

The Mystery: Healing and New Life



Reimagining Relics and Shrines

In the early centuries of Christianity, the remains of holy men and women were considered especially precious and capable of working miracles. These relics were powerful objects to be treated with the utmost care and veneration. Wherever they rested, the place of their rest was to be considered holy and so very often became a place of pilgrimage as people sought out that holiness, often for superstitious reasons as well as genuine expressions of faith.

Today, we might wonder why Christians of the past set such store by bits of bone and human remains that may or may not have belonged to a particular person from long ago, and why those Christians wanted to create shrines where people could start or end a pilgrimage, or kneel in prayer. The holy well at Holywell has been a place of pilgrimage for a very long time, at least since 1115! It may be the oldest continually visited pilgrimage site in Britain. You can see how old the image of St Winefred is in the picture above, and this is part of an ancient stone panel in Shrewsbury Abbey where St Winefred's remains were said to have been brought.

So how can we reimagine relics for today?

It might help to think about how relics point us to a physical body and a real person, and remind us that the saints are not some work of fiction or shadowy myth. In a sense, it doesn't matter whether we can prove that such a relic actually belonged to this or that person; rather the relic points backwards in time to a human being made and loved by God, who lived and died and who can set us an example. Relics create linkages between miracle stories and the hard facts of our existence, - that we are creatures who live and die, and the fact that so many Christians have died because they loved God and were true to their faith – something which is still going on in the world today.

So what about shrines? Why does having a shrine to some person in an abbey or a cathedral have anything to do with modern Christian faith?

People still feel the urge to make temporary shrines today. If we read in the newspapers about people who have died by violence, who should have been safe and happy, you will doubtless see that many people come out in public to grieve and leave flowers, candles, gifts and messages at the

places where they died, even if they did not know the people concerned. There is a powerful human urge to express solidarity and sadness when tragedies occur, as well as the need to look for change and hope. Shrines dedicated to saints do not tell us that the saint was more deserving of attention, but become fixed locations where people can pray, find solace and a more focused direction for the journey of faith. That is why pilgrimage as a physical journey can be a good way to reflect and ponder on where next in the Christian life you might want to go.

Some people find it helpful as part of their tradition to believe that saints can pray for us. But you don't have to believe that to find praying at a shrine meaningful. Just the idea that we are part of an ancient tradition of pilgrimage and prayer can connect us, not just to our own Christian community but to so many who have gone before and believed that prayer is not an empty gesture but that God does hear us and respond to us, and that the Holy Spirit directs us and inspires us.

So the physical locations associated with the body of St Winefride as a physical person who lived and died for her faith, have become places where people find inspiration for their own lives, healing and a sense of new life as they discover, through prayer and pilgrimage, what wonderful things God has in store for them.

Digging into the Mystery – something to do

- Imagine you are an archaeologist and have just discovered a small human bone from the 7th century. Now imagine the body the bone belonged to, and then imagine that body as a living, breathing person. Now imagine that person's family around them, and their daily lives. What might they have eaten for dinner? What clothes might they have worn? How would they travel around and what dangers might they have faced? If you find it difficult to imagine, do a bit of research to find out about life in those days long ago.
- Now imagine having a conversation with St Winefride or St Beuno back then. What might you want to talk about? What might you want to ask them?
- Or: imagine meeting some pilgrims from the early days of the shrine. Where might they have come from and what might they have hoped for?
- Or: go and visit one of the locations associated with St Winefride and talk to some of the other visitors about what they are doing there and what the visit means to them? See if that enables you to say something about your own faith and faith-journey.



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