

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?

The Mission: Following in the Footsteps of St Winefride – Living a Consecrated Life



Jules and Jenny/flickr Warwick, St Mary's church, Beauchamp Chapel, East Window detail

St Winefride is example of a Christian who decided that marriage and family was not for her, but that she would rather dedicate herself to God.

Many people in today's society find that idea simply odd. We are encouraged to see sex and relationships as fulfilling, and chat about love, sex and relationships is everywhere in popular culture.

But what about a dedication to a celibate, single life? Where does that get talked about as a good, confident and right choice for a person?

In her book, *Single-Minded: Being Single, Whole and Living Life to the Full*, the Rev'd Kate Wharton comments on how strange it is that married people or people in a relationship talk easily about 'my other half' as if they were only one half of a person to start with, and that many pop songs talk about finding someone to 'complete' them as though there was always a piece missing. So it can be easy to view single people, or widowed people, as somehow incomplete, waiting for 'the one', having lost 'the one', or simply missing out on what life has to offer.

And life can seem biased against single people: travel can be more expensive (single person supplement), or it's less easy to get a table for just one in a restaurant. Life can seem designed for couples and families and not for people on their own who are encouraged to join up with others in order to enjoy themselves.

In the Church, single people are sometimes whispered about – they must have a secret life, an undisclosed sexual preference, or are

hiding something, instead of being allowed to be who they are – single, celibate people living their lives faithfully.

Nor is it true that single people who dedicate themselves to living a Christian life without a partner are cold, disinterested, or haters of relationships. Single people are at liberty to fall in love, but also may find fulfilment in loving others as uncles and aunts, siblings, godparents and friends. And single people may love Jesus and want to dedicate themselves to living a faithful life in his service, which is after all what members of religious communities do, undergirding the ministry and mission of us all by praying for the Church and for all Christians every day and working tirelessly in all kinds of ways in the service of God.

So what can people who are married and in relationships actually *learn* from St Winefride and all those who follow a life dedicated only to God? And how could that way of living help us know more about how we grow in faith?

Responding to the Challenge:

- How could we be more like St Winefride in offering our whole selves to God?
- How can we better honour the (other) single people we know and what they have to offer ourselves, our families and the Church? Do we have to say sorry for any gossip or speculation about unmarried people whom we know?
- How can we talk positively about sex and relationships with young people to make space for the possibility that they might wish to remain single? And how can we make space for young people to tell us how they feel about it?
- How can we counter ideas that single people are unfulfilled, incomplete or simply lacking?
- What story do you have to tell about your own single life, or the time when you were single before being married or in a relationship?



Judith Jackson/flickr Single Soul

The Miracles: Following in the Footsteps of St Winefride – bringing healing to the hurt



The Baths at St. Winifred's Well, near Woolston, Shropshire cc-by-sa/2.0 - © Des Blenkinsopp - [geograph.org.uk/p/2945521](https://www.geograph.org.uk/p/2945521)

Healing traditions are associated with a variety of places associated with St Winefride, such as the holy well at Holywell, the baths at Woolston, near Oswestry, and at Shrewsbury Abbey, although exactly how and why such associations came about are sometimes lost in the mists of time. But what is interesting is how many people seek out places of healing, and seek out springs and wells, out of interest in the myths and legends that go alongside them as well as actively searching for healing for themselves. For example, the Facebook Group 'Holy Wells and Springs of Britain' has more than 12,000 members and within the group people post pictures and discuss local knowledge and folklore as well as spiritual matters and accounts of healing. Water connects us intimately to God's creation, to our baptism, to the idea of cleanness, refreshment or new start, so it is not surprising that people

are attracted by the idea of water as a spiritual marker of change, to go alongside the chance we all have, to start again with Jesus.

In addition, the idea that there is a long history or tradition where people have prayed and found peace, reconciliation and healing as well as encounter with God has a powerful pull for many people who feel they need to go *somewhere* to have that transforming experience for themselves.

So how can the story of St Winefride and the presence of these 'thin' or holy places, inspire us to be instruments of bringing healing to others?

Responding to the Challenge:

- How might the story of St Winefride inspire us to think about the significance of baptism – in our own lives and in those we hope might come to faith?
- What might we learn from reflecting on the story of St Winefride about how God brings healing, peace and reconciliation into our lives?
- Places of miraculous healing are often marked by gifts of gratitude or by walking instruments or other aids left behind. What kinds of 'crutches' have we been using in our daily lives and in our spiritual lives, which now need to be left behind?
- How do we say thank you to God for acts of healing and hope in our own lives and how can we be agents of healing and hope towards others?



Luke Peterson/flickr

The Mystery: Following in the Footsteps of St Winefride - Inspiring and Transforming the world

How can we respond to what we have learned and thought about concerning the story of St Winefride and use that to refresh and inspire our continuing Christian life? How might we be challenged and changed in order to offer more witness to Christ and more loving service to the world?

Below is a picture of an icon of St Winefride. Icons are often considered to be windows into the heavenly world. They are not so much representations of people as ways of engaging a spiritual response of prayer and devotion in the viewer. So this picture is followed by a meditation on the icon above which might help us to consider more deeply the story of St Winefride and how she is relevant to all of us who are trying to follow Jesus more faithfully day by day.



As we invite you to contemplate the icon of St Winefride, please take a moment to pause, take a deep breath and be still, as you are comfortable and it is practical to do so.

As you gaze upon the icon imagine yourself entering the picture.

As you look upon the well, imagine its refreshing waters reviving you. Where are the wells in your life? Where do you find refreshment and nourishment?

Imagine yourself wearing St Winefride's clothing. Clothing that enfolds you, protecting you from the elements. Where do you feel safe? Protected? Loved?

Can you see Christ hanging on the cross in the details of Winefride's face? A reminder that God redeems the worst events in our lives and restores us.

Spend a few moments more in quiet. Allow God to speak to you, to heal you, restore you and reclaim you.

Our prayer is that this icon will be a continuing inspiration to you.

Responding to the Challenge:

A place to go further.... An invitation from the community of St Chad.

We hope that exploring the life of St Winefride has been enriching and encouraging for you. If you would like to continue exploring faith through the life of the Saints, then the Community of St Chad welcomes you.

Drawing inspiration from the life of St Chad, the 7th century missionary bishop of Lichfield, the Community of Saint Chad is an expression of modern-day monasticism. It has a geographically dispersed membership united by a common commitment to a spiritual lifestyle shaped by five Rhythms of Grace, and by participation in a Spiritual Companion Group.

The Community of Saint Chad welcomes any Christian who longs to grow in depth of discipleship and who is prepared to journey with others in a quest of a life-changing faith.

To find out more please contact The Revd Rosanne Wilshire revrosst@gmail.com or The Revd Chris Precious revdchrisprecious@gmail.com Please visit our website

<https://www.lichfield.anglican.org/our-faith/community-st-chad/> and our Facebook page:

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