

The Mission: Winefride and Beuno



In the *Golden Legend*, the story of St Winefride delves into the relationship between Winefride and her mentor and guide St Beuno. St Beuno is about to depart for Ireland, but he wants to remain in contact with her. He tells her that even though she will be living as a nun and not actually going anywhere, if she makes and sends something for him, she can use the power of the natural world, the well that sprang up at her attack. The water will take it to the sea and from there across to Ireland where he will receive it.

The story says:

Then after, this holy maid Winefride was veiled and consecrate into religion by the hands of this holy man Beuno. And he commanded her to abide in the same church that he had do make there by the space of seven years, and there to assemble to her virgins of honest and holy conversation whom she should inform in the laws of God. And after the seven years to go to some holy place of religion, and there to abide the residue of her life. And when this holy man should depart from her and go into Ireland, she followed him, till she came to the foresaid well, where they stood talking a long while of heavenly things. And

when they should depart, this holy man said: It is the will of our Lord that thou send to me every year some token, which thou shalt put into the stream of this well, and from hence it shall by the stream be brought into the sea, and so by the purveyance of God it shall be brought over the sea the space of fifty miles, to the place where I shall dwell. And after they were departed, she with her virgins made a chasuble of silk work, and the next year following she wrapt it in a white mantle and laid it upon the stream of the said well, and from thence it was brought unto this holy man Beuno, through the waves of the sea, by the purveyance of God. After this, the blessed virgin Winefride increased from day to day in great virtue and goodness, and specially in holy contemplation with her sisters, moving them into great devotion and love of Almighty God.

This story is interesting in that it looks at the relationship between a man and a woman through the filter of holiness and devotion to God. Winefride has become a nun, a bride of Christ, dedicated now to 'honest and holy conversation' with others as a practice of evangelism and then to dedicate herself to her religious order. Yet with all that has happened to her, reconciliation and relationship have still to be worked out. This can be done if the context of relationship is seen through the filter of dedication to God. St Beuno, her uncle and protector, has restored her, but the power relationships could still be unequal and restricting for her. It is interesting, then, that she follows him to the place of her attack, with its well of life-giving water, and there they speak as equals of 'heavenly things'.

Although they are to live their separate lives, they can remain in touch with one another. St Beuno says that by the agency of the water, carrying it by stream and sea, a message can be sent to him in Ireland. Although on the surface this looks like doing something 'for' him, with no promise of return,

yet it is left in Winefride's hands to choose what to send, and what creativity to put into it. She sends him a chasuble (a tunic worn during a service of Holy Communion) which she and her companions have sewn, to encourage her uncle in his own priestly ministry. Just as Beuno rescued and consecrated Winefride to ministry, so she in her turn chooses to encourage his. In all this, God blesses and enables the communication and the encouragement and the ability to grow in holiness, trust and discipleship.

What this means for us today

We may learn a number of important things from this story. First, friendships and relationships between men and women can be mutually enriching and can exist without unequal power relations. But where women have been traumatised and have suffered at the hands of violent partners or other family members, it can be difficult to get to that place of trust and respect.

There is also here a message about gifts and gift giving. As Winefride and Beuno stand by the well, Beuno asks her for a token, offering up a place of lack in himself which needs to be filled. He is not her patron any longer, but the one who needs something from her. This version of the story does not say that she has to provide this or that, but leaves the question of what is appropriate to send, and whether she does it or not, with her.

Finally, we may see in this story something about how we can all encourage each other in mission, evangelism and discipleship. We can remember missionaries who work overseas and seek to encourage and resource them. Yet staying at home does not mean we have no agency in mission, prayer and creativity and communication are important in sustaining relationships and helping those who work in mission to bring the Good News of Jesus Christ into the lives of others.

Some things to think or talk about:

- What do you know about the people who work for mission agencies?
- What sort of thing could you make or give to your local clergy to encourage them in their life and faith?
- What sort of heavenly things do you think Winefride and Beuno talked about?



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