

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 (7th century). However, other historical evidence of her reliquary (a structure with some part of her remains) dated from the 8th 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 12th 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?



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