**Joseph Kelly of the Catholic Network talking with Bishop Peter Brignall of Wrexham**

**JK:** Hello, this is Joe Kelly from the Catholic Network. We're here today at St. Winefride's Well and Shrine in Holywell in North Wales with Bishop Peter Brignall of Wrexham. Good morning Bishop, lovely to see you.

**+PB:** Thank you.

**JK:** We're here to talk about the Day of Prayer for victims of abuse that's taking place here next week, but I was wondering first if you could just recap for us the story of St. Winefride …

**+PB:** St. Winefride is one of our Celtic saints of the Seventh Century. She was of a devout family and as a teenager she refuted the approaches of a local prince and in his anger and rage and ill-feeling towards her he struck out with his sword. Legend has it that he cut off her head and where her head fell a spring of water, sprang up and in fact then her uncle, who was Beuno the local priest and had his cell not far away, restored her to life, put her head back on her shoulders and resuscitated her.

And very quickly within a couple of centuries that story spread. By the 12th century Robert of Shrewsbury had drawn the story together, from the different accounts, and by that time too the Holy Well and that spring of water, the well as we would think of it today, had become a place of pilgrimage, had become a place of healing, of hope, of new life.

From that time to this there has been pilgrimage to the shrine and to the well here, unbroken tradition through the years of Reformation and division within the life of the Church. But now Winefride is in many ways uniting the Church again and serving as a point of focus of healing.

**JK:** That’s quite fascinating and I can understand how that story has resonated down the centuries and particularly I can understand its relevance to the sort of modern problems of domestic and other abuse that we're encountering in society. Could you sort of tell us a bit more about your vision for this and how in particular you see St Winefride 's shrine playing its part?

**+PB:** I think there are a number of thoughts coming together and being woven together. Part of my intent for the shrine and the well here has been its development. Decades ago there were hundreds, thousands of people who would come in pilgrimage, would come to the well. And that devotion and that piety has continued to this day, and through the centuries also it has been a place of healing and there are – particularly in the 18th and 19th centuries – not insignificant records of healing.

And I suppose we tend to think of healing more in terms of curing these days and that is part of it, but we are also in an age when we know of significant social ills, psychological ills and I saw that the story of St Winefride had a relevance to today she was a victim of sexual harassment, of sexual abuse, of sexual violence – her suitor trying to force himself upon her – and that as a consequence it puts the Winefride story very much into the 21st century.

**JK:** Yes, very much so. And you've produced some prayer leaflets and cards to begin this process …

**+PB:** Yes, And that's that line and then the other line is that in 2016 Pope Francis asked the bishops of the world that in their jurisdictions they initiate a day of prayer for the victims of sexual abuse and those two strands come together. And then last year at the pilgrimage day for the diocese and for Wales I inaugurated the shrine as a place of healing and prayer of peace, of hope for those victims of sexual harassment and abuse. And this therefore would be the first of the world days of prayer that fit into that programme.

Knowing that there will be people, hoping there will be people, who are attracted by the thought of the healing place of the Church and of the story of Winefride who may come here as do many other pilgrims – some of faith, some of Christian faith, some of other religious faith, some of no particular faith. But those who do come here might be helped by having some words that he can use. So it becomes a school of prayer and reflection as well.

**JK:** Indeed, and I understand you're having actually a day of prayer next Tuesday ..

**+PB:** So next Tuesday, the Tuesday of the fifth week of Eastertide, which is the day in England and Wales for the victims of sexual abuse, there is a specific invitation to all to come and to pray, either because they are victims or they know of victims, or perhaps they have been perpetrators of such abuse and come in repentance.

All who come will be anonymous, but there will be, during the course of that day at 12 noon and at three o'clock in the afternoon, a short service of prayer for the victims, for health, for a restoration of hope, and of an opportunity for those who wish to speak with a priest or speak with somebody about their own sorrows, their own situation.

**JK:** That's very good to hear. I'm sure there'll be a very good response to that. We would certainly encourage people to come along on that day and hopefully experience something of the peace and beauty of St Winefride’s Shrine for themselves. Certainly the atmosphere that the shrine gives of a place of refuge and peace and quiet, which would be very nice for people to come and experience that for themselves.

Of course a lot of people are familiar with the shrine now, after it was featured recently in the BBC TV *Pilgrimage* series. And I know you were part of the filming for that. I saw you on the episode itself. The celebrity pilgrims were from quite varied faith backgrounds. What was that few days of filming like and how did they sort of respond to their visit?

**+PB:** It was a very interesting day. In fact, they had only met one another as the film indicates. They had only met each other a couple of hours before arriving at St. Winefride 's. And they had been given the story and they then spent about five hours filming here, doing those things that pilgrims would do, doing those things that the tourists would do also, because they came with a certain curiosity and a seeking.

And it was a wonderful experience being with them, trying to answer their questions, trying to respond to their needs, trying to point them in the direction which gives them a greater understanding.

For them, it was a very interesting experience, unlike some of the previous programmes, that we tend to think of St. Winifred's as being the destination. For them, it was actually a marker of the beginning of their pilgrimage. And it very much set the tone, I feel, having seen the subsequent programmes. I very much feel that it set the tone for all that they were then to experience in the following fortnight.

And it did arouse, and they referred back to it on a couple of occasions, it did arouse that interest, that meaning of pilgrimage – that it's not, as I've said elsewhere, it's not just a holy walk. Neither is it just the conquering of a long-distance footpath. But actually, it's a metaphor for life's journey.

**JK:** Indeed. I was quite fascinated, I know probably quite a few people were disappointed at the end when they didn't get across to Bardsey Island, but I thought it was a very touching ending to the whole programme in that they almost didn't want to go across themselves and decided that, exactly as you said, it was like to do with a lifelong journey and not just something where they go from place A to place B. And then it finishes. So it was quite nice that the programme ended in that way ..

**+PB:** And a reflection, true reflection on our lives, that however much we plan and hope to achieve some type of internal factors prevent that from being fulfilled. How often does that happen in our lives? But it still leaves us with that ambition or that determination to complete the journey. I think that that was something which again came across in filming.

**JK:** Well I know over the years when I visited Hollywell Shrine, it's been quite astonishing and uplifting to speak to some of the other people who are there when you arrive and get around. Because people come here from all sorts of backgrounds and all sorts of faiths and for all sorts of reasons as well. And it's quite fascinating to see and to hear sort of people's stories and how the shrine has actually impacted on their lives. Many people who come here on a regular basis or come there quite often and it forms part of their sort of life journey the same sort of way.

And it is interesting that some people come because it is an ancient monument and they perhaps come to the architecture or they come to discover the story or some do come with faith. I hope that all of them come leave uplifted by their experience.

**JK:** Yes, I was here the other week and there were a group of ladies from a local outdoor swimming club who came because the shrine was on their list of outdoor swimming places. But were quite astonished and moved when they came here. They weren't aware of the stories of St Winefride and of the well and the place and as you say it's history. So they certainly had a very different experience than just coming for a swim. They found that it was very spiritually uplifting and quite moved by the experience. So that does tend to be the sort of reaction of most people who come here that it's that sort of place which I suppose might sort of persevered throughout such a long history and, as you say ,the story of St. Winifred developing a new relevance for today as well.

**+PB:** Again, it is interesting that Gerard Manley Hopkins who in his poem on St. Winefride actually does describe that sense of people coming from far away. But the reputation certainly throughout the centuries of the last millennium have very much put Holywell on the map and in part we're trying to revive some of that sense now.

**JK:** I was quite fascinated as well as Hopkins spent quite a lot of his life trying to write a play script around Holywell which he never really completed but there are fragments of it that survive. And there is one little text where he describes a scene where a lady who's become very battered and beset by life's troubles is staring down into the water and she sees herself reflected back, but the person reflected back is reassuring her that you need not worry about life's troubles and all will be well in the end. So it's quite a fascinating analogy that Hopkins sort of saw in the well and its role, and in terms of its role for women as well in particular.

And that imagery of people staring into water and seeing a reflection but very often not a reflection of themselves but actually of another character is quite common in religious literature.

**JK:** As you've said, Bishop, there's a day of prayer for victims of abuse being held here in Holywell next Tuesday and everyone is absolutely welcome to come to that. But if you can't make it there is a website for The Shrine – www.sittwinifredshrine.org – and there you can find everything you need to know about The Shrine – it's opening and bathing hours and directions on how to get here. Also if you would like to obtain a copy of The St Winefride 's Prayer Cards and leaflets you just need to contact The Shrine for more information on that.

So please do try and come here on pilgrimage anytime you can and I'm sure you'll find it a very uplifting and transforming experience. So once again, thank you Bishop Peter for your time in taking time to come and talk to us about the story of St Winefride. It's really very much appreciated.

**+PB:** Thank you very much, Joe.

*25th April 2024, St Winefride’s Well and Shrine, Holywell*