

Missionary Profile

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- Mrs Jhansi Praveen.

Mary Slessor – A Brave Soldier of Christ.

Birth and Childhood:

Mary Slessor was born on 2 December 1848 in Scotland in a poor working-class family. She was the second of seven children. Her father Robert Slessor was a shoemaker. Her mother was a faithful Christian woman who taught her kids to pray. Robert Slessor was an alcoholic and could not hold on to any good job. The children had to take up jobs due to poverty. By age fourteen, Mary had become a skilled jute worker, working from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. Mary was 27 when she heard that David Livingstone, the famous missionary and explorer, had died, and decided she wanted to follow in his footsteps.

Early Missionary Life:

Mary became determined to go to Africa as a missionary and her mother supported her decision. After training in Edinburgh, through the Presbyterian Church, she sailed for West Africa. On reaching Calabar in Nigeria, she was stationed at Duke Town as a teacher. She learned the local language, Efik, and she enjoyed teaching but was determined to go and do mission work. She was warned that the Efik people there believed in traditional West African religion and had superstitions in relation to women giving birth to twins. She found herself in a land where terrified prisoners were made to dip their hands in boiling oil to test their guilt under some accusation and where wives were strangled or buried alive to go with their dead chief into the spirit-world. The birth of twins was considered a particularly evil curse and both babies were thrown into the bushes in the forest to either die of starvation or be eaten by wild animals. Mary was depressed and she knelt down and prayed, "Lord, the task is impossible for me but not for Thee. Lead the way and I will follow." Rising, she said, "Why should I fear? I am on a Royal Mission. I am in the service of the King of kings."

First Preaching to the Tribes:

Mary went out on her first "preaching" trip. Two boys carried a drum and beat it to call the people together. Hearing that a white woman was in the place, a great crowd quickly gathered. Her first message to the tribes with superstitious and barbaric behaviour was delivered under the shade of a large tree beside a devil-house built for a dead man's spirit. After reading John 5:1-24, she spoke in tender tones, dwelling especially on verse 24: "Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life." In a land of *death*, she brought a message of *life*. To people dwelling in the habitations of cruelty, she spoke of love and kindness and a redeeming Saviour.

God's Hand with Mary:

Mary wanted to go deeper into Calabar, but she contracted malaria and was forced to return to Scotland to recover. After 16 months in Scotland, Slessor returned to Africa and her new assignment was three miles farther into Calabar, in Old Town. Mary wanted to win the people to Christ and she felt the best way was to live just like them. She didn't wear shoes and ate the native food and slept on the ground like them. In Old Town there was a Christian chief who often consulted Mary on dealing with white men. She took his help in working with the natives. She had the burden to go to the remote Okoyong tribe. God was leading her there but the people warned her that she would die if she went there. At last King Eyo Honesty of Old Town sent her there with special escorts as the people were known to be fierce. When Mary preached about the love of Christ to the Okoyong tribe, they were amazed that she was not afraid of them and ceased all their activities to listen to her.

White Queen of Okoyoug:

Slessor's work in Okoyoug earned her the Efik nickname of *Obongawan Okoyong* (Queen of Okoyong). Slessor focused on evangelism, settling disputes, encouraging trade, establishing social changes and introducing education. Mary adopted some of the twins she helped save as her own children. The tribal people realized that the God of Mary was the true God. As a result of her meetings Okoyoug opened up to outsiders. Mary had achieved what traders, soldiers and diplomats had been unable to do for four hundred years. The tribe began to understand the reason for honest work and it became a turning point in their lives. At one time, Mary stopped two savage native armies from fighting with one another. A court system was set up and Mary was appointed as its first judge. Mary Slessor suffered failing health in her later years but remained in Calabar till her last day.

Death:

In her lifetime Mary rescued hundreds of twin babies thrown out into the forest, prevented many wars, stopped the practice of trying to determine guilt by giving poison to eat, healed the sick, and told the people about the great God of love whose Son came to earth to die on the cross that poor sinful human beings might have eternal life. The Master she loved and served so passionately crowned her labours by permitting her to establish a number of churches. During the last 4 decades of her life, Slessor suffered from malaria many times but she never thought of giving up her mission work or returning permanently to Scotland. The fevers eventually weakened Slessor to the point where she could no longer walk long distances in the rainforest, but had to be pushed along in a hand-cart. While working at a remote station she suffered a severe fever and died at the age of 66 on 13 January 1915. Her body was transported to Duke Town for a state funeral. Flags at government buildings were flown at half-mast. Nigeria's Governor-General, Sir Frederick Laggard, telegraphed his "deepest regret" from Lagos and published a warm tribute in the Government Gazette.

Honours:

Mary Slessor was honoured in 2009 by Clydesdale bank by featuring her on the back of the bank's £10 note. The bank note highlighted her work in Calabar (Nigeria). Several memorials in and around the Efik provinces of Calabar and Okoyong testify to the value placed on her work. Some include Mary Slessor Road in Calabar, Mary Slessor Roundabout, Mary Slessor Church, and statues of her at various locations in Calabar. But the lasting tribute to her life will be known in eternity through the lives she helped come to the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.