

The Mystery – the New Spring of Water



Alex Liivet/flickr St Winefride's Well

The *Golden Legend* says that when St Winefride was killed by her angry suitor, Caradoc, something miraculous happened:

And in the same place whereas the head fell to the ground, there sprang up a fair well giving out abundantly fair clear water, where our Lord God yet daily showeth many miracles. And many sick people having divers diseases have been there cured and healed by the merits of this blessed virgin, Saint Winefride. And in the said well appear yet stones besprinkled and speckled as it were with blood, which cannot be had away by no means, and the moss that groweth on these stones is of a marvellous sweet odour, and that endureth unto this day.

The appearance, or discovery, of a spring in relation to a supernatural event or the death of an especially holy or devoted person, is a common occurrence. It is as though the natural world, responding to a 'thin place' created by the event, offers something which can be read by humans as a symbol of hope and life. More to the point, in cases like this, the horror of unjust, violent, death is countered by people finding something which offers life and hope. For this reason, such springs and holy wells can become places where people do indeed find life and hope and healing.

Another important point is that the violence done to Winefride is countered by transformation and beauty – the blood disappears but is replaced by speckled stones, the stench of death is replaced by sweet moss and the horror is transformed by the cleansing water, literally washing the dread away and replacing it with beauty, growth and cleanness.

Why should we care about this when so much violent death today goes untouched by transformation and remains as a scene of horror and grief? Why would anyone whose loved one has been murdered, not to mention the scenes at Auschwitz or the mass graves of Srebrenica, or the killing fields of Cambodia, be impressed by a spring of water and the death of a young Welsh woman so long ago?

The thing is, even in today's more sceptical and perhaps cynical times, we do try to bring beauty and hope into tragedy and horror. The roadside shrines at the sites of accidents or the masses of flowers brought by complete strangers to the sites of terrorist bombings or tragedies, show a pull in the human heart to remember, and change grief at untimely death into something that takes us forward in hope.

So when we donate money, or join a fun run in memory of someone, when we pray for situations where someone has been killed or many people have died, we create different kinds of springs, - springs of hope and reconciliation and peace. When we become creative in someone's memory, such as setting up a charity or a foundation to make future life better for others, we create speckled stones and sweet moss. We have many more opportunities for doing this than the people of 8th century Wales and every day we create thin places for the Lord to work miracles by the merits of Christians, of people of faith and hope everywhere.

And the healing miracles do matter, because each person who has found relief at a holy well becomes a testimony to the healing power and strength of the God of creation, who, in the Christian tradition, at the end, wipes all our tears away (Rev 21.21)

Some things to talk and think about:

- Why do you think water is such a powerful symbol of life?
- Where so you see people trying to make something good and pure come out of violence and death?
- What do you think people felt when they associated the story and the spring of water and what might we make of it today?
- What does this story tell us about holiness and how evil can be overcome?



Jose Nicdao/flickr stone and water