christians: I feel a great gulf, for instance, between myself and those who still interpret the Bible so literally that they deny evolution and much of modern science; who are suspicious of every aspect of modern life around them, and so distrustful of medicine that they reject vaccination; who view any but 'normal' heterosexual relations as abhorrent; who preach what seems to me a vengeful and unforgiving gospel; who want to convert me to their ways of thinking because in their eyes I am simply not a Christian. Yes, I can admire the persistence of their blinkered faith – they are enormously committed; but it angers me that their beliefs are often taken to represent Christianity as a *whole*, and bring the faith *generally* into disrepute and mockery; better (I sometimes think) no faith at *all* than a harsh, obscurantist one. And there are even fellow *Anglican* I'd like to 'convert' – who cling onto what seem to many of us to be outmoded views on the headship of men in family and church, and therefore bar women from their rightful

place in ministry. But always I must stop and ask myself: can I be sure I'm so totally in the right? or am I being arrogant? It's Christ who is 'truth'; I must constantly check *my* truth against *his*.

So what is *good* mission? It must be *loving* – looking to the good of others as God does. It must respect others' integrity and freedom, never putting pressure on them to make a hasty 'decision for Christ'; never capitalising on others' weaknesses, and of course never imposing an abusive authority over another. Missionaries must seek not their own satisfaction or glory but God's. Though they will be mindful of others' *ultimate* good (beyond death), they'll be concerned about the establishment of the Kingdom of mercy, love and peace *now*; and that means providing *physical* health-care as well as *spiritual*, and food and housing and education and security; and that can't happen without our considering the health of the *planet* on which *our* well-being and that of generations-to-come depends; we have to consider the long-term future of the earth. And what applies to 'the church' and its missionary activity, applies to me personally in all *my* missionary encounters.

There's an urgency about mission, as St Paul and Jesus

himself make clear. Not so much, I like to think, because there's judgement to come, but because it's a pity and a shame when *any single* human being has not been given the opportunity to know the love of God revealed in Jesus.