

The Woman: Following in the Footsteps of St Winefride - Safety and Harassment



Martyrdom of St. Winifred, by the Fastolf Master. Hours of William Porter; France, Rouen, ca. 1420-25. Pierpont Morgan Library, MS M.105, f. 73 (detail). <https://www.themorgan.org/collection/Illuminating-Fashion/22#>

Many people have heard of the #MeToo movement in which women in particular have registered publicly the way they have suffered unwanted advances, or have been sexually harassed by others. Today, this issue has become increasingly acute as people have reacted with horror to the murders of women such as Sarah Everard and Sabina Nessa in 2021. There has been heated debate about whether such terrible events mean that women have to behave differently to protect themselves (such as not walking by themselves at night) or whether more has to be done to prevent others from ever intending harm and harassment. And there are many questions and outright disputes about how as a society we could do more to educate, protect and look out for one another.

This current debate shows that St Winefride's own story is entirely relevant and contemporary. As a woman harassed, overpowered and killed by someone who thought he could just force her to do what he wanted, her death shows that this kind of behaviour has affected all kinds of people down the ages. But St Winefride's story shows us more than just a story of lust and deadly violence; it is also a story of recovery, determination and flourishing, - with God's help.

In the illustrated manuscript above, we see Winefride on foot, hastening away by herself, trying to climb a slope towards the sanctuary of buildings and church which seem impossibly far away. Her attacker rides a powerful horse and carries a raised sword which he obviously intends to use on her.

Although we can read about people like Sarah and Sabina in newspapers and see the pictures of those smiling, confident, young women, it can be difficult to know how to approach their stories, how to honour them, mourn for them and face the horror of their deaths. Our proper emotions of sadness and revulsion and compassion for their families can make it difficult to think about the wider consequences and issues around how we trust one another and keep each other safe. But a picture like the one above, from a medieval manuscript filled with symbolism, may give us a different way in to think about and reflect on matters of power, lust and brutality against people who should be safe and free. For all its horror, the picture also contains images of hope and overcoming with the healing water of the well and St Beuno in the very top of the picture restoring his niece to life.

The picture, then, makes an entire sequence of events present and while it does not deny death and horror it offers against them hope and restoration, that good change and restitution should come out of evil acts.

So perhaps we could use what we learn from letting this illustration soak into us to be more mindful of people around us who have been silent about their experiences and who might need a safe space to begin to come forward and talk about them. The Church is often accused of being bad at this and not helping people enough or taking them seriously. Perhaps through the story of St Winefride we could make spaces for more people to feel able to say that things have happened to them, some of which may have been sources of anxiety and pain for a long time.

Of course, #MeToo or other campaigns shouldn't just be about particular situations, but about caring for, and solidarity with, anyone who has ever suffered from being bullied or coerced. Because in Winefride's story there is also a message of deep and lasting hope, - that anyone who has suffered in this way is permitted to tell their story, to be heard, to be held by the Church and they and their friends and families, should be offered genuine listening, care, encouragement, support and help for as long as they need and want it.

And perhaps the story of St Winefride could help us confront our own experiences, positive and negative, including any times when we have tried to dominate or control others, and look more deeply into our own spiritual lives?

Responding to the challenge St Winefride sets us:

- How could reflecting on the story of St Winefride make us better at recognising and responding compassionately to people who have been harassed or have had inappropriate advances made to them? Would you know how to receive such a story and how you should respond? Do you know about safeguarding in the church?
- How can we encourage respect for others, ways of looking out for others and being aware of our safety and that of people around us? What does Jesus tell us about this?
- What more could we do to remember victims of violence and work with those charities and agencies which are trying to stop violence happening?
- Why not start a conversation with someone you know and tell them something interesting about St Winefride?