

St Edmundsbury Cathedral



Spring of Living Water (Baptism)

6 September 2026

St Edmundsbury Cathedral

Sermon by the Revd Canon Matthew Vernon

When the head of St Winefride's hit the ground a fountain of water sprung up.

Winefride was devout and chaste.

She was being pursued by an eager chieftain, Caradog.

- But she resisted and he drew his sword.

This was in North Wales around the year 630.

Fortunately for Winefride, St Beuno, the local holy man, was close by.

He emerged from his church and miraculously reunited her head and body.

So Winefride lived on many more years with a white line around her neck.

The fountain of water where her head landed continued to flow

- and today the town Holywell attracts thousands of pilgrims who visit to bathe in the pool of healing water.

The pool is like a small, outdoor swimming pool, with various buildings and a church.

All around Britain there are water springs that have been significant since ancient times.

For centuries, people have used them for drinking water and for religious ceremonies.

With water being essential for our lives, it's easy to see how these water springs were closely linked to life and the divine.

In Thetford Forest, there's St Helen's Well.

In Cornwall, there is an ancient well in St Mylor's churchyard.

St Mylor was there around the year 400.

The water forms a pool at ground level and still today water for baptisms in the St Mylor's Church is taken from the pool.

Visiting in June, I read the sign: "please be careful - there are newts in the water".

Once upon a time three people were searching for the water of life,

- hoping to drink from it and live for ever.

The first was a warrior: he thought the water of life would be very mighty – a torrent or a rapid –

- so he went in full armour, with all his weapons,
- believing he could force the water to yield to him.

The second person was an enchantress:

- she thought the water of life would be very magical –
- perhaps a whirlpool or a geyser, something she would need to manipulate with spells –
- so she went in her long star-spangled robe, hoping to outwit the water.

The third person was a trader:

- he thought the water of life would be very costly –
- a fountain of pearl-drops or diamonds, perhaps –
- so he loaded his clothes and purses with money, hoping to be able to buy the water.

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When the travellers reached their destination, they found they had all been quite wrong about the water.

It wasn't a torrent to be intimidated by force.

It wasn't a whirlpool to be charmed by spells.

And it wasn't a fountain of pearl-drops or diamonds to be bought for money.

It was just a tiny, sparkling spring;

- its benefits were absolutely free –
- but of course you had to kneel to drink it.

This caused the seekers great concern.

The warrior was in full armour and couldn't bend.

The enchantress had on her long magic robe, and if that got mucky it would lose its magic power.

The trader was so loaded with money that if he only bowed his head, coins would start rolling away into corners and crevices.

All dressed up, the three could not lower themselves to drink from the spring of the water of life.

There was only one solution.

So the warrior laid aside his armour.

The enchantress laid aside her magic robe.

And the trader laid aside the clothes he had stuffed with money.

And then each of them could kneel to drink from the water of life

- and receive its sweet, cool, startling benefits.

The drought this summer has reminded how precious water is

- and how, in history and still today, water in our taps at home is a remarkable gift.

This morning we continue the ancient human practice of celebrating life with water.

Christians have done this for 2000 years, knowing Jesus as the water of life.

We are all invited to drink deeply of God's refreshing, life-giving streams.