

The Woman: Seeing Winefride

Writing about the saints is called hagiography – a way of presenting holy women and men as marvellous individuals for all their human faults, who can be sources of inspiration to Christians as they follow Jesus Christ in their daily lives.

Also important are the traditions of art and representation. Saints are often portrayed with items relating to their stories and to their Christian witness, which provides a way of finding out about them without words. This is a tradition which may feel unfamiliar, but it can be very rewarding just using our eyes and think about what the colours, shapes and symbols mean. Many people are drawn to, and love looking at, stained-glass in churches, for example.

St. Winefride's Well, Holywell, Flintshire, UK. Stained glass window showing Saint Winefride.



Original photo: Andrew/flickr

In this stained-glass representation, St Winefride is represented in long, flowing blue clothing and quietly listening to St Beuno. They sit together, but also apart, in a pastoral landscape of fields and trees and by the spring of water that sprang from the place where St Winefride died and was restored to life. Nature is green and flourishing and becoming fruitful around them, just as the nourishing words of Jesus bear fruit in people's hearts when they become Christians and seek to follow him.

Both figures are dressed in the clothing of a religious order, showing their dedication to Christ and St Winefride holds a rosary (the prayer beads with a cross), showing the importance to her of prayer. As is traditional, both figures have haloes, showing that they are holy persons who can inspire us.

Behind St Winefride is the cross of Jesus, seemingly supporting her, part of her background, and what is rather more difficult to see here (but see the detail below) is the faint broken line across her neck which tells us, visually, what happened to her.

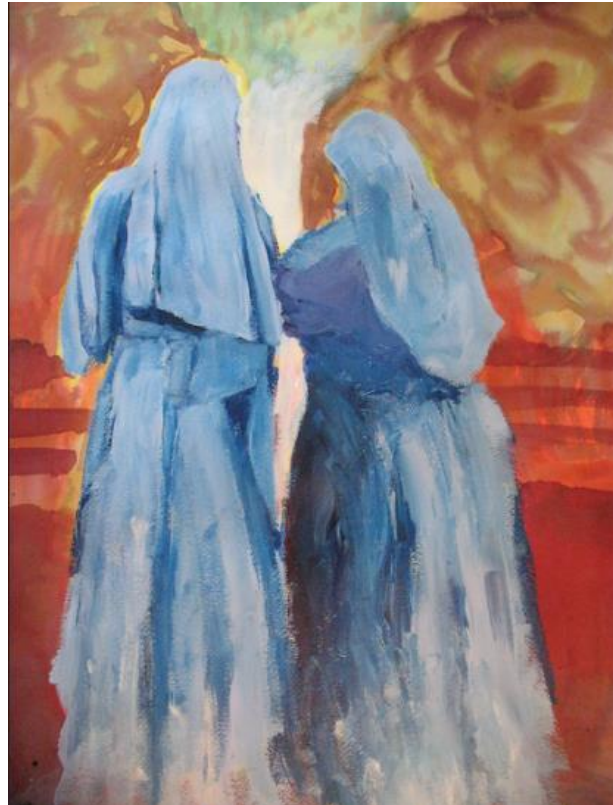
The colours also tell us something. If you have ever looked at other stained-glass windows you will often see that Mary, the Mother of Jesus, is often represented in blue. This colour is often used by the makers of stained-glass to represent faithfulness, chastity, and hopefulness in faith. The greens in the glass and the nature images speak of hope, rebirth and restoration.

Some things to do:

- How do you imagine St Winefride if you were going to describe her to someone else? (You could look at some of the pictures on some of the other resources for ideas or at the detail reproduced below.)
- If you were going to produce a picture of St Winefride to encapsulate her life and story for others, what would you put into the picture and why? You even could try icon making, tapestry or painting if you wanted to make something more elaborate than just a drawing.
- Try to visit a church or place associated with St Winefride (or look online) and find out how St Winefride is celebrated visually there.



The Mission: Dedication to Christ



Xinem/flickr

In Butler's *Lives of the Saints*, we find the following written about St Winefride:

When the holy priest preached to the people, Wenefride was placed at his feet, and her tender soul eagerly imbibed his heavenly doctrine, and was wonderfully affected with the great truths which he delivered, or rather which God addressed to her by his mouth. The love of the sovereign and infinite good growing daily in her heart, her affections were quite weaned from all the things of this world: and it was her earnest desire to consecrate her virginity by vow to God, and, instead of an earthly bridegroom, to choose Jesus Christ for her spouse. Her parents readily gave their consent, shedding tears of joy, and thanking God for her holy resolution.

People become Christians in many different ways, but this account of St Winefride's decision to consecrate herself to a religious life, echoes what people still testify to today about evangelism and discipleship, - how people are called by God to be Christians and determine to follow Jesus Christ. It is important that we have people to help us understand the Gospel, the good news about Jesus, and that we enter into a journey of learning and growing in Christian faith. The worshipping community is important. And it is important that we come to learn that it is God that calls us and converts us.

For many people today, the idea that we could turn away from earthly things like money and possessions to concentrate on God is difficult to comprehend. It seems that so much of modern life puts the emphasis on possessions and partners, so the idea of doing without them can seem scandalous, impossible.

But this is precisely what Jesus asks people to do in the Gospels. He tells the rich young man that he needs to get rid of his many possessions if he really wants to love God and follow him. He tells his followers not to get hung up on family affairs and to leave their busyness and their worldly attachments in order to hear and understand more clearly what he has to tell them about God's purposes for them and about the nature of the kingdom of God.

Today's monks and nuns continue to live the same consecrated life as St Winefride and many people seek out their wisdom and presence with things like retreats or study days among those communities; even people who have little or no faith will visit for rest and refreshment. Such people value the rhythm of life, the constancy of prayer and the dedicated faith of those living in those religious communities, even if they don't understand it or the choices that are made by those who choose a single life totally dedicated to Jesus Christ.

Digging into the Mission – some things to do

- Find out about monks and nuns living in religious orders today. What different kinds of religious orders are there? Where and how do they live? What do they offer to people?
- Find out about things like living by a rule of life and the cycles of prayer. Could you live by a simple rule of life which shaped your day? Why not have a look for one?
- 'Decluttering' is quite a fashionable idea these days. If you were going to 'declutter' your life, what would you get rid of and why? What could you not bear to part with? Why not?
- What examples of famous preachers can you think of? Who are the most important teachers and helpers in your life? How have they shaped your ideas, thoughts and decisions? Have you ever thought about finding a spiritual director, spiritual companion or soul friend?
- Look at the picture below? Who is listening? What do you think the two people might be talking about?



Rolf Dietrich Brecher/flickr Listening

The Miracles: Death and Restoration to Life



Ben Churchill/flickr

The poet Gerard Manley Hopkins began writing a dramatised poem about St Winefride although it was never finished and only fragments of the writing remain. In one section of the poem, he gives St Beuno a monologue as the saint looks forward into the future and sees in his mind's eye what Winefride's death and restoration to life, and the establishment of the holy well, will mean for people yet to come:

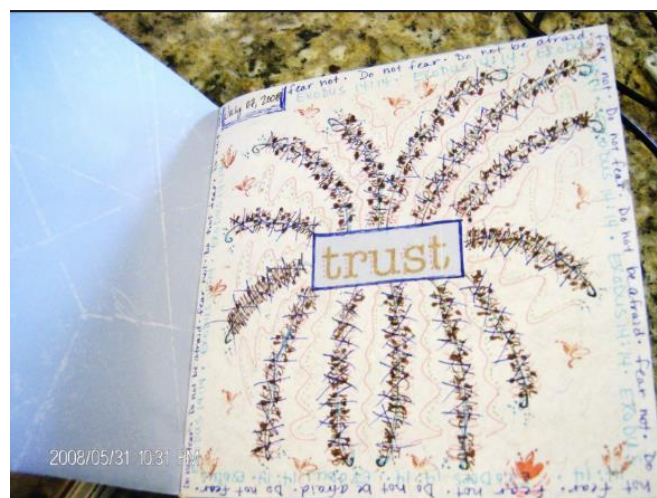
*As long as men are mortal and God merciful,
So long to this sweet spot, this leafy lean-over,
This Dry Dene, now no longer dry nor dumb, but moist and musical
With the uproll and the downcarol of day and night delivering
Water, which keeps thy name, (for not in rock written,
But in pale water, frail water, wild rash and reeling water,
That will not wear a print, that will not stain a pen,
Thy venerable record, virgin, is recorded).
Here to this holy well shall pilgrimages be,
And not from purple Wales only nor from elmy England,
But from beyond seas, Erin, France and Flanders, everywhere,
Pilgrims, still pilgrims, móre pílgrims, still more poor pilgrims.*
(St Winefred's Well, Fragment C, ll. 10-14, 18-23)

It is easy to be challenged by accounts of miracles. And a miracle like having a decapitated head restored to a body can be so completely extraordinary that it's impossible to imagine. But we can see from the poem that there is much more to it than that. Accounts of miracles cut through space and time to bring people face to face with the fact that God can and does work in the world, the very world that we experience. God's love, pouring into the world, brings us hope, transformation and healing. So Hopkins imagines people coming to the special place where St Winefride's miracle happened from many countries, coming in hope of change and remedy, - and finding it, witnesses to the reality of God's work in people's lives.

Many people from different churches make pilgrimages to Jerusalem or to Galilee. It can be humbling and amazing to walk in the same places Jesus walked and to think about him performing miracles and healing people in those places, changing lives for ever. Similarly, people are drawn to other places of miracle because of the sense of awe and wonder in God's power and love that they can feel there.

Digging into the Miracle – something to do

- Do some research and find out about places where miracles are supposed to take place, or 'thin places' where people might go to feel close to God. See if you can find one near to where you live and go for a visit. Otherwise, why not just visit a local church (or a church you don't normally visit) and see what about it speaks to you of a living faith.
- How would you start a conversation about miracles? How might telling the story of St Winefride and the holy well create a good framework for talking about faith?
- Miracles and prayer are closely related. People pray for something to change, - perhaps for help, or healing, or direction. How might God answer our prayers, but in a different way from what we expected?
- Many people pray in words, write down what they want to say and leave it at a particular place, or they might light a candle. But there are lots of other ways to pray, - creating visual prayers in a drawing or sewing, or painting a pebble, or singing or chanting or playing an instrument. Some people like to create visual prayers which show what is being prayed for but leave spaces to show how God has responded afterwards, so the prayer is completed later, possibly much later. Why not have a go at doing prayer differently?



MichellePendergrass/flickr Visual Prayer - Trust

The Mystery: Healing and New Life



Reimagining Relics and Shrines

In the early centuries of Christianity, the remains of holy men and women were considered especially precious and capable of working miracles. These relics were powerful objects to be treated with the utmost care and veneration. Wherever they rested, the place of their rest was to be considered holy and so very often became a place of pilgrimage as people sought out that holiness, often for superstitious reasons as well as genuine expressions of faith.

Today, we might wonder why Christians of the past set such store by bits of bone and human remains that may or may not have belonged to a particular person from long ago, and why those Christians wanted to create shrines where people could start or end a pilgrimage, or kneel in prayer. The holy well at Holywell has been a place of pilgrimage for a very long time, at least since 1115! It may be the oldest continually visited pilgrimage site in Britain. You can see how old the image of St Winefred is in the picture above, and this is part of an ancient stone panel in Shrewsbury Abbey where St Winefred's remains were said to have been brought.

So how can we reimagine relics for today?

It might help to think about how relics point us to a physical body and a real person, and remind us that the saints are not some work of fiction or shadowy myth. In a sense, it doesn't matter whether we can prove that such a relic actually belonged to this or that person; rather the relic points backwards in time to a human being made and loved by God, who lived and died and who can set us an example. Relics create linkages between miracle stories and the hard facts of our existence, - that we are creatures who live and die, and the fact that so many Christians have died because they loved God and were true to their faith – something which is still going on in the world today.

So what about shrines? Why does having a shrine to some person in an abbey or a cathedral have anything to do with modern Christian faith?

People still feel the urge to make temporary shrines today. If we read in the newspapers about people who have died by violence, who should have been safe and happy, you will doubtless see that many people come out in public to grieve and leave flowers, candles, gifts and messages at the

places where they died, even if they did not know the people concerned. There is a powerful human urge to express solidarity and sadness when tragedies occur, as well as the need to look for change and hope. Shrines dedicated to saints do not tell us that the saint was more deserving of attention, but become fixed locations where people can pray, find solace and a more focused direction for the journey of faith. That is why pilgrimage as a physical journey can be a good way to reflect and ponder on where next in the Christian life you might want to go.

Some people find it helpful as part of their tradition to believe that saints can pray for us. But you don't have to believe that to find praying at a shrine meaningful. Just the idea that we are part of an ancient tradition of pilgrimage and prayer can connect us, not just to our own Christian community but to so many who have gone before and believed that prayer is not an empty gesture but that God does hear us and respond to us, and that the Holy Spirit directs us and inspires us.

So the physical locations associated with the body of St Winefride as a physical person who lived and died for her faith, have become places where people find inspiration for their own lives, healing and a sense of new life as they discover, through prayer and pilgrimage, what wonderful things God has in store for them.

Digging into the Mystery – something to do

- Imagine you are an archaeologist and have just discovered a small human bone from the 7th century. Now imagine the body the bone belonged to, and then imagine that body as a living, breathing person. Now imagine that person's family around them, and their daily lives. What might they have eaten for dinner? What clothes might they have worn? How would they travel around and what dangers might they have faced? If you find it difficult to imagine, do a bit of research to find out about life in those days long ago.
- Now imagine having a conversation with St Winefride or St Beuno back then. What might you want to talk about? What might you want to ask them?
- Or: imagine meeting some pilgrims from the early days of the shrine. Where might they have come from and what might they have hoped for?
- Or: go and visit one of the locations associated with St Winefride and talk to some of the other visitors about what they are doing there and what the visit means to them? See if that enables you to say something about your own faith and faith-journey.



Jairo/flickr Pilgrims