

37. ANGLO-SAXON MISSIONARIES I: WILLIBRORD

One beautiful spring day in the year 690, a little ship approaches the Dutch coast near Katwijk¹. Smoothly it sails up the River Rhine towards Utrecht. At the bow of that ship stands a young man, who is just over thirty years old. Keenly he watches the river banks slowly glide by. There is a smile on his lips, and his heart fills with joy.

Finally, his wish is being fulfilled.

How he has looked forward toward this moment! Finally, he may go and preach the gospel to the nations who continue to live in the darkness of paganism! He is eager to step on land so that he can begin his work. For him, the journey has lasted too long, and he is impatient.

That young man's name is Willibrord. A few days ago, he boarded the ship in England, and now he is nearly there. He was born in England. The Anglos lived in England much earlier, but Frisians and Saxons had crossed over from mainland Europe to England during the great migration of nations. They had mixed with the Anglos, and their offspring were called Anglo-Saxons. Willibrord was born of Anglo-Saxon parents.

His parents sent him to a monastery in England when he was still relatively young. He was not yet twenty when he left to go to another monastery in Ireland to train as a missionary. For that was his heart's desire. He

wanted to preach Christ to nations who were still held captive by pagan idolatry.

He spent twelve years in that Irish monastery. You may be sure that he studied hard as he wanted to finish as soon as possible. Finally, with eleven assistants, he left that Irish monastery and boarded a ship sailing to the Netherlands.

What awaits him there?

Many dangers and difficulties?

Death perhaps?



Willibrord arrives in 691 (Painting by Simon Fokke approx 1735)

¹ There are other, very well documented articles, saying Willibrord did not arrive in Utrecht, in the Netherlands, but crossed from England into Northern France (where today we have the tunnel between England and France). Willibrord himself recorded that he... "arrived in Francia", and also, after his trip to Rome... "returned to Francia". Utrecht and Katwijk didn't exist then yet and there is no historical evidence that Willibrord was ever there. There appears to be lots of evidence that he

worked in the North of France, but no archaeological evidence can be found in Belgium and the Dutch Frisian area. The Dutch seem to have taken the stories about Willibrord from Northern France and made it their story. We leave the decision regarding the accuracy of this chapter to the discretion of the reader. For those acquainted with the Dutch language see:

<https://www.noviomagus.info/willibrord.htm>

Willibrord is not afraid. He will go and preach Christ to people who do not know Him yet. He feels called to that work. We already know that the Frankish missionaries experienced much opposition from the Frisians because they thought the Frankish missionaries were spies. And now the Lord, in His mercy, sends missionaries who are not Franks. In that way, the Lord removes the main stumbling block. Willibrord speaks the Frisian language fluently, so they will be able to understand his message.

When their little ship docks at Utrecht, he and his assistants go ashore. He will preach the gospel in this land for more than fifty years. No, the task awaiting him is not easy. The battle will be severe. He enters Radbod's territory, the king of the Frisians we wrote about in the previous chapter. Radbod, that fierce enemy and strong adversary of the Christians.

WILLIBRORD IN THE NETHERLANDS

Willibrord immediately begins to work in Utrecht. A chapel had been built there before, but Radbod had levelled it to the ground. Now Willibrord rebuilds that church again.

But before he commences with his real mission work, he travels to Rome, where the pope appoints him as bishop of Utrecht. It is a pity that he acknowledged the pope of Rome. Already here, we see the result of the fact that the Roman Catholic Church in England and Ireland had been victorious over the Irish church. Willibrord also attached importance to relics, but he still preached salvation in Christ alone.

From Rome, he returns to Utrecht, and that city becomes the base of his mission work. But he does not limit himself to Utrecht; no, he makes long journeys throughout the land of the Frisians. He even preaches in Denmark. He faces many dangers and suffers many hardships. I will tell you something about that later.

In those days, some Frisians lived in the south of Holland, on the island of Walcheren. Close to West Kapelle, a coastal village, stood a large image of Wodan. Initially, Germanics did not worship images, but this had changed. Now they did have an idol, possibly copied from the Romans who had moved into that area. The temples in Rome were full of images of their idols.

The entire population of Walcheren worshipped that image at West Kapelle. They even made pilgrimages to that image. They celebrated their pagan feasts around that image and brought sacrifices to it.

WILLIBRORD ACTS FEARLESSLY

Come. In thought, we'll watch one of those pagan feasts. Many Frisians from all over Walcheren have come together.

A happy crowd bustles about. The priests walk around in their long white robes. They are making everything ready for the sacrifice. Suddenly they hear a shout: "The Christians are coming!" An angry murmur arises. The men take a firm grip on their weapons. All eyes focus on the direction from where they expect the Christians to come.

Are those hated Franks coming again? Do those spies dare to risk entering their holy places? Yes, indeed, a group of strangers is approaching. With dark threatening looks, the Frisians watch them come. But when those strangers come near, they see that these men are no Franks. These strangers are Willibrord and his assistants.

When Willibrord sees what they plan to do, he steps forward fearlessly with a heart full of compassion. Poor people, they don't know any better. They give divine honour to an image of stone. With a loud voice, he cries out:

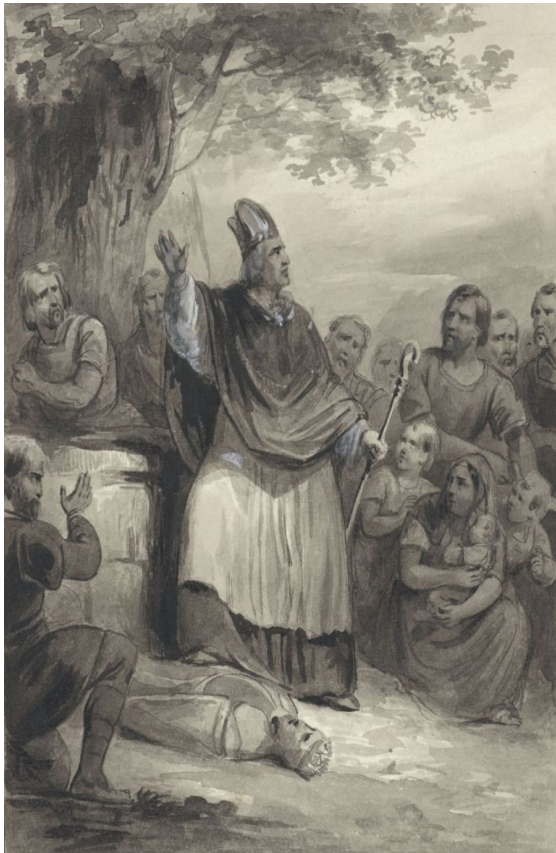
"People, stop! You worship gods that *are* no gods! You worship only what is a piece of stone. Let me show you that Wodan does not exist."

For a moment, he looks around searchingly. Ah, there lies a hammer, just what he needs. He quickly picks up that hammer up, swings it, and breaks that large image of Wodan to pieces with a heavy blow. Then he cries out triumphantly, "Look, there lies your god!" The crowd is in shock. Horrified, they watch it happen, and they all hold their breath; no doubt Wodan will strike down that impudent stranger with lightning! This action *cannot* and *may* not remain unavenged!

They wait... and wait some more... but nothing happens!

The brave missionary stands unharmed by the shattered idol.

Then, in a blind rage, one of the image-guards attacks Willibrord with his sword and seriously wounds the brave missionary in the head. Willibrord's assistants dash forward with the intention to kill the guard, but



Willibrord preaches the gospel and destroys the image of Wodan on Walcheren, Zeeland Drawing from 1840 (Dutch rijks-museum)

Willibrord, with blood gushing out of his head wound, stops them by shouting:

"Do not harm that man; I forgive him his deed!"

That leaves a powerful impression!

What they all expected to happen, *did not* happen! Wodan, the magnificent one, *did not* avenge himself.

How come?

The crowd goes home, busily discussing what has just happened. Doubt rises in their hearts about the power of Wodan. If Wodan is really a god, why doesn't he punish those strangers? They have no answers to that question.

For many years Willibrord laboured in Walcheren. He proclaimed the gospel to them, and they listened to that preaching. That preaching has borne much fruit on the island of Walcheren. Thankfully, the severe wound on Willibrord's head healed well, and cheerfully the undaunted missionary travelled on to other regions.

GOD HEARS PRAYERS

With difficulty, a group of people struggles through the soft sand of the dunes near Heilo, a small village close to the beach in North Holland. The sun burns down on the white dunes, which reflect the fierce heat. They are desperately searching for fresh water, as thirst torments them. The heat and toil make sweat drip off their faces. After climbing to the top of another dune, they see water in a hollow in the dunes. With a cry of joy, they rush towards it. Finally, they will be able to quench their terrible thirst. The first ones arrive at the beckoning water. They bend down, drink, and ... immediately spit the water out again. Yuck! The water is not fit to drink; it is *brackish*! Brackish means salty water mixed with sweet water. This is a great disappointment for those weary travellers! Dismayed, they stand there looking at the tempting water, but they must leave it standing there because if they drink that, their thirst will only get worse. The group marches on despondently — uphill...downhill... will it never end? The thirst becomes unbearable

and torments them more and more. Ah, finally, they discover another pool of water. New hope fills their heart. They hasten to it, but... again, it is brackish... Sadly, and more despondent than ever, they drag themselves along; they are near total exhaustion.

Those men are Willibrord and his assistants. They are undertaking another long, dangerous journey in the land of the Frisians. Eventually, Willibrord speaks up:

"Men, we cannot continue like this! At this rate, we'll die of thirst."

Bewildered, his companions stop walking.

They look at their leader doubtfully. It's ok for him to say that, but what then? The only option is to keep going..!

But very calmly, Willibrord commands them to dig a hole in the sand.

The men look puzzled, but their confidence in their leader is great enough to obey without objecting. Their heads ache, their tongues stick to the roof of their mouths, total exhaustion slows their movements, but... they dig.

Meanwhile, Willibrord kneels in the hot sand. In fervent prayer, he tells the Lord their desperate need. He implores God to help them, asking for deliverance from this great distress.

And God answers that prayer!

Look, they have barely started digging when suddenly water bubbles up!

The tension is palpable!

Shall it be brackish water again?

It is very possible...

They taste it and ...shout with joy!

The water is sweet!



Willibrord well in 1925 (image bank Zeeland)

They drink and drink with long, greedy gulps. Then, with renewed strength, they continue their journey.

Today, the Willibrord Well is still at Heiloo, as a telling proof of God's faithful care for His servants.

WILLIBRORD IN DENMARK

One day Willibrord goes to Denmark to bring God's Word there too. The opposition he experiences in that country is awful.

He is not sure of his life for a moment.

Danger lurks everywhere.

Death lurks everywhere.

Discouraged, he finally leaves Denmark by boat and takes thirty young Danes with him.

He will do his best to convert those young men, hoping to send them back to their own country and people as preachers of the gospel.

While travelling, a violent storm arises. Huge waves constantly beat against the slender vessel.

Dread is on all faces.

Will they drown in this storm?

Is this to be their end?

No, not at all, for God watches over them.

Finally, the storm throws them onto one of the Wadden islands. Some writers tell us that they suffered shipwreck upon Heligoland, one of the German Wadden islands. Others think that it was Ameland, an island off the Frisian coast. Whatever the case, they step ashore on that island, numb and soaked to the skin. God has saved them from the peril of death.

Not at all discouraged, Willibrord immediately preaches the gospel to the islanders with good result. Some of them desire to be baptised. God's Word had conquered their hearts and they believed.

On that island was a sacred well which they had dedicated to Wodan. Some oxen grazing on the island had also been dedicated to Wodan. Those islanders worship that well and those oxen. Willibrord baptises those

converted islanders with water from that sacred well, and he has the 'holy' oxen slaughtered as food for his men.

The pagan inhabitants watch all that with dismay and wait for Wodan to take vengeance. They do not doubt that Wodan will punish those fearless strangers. They will experience that Wodan is not to be mocked! However, to their great surprise and disappointment, nothing happens.

So they complain about Willibrord to Radbod, their king. When he hears their complaint, he is furious. He hurls abuse at the brave missionary and even threatens to kill him! Calmly the missionary answers the angry king that his gods are no gods, that Wodan does not exist, but that there is only one God Who created heaven and earth.

This undaunted attitude makes an impression on the pagan king. But he still wants to take vengeance for the desecration of the holy well. He insists that this must be punished. Because Willibrord offended the gods, the gods must indicate who should die. Radbod casts the lot three times. He secretly hopes that Willibrord is chosen to die. But his wicked plan fails! Three times the missionary is not selected. However, one of his faithful assistants *is* put to death. Willibrord's pleas to spare his faithful helper do not move the king. Helplessly, the missionary has to witness the murder of his companion. How painful that must have been for him. At the same time, the king orders him to leave the island immediately.

GOD TRIUMPHS OVER RADBOD.

This is how Willibrord preached for many years. He did not have an easy life. It was a life full of strife and trouble, a life full of hardships and dangers. Wherever he came, he built churches and founded monasteries. He appointed overseers and preachers so that the young Christian churches would not be left unprovided for after he had moved on.

In the meantime, the war between Radbod, the king of the Frisians, and the Frankish

people continued to rage. When Radbod suffered *defeat*, he was forced to allow the preaching of the gospel in his country. However, whenever Radbod *conquered* the Frankish armies, he turned the churches and monasteries into smoking heaps of rubble - the tireless work of many years - and the blood of many Frisian Christians soaked the ground.

At times it seemed as if all the missionaries' work would come to nothing. At times it seemed as if all the newly planted congregations would be destroyed. But whenever Radbod suffered another defeat, Willibrord would start all over again. And then it became evident that Radbod had not been able to destroy everything. Radbod died in 719. During the last years of his life, he no longer persecuted the Christians.

After Radbod's death, the new ruler allowed the preaching of the gospel in Friesland. Willibrord was able to labour faithfully for twenty more years. This zealous, tireless missionary died in the year 739 at the age of eighty-one years. Others continued his labour. His name has received an honourable mention in the history of the church.

This history clearly shows how much pain and strife went with bringing the gospel to our pagan ancestors.

Today, we still have God's Word. We may go to God's house unhindered. Do we appreciate that? Or do we take these things for granted? Think seriously about these things.

QUESTIONS

1. Who is Willibrord?
2. Name two advantages Willibrord possessed which the Frankish missionaries lacked.
3. Was Willibrord free from the errors of his time? Explain.

4. What importance did the Zeelanders attach to the image of Wodan at West Kapelle?
5. What approach did Willibrord take to the idolatry of the people?
6. List one impression the people received at this feast.
7. What is the Willibrord Well?
8. Why was he content to leave Denmark with thirty young men?
9. Explain the conflict between Willibrord and Radbod. What was Willibrord's response?
10. How did Radbod persecute Willibrord and his assistants?
11. Summarise the rest of Willibrord's life.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Compare Willibrord's reaction to his injury with that of the martyr Stephen. Whose example did both of these men follow?
2. Why was it so necessary for these missionaries to show how helpless the pagan gods were?
3. To what Biblical story can you compare these stories?