

Dear Friend

It is now mid-February as we prepare to enter a new stage in our annual Christian journey. This week we shall celebrate Ash Wednesday: the start of the Lenten period leading up to Passiontide, Holy Week and Easter.

We are now preparing ourselves for a lengthy period of penitence. Might we wish to change our lifestyle and expenditure of time and money in ways that might help others, and help us to focus more clearly on Jesus Christ, his journey to the Cross and our relationship with him?

But today we are not yet in Lent. We still have stories to tell about how the Good News was and is spread throughout the world.

In the church calendar today we remember Sigfrid, bishop 1045, and Thomas Bray, founder of SPCK and SPG 1730.

Sigfrid was an Englishman who became known as the Apostle of Sweden. Along with three of his nephews, Sigfrid was sent to King Olaf of Norway by the English King Ethelred in 995. Olaf had converted to Christianity whilst living in England during a period of exile from Sweden, and on his return had requested the help of the English king in his attempt to bring Christianity to his household, his country and Sweden also.

Thomas Bray was born over 600 years after Sigfrid: in 1656 at Marton in Shropshire. He went from Oswestry Grammar School to All Souls College, Oxford. Thomas was ordained in 1681 and in 1690 was presented to the living of Sheldon, in Warwickshire. A few years later, Henry Compton, Bishop of London, commissioned Thomas to report on the condition of the Church in the British colony of Maryland - this was well before the American War of Independence 1775–1783.

During his investigations, Thomas became aware of a chronic difficulty in accessing books: this was restricting Christian teaching in Maryland, making clergy reluctant to offer to serve in the colony. Thomas hit upon the idea of providing both books and whole libraries for the benefit of the colonial clergy. This led to the foundation of the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge SPCK in 1698, followed in 1701 by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel SPG. SPG was the Church of England's first overseas mission society.

Yes: presenting the Good News of Jesus Christ to others lies at the core of our Christian life. One of the great ways in which we do this is how we live and how we relate to others and the world at large. May you in this time, during this week, be blessed with an opportunity to live life differently during Lent: different in some way which enables you to share in Christ's journey to Jerusalem, to the cross and ultimately to resurrection.

With all good wishes,

Richard Hinder