

# The Woman: Winefride

## (Also Winifred, Welsh: Gwenfrewi/Gwenffrewi)

*St Winifred, Castell Coch stained glass panel designed by William Burges. Hchc2009 Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0*



Some people have doubted that St Winefride actually ever existed, because writing about her started so late after the time she was actually supposed to have lived (7<sup>th</sup> century). However, other historical evidence of her reliquary (a structure with some part of her remains) dated from the 8<sup>th</sup> century has come to light, showing that she was revered as a saint quite soon after her death and that a church dedicated to her memory was established containing these relics. In this resource we go on a journey to discover the woman behind the saint and the legends associated with her and why her life is so relevant to women today.

The various written accounts of the life of Saint Winefride date first from around the 12<sup>th</sup> century. She is thought to have been the daughter of a Welsh nobleman, Tyfid ap Eiludd, the chief of a people living in what is now the border country between England and Wales, in Flintshire. Her mother was called Wenlo, sister to Beuno (St Beuno) and also part of an important Welsh family. She was their only child.

Her story is a sad one. She is said to have been a faithful Christian who wanted to know more and more about Christ and to follow him as diligently as she could, encouraged and taught by her uncle, Beuno. In those days the relationship between an uncle and a niece or nephew was an important one, and Winefride would have been under his protection and care as if she were his daughter. Eventually she decided that she wanted to devote her whole life to Christ and become a nun.

Unfortunately, a man called Caradoc wanted her. He also came from an aristocratic family and wanted to marry her, probably to form an alliance with other aristocratic families. The story says that he came to her and insisted that she give herself to him. She refused but he would not listen and she feared that he would immediately rape her. Pretending to give in, she said she would go to her bedroom and get ready, but escaped through another door and tried to run away to the church. However Caradoc followed her, caught her and said that if she didn't allow him to have sex with her immediately, he would kill her. Winefride said she would choose death rather than give in and so he decapitated her.

[This was not the end of the story – which you can continue in the Miracle section]

## What do we learn about Winefride from this part of her story?

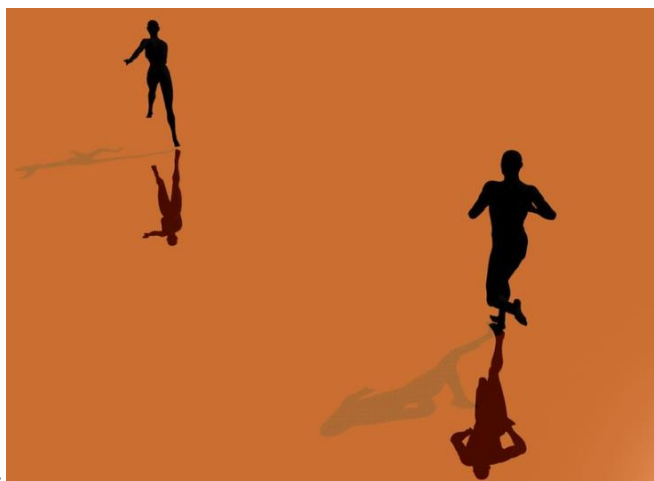
First, we have to set her in her context. As the only daughter of a noble family she would have been seen as a useful asset. Her marriage into to another aristocratic family would have offered importance alliances, protections for her father's position and estate and any children of the marriage would have enabled further consolidation of power structures, territory and heritage. Women were political pawns in the feudal structures and politics of the time and she would have been brought up within this mindset and aware of the precarious nature of the social structure in which she lived. Her mother was doubtless the subject of such an alliance and her own position and path in life would have been expected within her own family,

Secondly, we can see that Winefride was an unusual person in seeking instead to learn and grow in faith and in her decision to dedicate herself to a single life and turn away at a young age from the expected path of marriage and children in order to serve God. This was particularly unusual, since she was an only child, and also because many women entered the religious life after having been widowed; marriage and family came first as necessary and the convent was available if their husbands died. So it wasn't an either/or choice. Yet Winefride was clear that her vocation as a young person was set and that she would refuse her suitor. Beuno appears as her 'spiritual' parent.

Thirdly, we learn that Winefride was absolutely determined that this choice was absolute and without compromise. Although she must have been terrified at being attacked, she was willing to die rather than compromise her ideals and life choice. We learn of her trying to negotiate and to escape and her refusal to give up her essential sense of self and vocation even when overpowered and about to be killed.

## Some questions to think or talk about:

- What do you think it was like to be brought up the daughter of a Welsh aristocrat in those days? What would life have been like?
- What reasons might have Winefride had for choosing the religious life over marriage and family?
- What can we learn about the exercise of power in those times? Where do we see power being misused today and what can we do about it?



Steve Johnson/flickr

## 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?



*Sjensen~/flickr*



## The Miracles: Winefride is restored



Amanda Slater, Coventry

The *Golden Legend* goes on to say that St Beuno found Winefride decapitated and cursed Caradoc so that he immediately died. He was popularly supposed to have melted and been swallowed up by the ground. After this, Beuno asked all the horrified people who have gathered around to join him in prayer:

*And after, took up the head in his hands, and set it to the place where it was cut off, and desired all the people that were there present to kneel down and pray devoutly to Almighty God that it might please him to raise her again unto life, and not only for the comfort of father and mother, but for to accomplish the vow of religion. And when they arose from prayer, this holy virgin arose with them also; made by a miracle alive again by the power of Almighty God. Wherefore all the people gave laud and praising unto his holy name for this great miracle. And ever, as long as she lived after, there*

*appeared about her neck a redness round about, like to a red thread of silk, in sign and token of her martyrdom.*

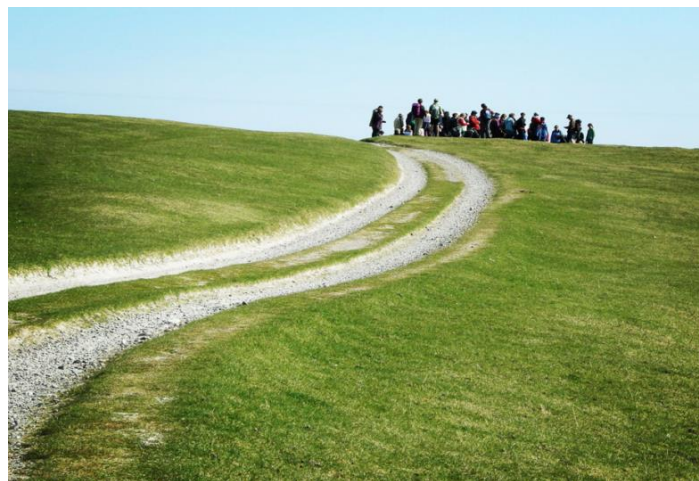
So Winefride is miraculously restored to her parents and to her religious vow, by the power of prayer. She lives out her life consecrated to that vow and bears her promise to God and her story forward into the future as an example to all.

What this story tells us goes far beyond the 'miracle' itself, not least because we are all too sadly aware from atrocities reported in the news, that beheaded people do not come back to life. Rather we learn from an extraordinary picture of utter destruction that nothing is impossible for God and that no life, no matter how long or short, is devoid of meaning or purpose. On one level the story is about a powerless young woman, subject to extreme, devastating violence; on another level, the evil that is done to her is destroyed and borne away and her contribution to the richness and fullness of God's world is restored, such that her story percolates as a source of inspiration through the ages and is still with us today.

Many of us bear the scars of pain and violence and the picture of this young woman walking about with the thin red line on her neck sends an important message about not being ashamed of the scars we bear, whether those are of physical violence, or impaired mental or physical health. The mark like a thread of silk externalises the suffering of oppressed women, of those trafficked for sex, victims of domestic abuse, who are often made to feel worthless and less than human. The transformation of corpse into a person of dignity, symbolises for us the transformation we should seek for all oppressed human beings, so that we can rejoice with them and learn from them. Their stories, like that of Winefride, should change us all.

## Some things to think or talk about:

- How can we work to restore dignity and worth to those who have been abused or to the memory of those killed?
- How important, do you think, is the picture of a crowd of people praying together for a miracle?
- How do we help people not to be ashamed of their scars and the bad things that have happened to them in life?



*Stew Dean/flickr praying at Iona*

# 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 8<sup>th</sup> 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*