

Mary Slessor



This remarkable woman was born in Aberdeen in 1848, but when she was ten, her parents moved to Dundee, looking for work as weavers.

Her father was an alcoholic and died young, but her mother was a Christian in the United Presbyterian Church. This church had started a pioneer mission work in Calabar, now part of Eastern Nigeria, and the stories from Calabar were studied in the Slessor house.

It must have been a miserable upbringing. The seven children and Mrs. Slessor lived in a one-roomed house which had no water, no light and no inside toilet.

Except for Sundays, Mary went to the mill barefoot to work from 6.00am to 6.00pm. Because she was the main breadwinner, she worked at the mill for 14 years. She was nothing more than a badly-educated slum girl. With one difference: she was converted to Christ in her teens, taught a Sunday School class and dreamed of going to Calabar. But all the lady missionaries she had heard of came from the professional classes such as doctors or teachers.

Missionary application

Aged 25, and with the support of her minister, she applied to be a missionary. And after some training, she set sail from Liverpool in 1876.

First impressions of the coastal mission station were dominated by row upon row of graves of people from Scotland. So, it really was the 'white man's grave'.

A bitterly cold temperature was 70F, and usually it was nearly 90 or 100. At that time, no one knew the cause of malaria which caused most of the deaths. So to feel ill, and be ill was part of the price she would have to pay. One biography compares Mary Slessor with those assault troops in World War II who knew before they reached the beaches that most of them would become casualties.

She too knew the risks and regarded herself as expendable for Christ. Not a common attitude is it? After three years in the comparative luxury of the coast, she crumpled under the strain and was ordered home by the church's doctors. As she recovered, she determined to try to penetrate the Calabar forests.

Headhunters

We have to get rid of our idea of happy African heathen. The forests were occupied by people who were headhunters, who believed twins were created by the devil and killed them and their mothers, who degraded women because marriage did not exist, who made money by slave-trading, and whose idea of justice was giving offenders poisoned beans to eat to see what happened. And so on.

When she was 34, she received permission to go a little way inland. She did away with all home comforts, except a cup of tea, lived rough and started to rescue orphans. In her diary she wrote: 'Oh for power! Oh for a heart full of love to Jesus!' and this: 'Only God can change

these people.' In 1880, her church agreed that she could go even further inland. But by going alone she was beyond human help.

Anchored in Scripture

Surrounded by her loyal orphans, she took 15 years to win over the trust of a very unpredictable people. She walked barefoot now and could go where no white person had ever been before.

Her spiritual life was anchored in Scripture. To this day, three of her Bibles are in Dundee City Museum. She wrote in all the margins. Above the page which has Psalms 3 and 4 printed on it, she wrote: 'God and one are always a majority.' She knew all the Psalms by heart.

Frequently she appeared fearless - such as when she put herself between a frenzied mob of warriors intent on human sacrifice. At great risk to her own life, she defied them to pass her and then snatched their weapons out of their hands. A man would have been killed and eaten for trying it.

But she was not really fearless. It was a spiritual matter. As she said: 'Courage is only the conquering of fear by faith.' She said she never appreciated the story of Daniel in the lions' den until she herself was surrounded by snarling, hungry lions. 'O Lord of Daniel, shut their mouths,' she used to pray.

In 1898, she was ordered back to Scotland so sick that she had to be carried to the ship. But she was so concerned about four orphans being left in the jungle that the church reluctantly agreed to let them go to Scotland too. When she became a bit better and went round the churches, the four orphans went with her. And at the time, she was as famous as Livingstone had been.

Return to Calabar

In that same year, she sailed from Liverpool with the four orphans. The church had reservations about giving her permission to go back. It seemed like a death sentence. This was her answer: 'If you don't send me back, I'll swim.' She went deeper still into the Calabar jungle. Other missionaries died, but she went on.

Then came a visitor from what was then called the Liverpool School of Tropical Diseases. He was Sir Ronald Ross and was on the verge of making the sensational discovery that malaria was caused by mosquitoes. That came too late for Mary Slessor. By now, her health was ruined. In addition to constant fevers, she had chronic arthritis and chronic headache. Her red hair was now white. She was stooped, wrinkled and little more than skin and bone. She called her body her 'poor carcass'.

But by 1903, a gospel church had been established. In that year, a Presbyterian minister came to baptise and hold communion. 200 Africans attended. Her plan now was to use African Christians to carry the gospel to Africans. At the time it seemed a novel idea.

When she could walk no more, the once savage, uncaring Africans gently carried the one they called 'the White Queen'. She died in 1915 aged 67, having been a missionary for 39 years. 'My life,' she recorded, 'has been one daily, hourly, record of answered prayer.'

If we don't feel some challenge from her life, we must be very hard.

Don Stephens