

The Woman: Susanna – faithfulness and obedience to God



Artemisia Gentileschi, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1610, Schloss Weißenstein, Bavaria, Germany

Susanna (sometimes called Daniel 13) 15-23

The story of Susanna is included in some Bibles as Daniel 13 but elsewhere is an apocryphal book which can be found easily enough in online Bible sites. The story of Susanna may help us to think about the story of St Winefride, and the story of St Winefride may help us reflect further about the story of Susanna.

Susanna is the faithful wife of a rich man who had a large house and garden and who was often visited by Jewish elders. Susanna often goes into the garden to walk and to bathe and the wicked elders spy on her and are overcome with lust. They therefore plan to force her, by blackmailing her into doing what they want or being put to death for adultery.

Once, while they were watching for an opportune day, she went in as before with only two maids, and wished to bathe in the garden, for it was a hot day. No one was there except the two elders, who had hidden themselves and were watching her. She said to her maids, “Bring me olive oil and ointments, and shut the garden doors so that I can bathe.” They did as she told them: they shut the doors of the garden and went out by the side doors to bring what they had been commanded; they did not see the elders, because they were hiding.

When the maids had gone out, the two elders got up and ran to her. They said, “Look, the garden doors are shut, and no one can see us. We are burning with desire for you; so give your consent, and lie with us. If you refuse, we will testify against you that a young man was with you, and this was why you sent your maids away.”

Susanna groaned and said, “I am completely trapped. For if I do this, it will mean death for me; if I do not, I cannot escape your hands. I choose not to do it; I will fall into your hands, rather than sin in the sight of the Lord.”

Susanna chooses to refuse the elders and let them do their worst. She chooses to remain faithful to her husband and to God and to keep the commandments, trusting in God to vindicate her. The young Daniel is moved to stand up for her and to question the elders separately, exposing their lies and confirming the truth of her faithfulness and steadfastness.

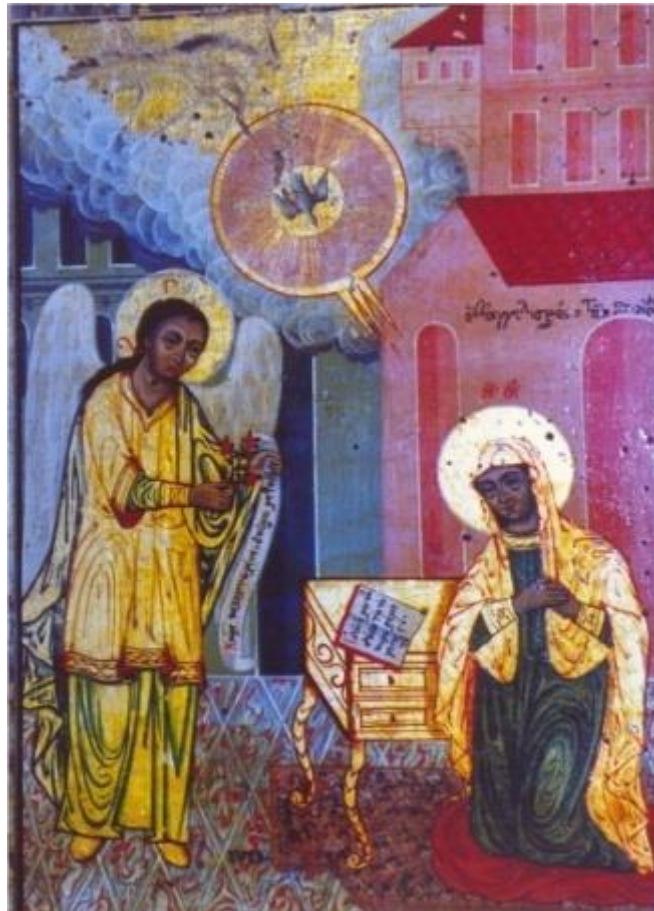
Some questions to think about:

- How do you think the story of Susanna illuminates the story of St Winefride or vice versa?
- How does the famous classical painting above (by a female artist) get across the emotions and power of the story?
- Have a look at the painting of Susanna by Francesco Hayez (below). Who is looking at her? How does *this* painting make you feel?
- How do you think the stories of Susanna and Winefride could be used as ways into discussing difficult issues about power, sex and sexual faithfulness with young people today?
- While Susanna is a story about lust, power and lies, it is also a story about faithfulness and obedience to God. How can we make our discussions about power and sex in today’s society also include the importance of keeping God’s commandments and being obedient to God’s will for us?
- Who are the Daniels of today in speaking up for victims and enabling women (other others) to tell their stories?
- How do you think the stories of Susanna and Winefride open up questions today about how men treat women, and difficult issues around things like consent, faithfulness, rape, and revenge porn?



Francesco Hayez – Susanna at her Bath 1850 The Yorck Project (2002)

The Mission: Mary's obedience brings Jesus into the world



The Annunciation (Evangelismos). Orthodox style icon by anonymous, 1825, Church Museum of the Bishopry of Thessaloniki https://repository.kallipos.gr/bitstream/11419/3927/1/05_chapter_3.pdf

One of the pivotal moments in the story of St Winefride is her decision to follow God's will for her and dedicate herself to holy chastity, -which costs her her life. In Luke's account of the Annunciation we hear another account of a woman called by God to dedicate her life to God's service. Mary is asked by God to become the mother of Jesus, also possibly putting her life at risk if Joseph decides to denounce her.

Luke 1. 26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon

you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.” Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her.

Some questions to think about:

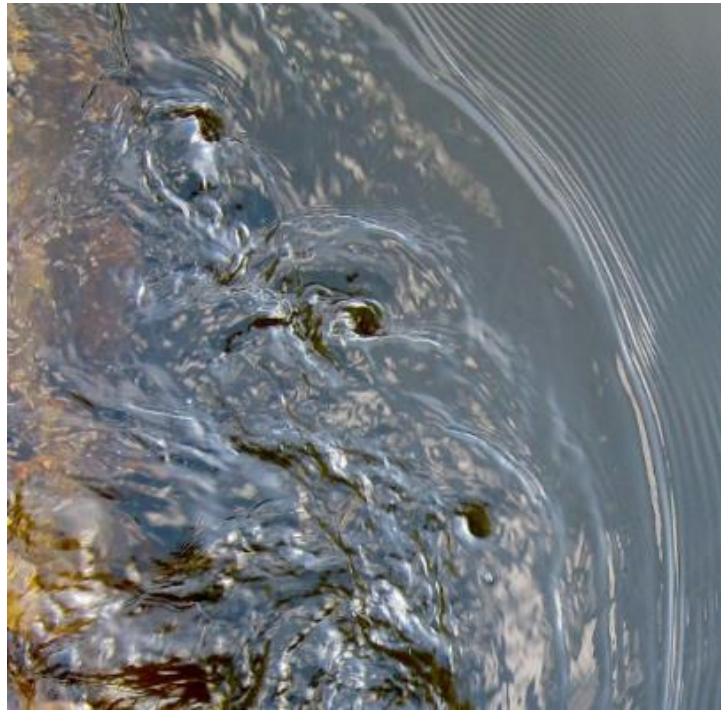
- In the Annunciation, Mary, who is betrothed to Joseph and expects to get married, is asked to conceive and bear Jesus. How hard do you suppose it was for Mary and for Winefride, as women seeking to serve God, to follow God’s will against the expectations and pressures of their societies?
- Mary was visited by an angel of God. Winefride was guided by St Beuno. How do you think people today hear God’s call and invitation to them?
- Although Scripture refers to Jesus’s brothers and sisters, Christian tradition refers to Mary as a virgin perpetually dedicated and faithful to God. What do you think this tradition, and the story of St Winefride, tells us about the beauty and purpose of a single life in a society which pressures people to have sexual relationships as a matter of course?
- The angel explains to Mary how Jesus is to come into the world and she agrees; Caradoc tries to force violence on Winefride and then kills her. What does this tell us about human minds and bodies and how God relates to our physical, mental and spiritual selves?
- Mary’s ‘yes’ to God brought Jesus into the world. St Winefride’s faithfulness to God led to a tradition of pilgrimage, healing and peace. How can we use these examples to witness to people today about how listening to God and acting in accordance to God’s will can radically challenge and change the world? What other examples of saying ‘yes’ to God can you think of?
- What does the photo (below) make you think about if we imagine a calling from God in the life of young people today? What could God be saying to the person in the photo?

Nenad Stojkovic/flickr



The Miracles: The Pool of Bethesda

St Winefride's well is associated with miracle healing, but what does this really mean? Maybe we can think more deeply about this by finding Jesus in the place of 'miracle waters'.



Underthesamemoon/flickr

John 5.1-9

Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Beth-zatha, which has five porticoes. In these lay many invalids—blind, lame, and paralysed. One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years [waiting for the stirring of the water; for an angel of the Lord went down at certain seasons into the pool, and stirred up the water; whoever stepped in first after the stirring of the water was made well from whatever disease that person had.] When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, 'Do you want to be made well?' The sick man answered him, 'Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me.' Jesus said to him, 'Stand up, take your mat and walk.' At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk.

In this account the sick man is lying hopelessly by a pool that is thought to provide miraculous healing. The section in brackets is an explanation added by some authorities to explain why the man was there. When the water began to stir this was seen as an indication that divine power was passing into the pool for healing.

Jesus, however, does not need to put the man into the pool and doesn't try to. Instead, he asks him a very pertinent question – do you *want* to be made well? Bishop John V Taylor once pointed out that this was a completely critical question -Jesus doesn't just randomly act to help people – they have to have agency in their own transformation and decision to follow Jesus.

But we might notice that while Jesus doesn't need the pool, he is present where the pool is. The people go there because it is a physical location with a tradition of healing and change. So perhaps those who seek out such places are precisely those who may well meet Jesus in those places and find more than just what they thought they were looking for. Places where miracles are supposed to happen can be places where Jesus meets us and tells us get up and get going for the sake of his kingdom.

Some questions to think and talk about:

- Many people seek out places of miracle healing even if they do not have a faith. Why do you think they might be drawn to such places?
- What do you think Jesus was actually doing at the Pool of Bethesda?
- Why do you think Jesus first asked if the man wanted to be healed?
- How do you think people might encounter Jesus at St Winefride's well and what could we do to help that happen?



Alex Liivet/flickr

The Mystery: Tabitha - a disciple restored to life



The raising of Tabitha (rh side) by Masolino, Yorck Project (2002)

In the story of St Winefride, we hear how she was horribly murdered by Prince Caradog but restored to life by St Beuno. Seems incredible? Surely such tremendous acts could only be done by Jesus – as in the raising of Lazarus and of Jairus’s daughter. Yet with God nothing is impossible and in Acts, we hear the extraordinary account of how Peter’s prayers to God enabled a holy woman called Tabitha to be restored to life and how this mystery of God’s grace brought many people to believe in Jesus Christ.

Acts 9. 36-42

Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas. She was devoted to good works and acts of charity. At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs. Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, who heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him with the request, “Please come to us without delay.” So Peter got up and went with them; and when he arrived, they took him to the room upstairs. All the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them. Peter put all of them outside, and then he knelt down and prayed. He turned to the body and said, “Tabitha, get up.” Then she opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up. He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive. This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord.

Some things to talk and think about:

- What does this story tell us about the power of prayer and about witness to God?
- Why do you think the disciples wanted Peter to come and see Tabitha's body? What do you think they expected and thought would happen?
- Why do you think hearing about this brought many people to belief in Jesus?
- How does this account in Acts illuminate the story of St Winefride, or vice versa?



Jules and Jenny/flickr

A Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ,

We thank you for the example of holy women and men

Who have kept the faith and witnessed to others that they might believe.

Watch over all who seek to serve you,

And over all who are persecuted and die for your name's sake.

We thank you for the mystery of grace and miracles of healing,

We ask your blessing on all who seek you

That they might meet you through prophets in places of injustice;

Through your loving invitation and call to serve you;

At places where people come for healing and salvation;

At places where all hope seems lost.

Amen