

# Sydenham Life

September 2025

In and around the parish of St Bartholomew

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## The privilege of preaching

When I was first ordained my sermons were quite boring. Or at least I thought so. Of course they may still be, and people are just too polite to say so, but I like to think that these days I manage to hold most peoples attention at least some of the time.

I was encouraged to deliver my first sermon aged just 18, a double act with a youth worker who was supporting my early exploration of vocation. That Sunday's bible readings concerned early church communities facing persecution (like many around the world still do today). In order to reflect on a sense of fear felt as those communities gathered as Christians, we asked someone to bring their pet tarantula to church. The distress caused to some congregation members far outweighed any message we were trying to convey – a good lesson learned early on!

In that particular fellowship sermons were sort of extended bible-studies; a mini-lecture detailing the passage being considered, its perceived meaning and the teaching or doctrine it proposed. I am in no way seeking to criticise this sermon style; it has a long a noble history especially in non-conformist churches. But it does work best in a particular church context, within a certain style of worship. Of necessity my early sermons were somewhat longer than would be expected at a church like St Bart's (I can't imagine anyone here complaining that a ½ hour sermon was *too short!*), and I preached from extensive notes, or scripted sermons to ensure that I didn't miss any particular detail and that all the points connected.

The churches I have served since then have varied in style but have all been in the mainstream of the Church of England (CofE), making good use of it's different liturgies and with Holy Communion as the central act of worship. In such contexts the sermon is just as important as in my earlier church, but requires a different approach. For a start, our liturgy (the pattern of prayers, hymns, readings etc. that provide the structure and much of the substance of our services) is already rich with scripture, given space to speak for itself. The whole service invites us to listen for God's voice and to encounter Jesus Christ through the scriptures, by our fellowship together and as he comes to us in the sacraments. As such the sermon highlights

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or directs our attention to what is already at work through the whole act of worship. Bible study is important, but that comes through debate, study groups and other occasions outside the week by week pattern of worship.

When I was first ordained my sermons were still following the pattern and style I had learned earlier, with me reading a carefully prepared and detailed 'script' as if delivering a lecture. In the context I was now in this was boring, and I realised it was, even as I was delivering a sermon! Things changed through involvement with mid-week services held in one of my curacy churches. These were short services, designed so that people could pop in during their lunch hour. They didn't include a sermon, but

often had a short 'thought for the day' or simple introduction to the readings delivered off-the-cuff. I quickly realised that people were far more engaged when I spoke at these services, and paid more attention to what I was saying. So I started to change the way I preach. I still do the same study and preparation but instead of detailed notes or a script, I learn and rehearse the key points until they are well embedded in my memory (my shower has heard a lot of sermons!). I then preach my sermons largely without notes; more engaging, more succinct, and, hopefully, a lot less boring.

The point of all this is that I do on occasion get asked for copies of my sermons, including sometimes by the excellent editor of this magazine who would like them for an article. Unfortunately, as noted above, I don't have notes or a copy of the sermon to give them (for which some readers may, of course, be thankful).

Preaching is a great privilege and responsibility and one I do not take lightly, always seeking to be hopeful, honest and sincere. Words can be powerful, for good or ill, whatever the context in which they are delivered. I have never really got used to the idea that my role as a priest and Vicar mean that my thoughts, ideas and interpretations of our faith, however sincerely arrived at, get taken seriously by other people. But they do, so I hope and pray that week by week what we offer at St Bart's doesn't bore, but brings hope, inspiration and above all points us beyond ourselves to the greatness and goodness of God.

Rev'd Jim

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# From the Editor

Since the end of the Second World War there have been many films depicting it. One of my favourite actors is Audie Murphy, who was the most decorated soldier in WWII. I also enjoyed his Westerns. However, there are other soldiers whose role has been minimised and their stories not told. These are the African, African American and African Caribbean and Asian Soldiers who fought the enemy whether in Europe, Africa or Asia.

Of particular interest are a group of American Soldiers who were the 761st Tank Battalion later named the 'Black Panthers'. They emerged within a segregated America, where African American soldiers were reduced to non-combatant roles. They were involved in building infrastructure, moving supplies around and for retrieving and burying the dead.

From April 1, 1942, at Camp Claiborne, Louisiana, the unit trained relentlessly for two years, determined to prove themselves. Their motto, "Come Out Fighting", reflected their determination to overcome prejudice.

At Camp Claiborne and later Camp Hood, Texas, the 761st endured harsh training conditions and uninhibited racism from fellow soldiers and civilians. The German prisoners of war were treated better than the Black American soldiers and would be put in charge of giving the Black soldiers their uniforms.

Under Lt. Col. Paul L. Bates, the battalion mastered their skills on M4 Sherman and M5 Stuart tanks, acquiring a "superior" rating from General Ben Lear. Their preparation, though prolonged, made them determined and kept them in a state of readiness by the time of their deployment. Perhaps there was a hope that they would not be needed.

General Patton commanded the 761st Battalion which formed part of his Third Army. The Black Panthers entered combat on November 7, 1944, at Morville-les-Vic, France, and fought without a break for 183 days across six countries. Their actions in major campaigns which included the Battle of the Bulge, demonstrated their skill, bravery and heroism, earned them 391 citations. Despite facing superior German tanks like the Jagdtiger, they inflicted over 130,000 enemy casualties.

We know of the many achievements of the Black Panthers because they were accompanied by a Black reporter named

Trezzvant Anderson who wrote the book 'Come Out Fighting': The Epic Tale of the 761st Tank Battalion, 1942-1945.

There would have been many instances of bravery. One such example would have been Staff Sgt. Ruben Rivers. Wounded in the leg by a mine, he refused evacuation and led his tank against German anti-tank guns at Guebling, France, on November 19, 1944. He was instantly killed when two shells struck his Sherman. His efforts earned him a posthumous Medal of Honor in 1997, one of only seven awarded to African Americans for their contributions to WWII. His actions saved his unit and advanced the line.

Another example was Sgt. Warren G.H. Crecy, dubbed the "Baddest Man" in the 761st. He earned a battlefield commission and a Medal of Honor nomination for his fearless actions. On November 10, 1944, after his tank was disabled, he manned a .50 caliber machine gun and neutralized German gun nests and artillery observers. His relentless courage inspired his comrades and disrupted enemy defences.

The 761st Tank Battalion together with 71st Infantry Division liberated Gunskirchen Concentration Camp on 4 May, 1945. In a documentary which is part of the Jewish Remembrance series found on YouTube, the narrator intones "It is the oppressed who will free the persecuted". The documentary shows the emaciated Jewish bodies lying in shallow graves. And there were others who perished in the concentration camps. Romani people (Gypsies), and mixed-race Black people. The soldiers were shocked and could not believe what they were witnessing; but the survivors were grateful. One can never get accustomed no matter who the victims are of the sight of such wretchedness, I can only suggest that you watch the documentary.

Geoffrey Cave, Sydenham Life Editor



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# ‘The Den’

Do you wonder about who lived in your home before you? What stories could your home reveal about the previous occupants?

You may be familiar with Jews Walk in Upper Sydenham – a leafy lane with houses/villas set back far from the pavement. The street took its name purportedly because of a 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> century Jewish businessman, who planted elms trees along a driveway to his house.

On the 30<sup>th</sup> March 1898 at 7 Jews Walk, a young woman was found lifeless in her room. Despite the cold weather, before she died, she changed into her favourite summer dress. A few hours earlier she had sent her maid with a note to the chemist at 92 Kirkdale to purchase prussic acid. The chemist was told it was to be used to put down a dog. She lied; she intended to take the poison as evidenced by the blue stains found on her dress. The dead woman was Eleanor Marx, her father was Karl Marx, a well-known socialist who died in March 1883. She was a prominent activist promoting Socialist ideology and fighting for workers’ rights. She was the first official English translator of Flaubert’s novel *Madame Bovary*.

The doctor who certified the death was Dr Henry Shackleton – the father of the famous explorer Ernest. The inquest into Eleanor’s death took place on Saturday 2<sup>nd</sup> April at Park Hall. The inquest report was published in several newspapers at the time. The first witness that was called was Edward Aveling. Who was he and what was his relationship to Eleanor?

Edward Aveling was Eleanor’s lover. They met in 1883 when Eleanor was going through an emotional period; her father had died and she had ended a lengthy relationship

with a French exile. Most of the information about Aveling does not paint him as a decent or caring man. He began the relationship with Eleanor but he was still married and had no intention of leaving his wife. His main motivation was to receive financial support from Eleanor to pay off his debts. He gave Eleanor false hope that he would stay with her. They lived and travelled together across the country and internationally. They moved into 7 Jews Walk in 1895 – a home bought by Eleanor that she named ‘The Den’.

Their relationship was tempestuous. She craved his love and attention. He wasn’t in love with her, he just needed her money to spend on other diversions. To add more angst to Eleanor, Aveling now a widower, secretly married another woman.

He used the name Nelson and reduced his age by three years on the certificate. When he eventually revealed his marriage to another woman, it was an utter betrayal to a woman who had put up with his philandering and demands for money. He told Eleanor that he was determined to leave her but still expected her to financially support him! She described the conversation to a friend, *“I am face to face with a most horrible position, utter ruin – everything to the last penny or utter, open disgrace. It is awful; worse than even I fancied it was.”* The speculation of what he had said to her suggests that he would publicly ruin her if she did not acquiesce to his demands.

It is believed that Aveling’s “threat” could have driven Eleanor to that fateful decision to end her life. The official verdict of Eleanor’s inquest recorded that she died by suicide and that Aveling was *the effective but not the immediate cause of her death*. As with many tragic love stories, the circumstances of her death remain open to speculation. The informal opinion of her friends of the circumstances of her death, suggested that Aveling’s account of their last day and hours together, that this was *not* how she had died.

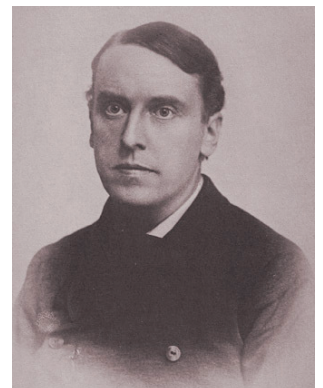
During the inquest, Aveling’s testimony was viewed as evasive, as was the testimony given by Eleanor’s maid, Gertrude Gentry, the key witness. The coroner asked questions of him that gave rise to the belief that he decided without greater probing that Aveling was innocent. It was suggested by friends of Eleanor that it was Aveling who approached the chemist who supplied the poison which killed her; that he was in the house on the day of Eleanor’s death; he then lied and pretended he hadn’t been there.



The Den



Eleanor Marx



Edward Aveling



Furthermore, the inference is that from his pattern of denial and deceit, Aveling must have applied the poison which killed her.

The strength of feeling towards Aveling is expressed by a close friend of Eleanor - Keir Hardie, future founder of the Labour Party then an activist in the Independent Labour Party, *"The brute has killed her – though she was not a thing he loved – he is incapable of loving anything outside his own dirty, cowardly, hide."*

Edward Aveling died on 2 August, four months after Eleanor. The Social Democratic Federation's newspaper *Justice* reported Aveling's death by noting the brief period by which he had survived Eleanor, *"It would be idle to affect grief over the demise of a man who we cannot help regard as being responsible for her death."*

Eleanor was just 43 years old when she died. She was as a champion of women's rights. If she had lived, she



Blue Plaque installed in September 2008

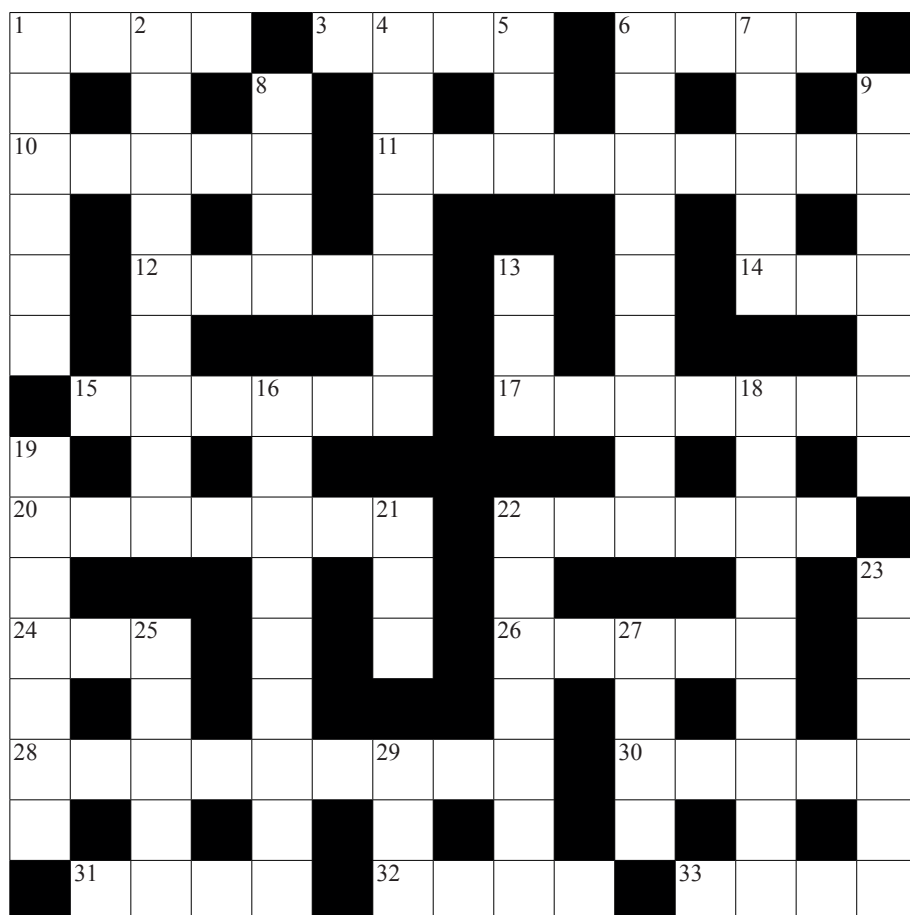
could have gone on to effect positive changes through her socialist campaigns. Her private life was in stark contrast; she capitulated to the demands of an uncaring selfish man who somehow weakened her resolve to remove him completely from all aspects of her life. Sadly, she was undermined by one man and a society that viewed women as property or 'fallen' if they lived outside the societal expectations. Hence, her grief and anxiety about her situation and her fateful decision.

The Blue plaque on the front of 7 Jews Walk only notes her name, her role and that she lived and died there. In looking into her life, I have discovered a woman

that was widely appreciated and respected. Her close friends could only support her despite their own views of her relationship with Aveling. Her ashes were interred in the family grave in Highgate Cemetery.

Angela Morgan MITG

## Beating the Bounds – Mthr Bea



### Across

- 1: Stop king following standard (4)
- 3: Essentially, Jock irks his church (4)
- 6: English lad returns to valley (4)
- 10: Fortunate girl takes in a grand (5)
- 11: Pub and hotel bring back crude metal for Ernest Shackleton (5,4)
- 12: Crazy bloke in charge (5)

14: Endlessly huge embrace (3)

15: Henry VIII's crown (6)

17: Fake waste found in hair salon (7)

20: Read about Ed Sheeran's second descriptor of him? (7)

22: White drunkard from Switzerland (6)

24: Oddly shaggy droop (3)

26: Bodies of water quench thirst top to toe (5)

28: Amanda and Sue mess up an annoying number of times (2,7)

30: Straining to cover transport (5)

31: Twist breeze (4)

32: Clever ushers hide a plant (4)

33: Even alliance has a boundary (4)

### Down

1: Pick up, overtake, win a big house (6)

2: Advise about commercial repair (9)

4: Suffering one back spasm is criminal (7)

5: Worse than Morley's. 1000 facts without a timestamp (3)

6: Aid Malala to become a holy person (5,4)

7: Drain Doctor (5)

8: Carol heard that man (4)

9: Imperial measure of great in penniless London (4,3)

13: Verily, verily escape confines (3)

16: Local pub drunk dry enough (9)

18: Thus, I spake, Is Istanie from Lahore? (9)

19: Oddly corny last dance for this type of ball (7)

21: Hound Venetian leader to get rid of drugs (3)

22: Mssrs Meaney and Tóibín broadcast articles (7)

23: Approach a location (6)

25: Information on two smarties (5)

27: Thousand for thousand in a little bird (4)

29: Almost noble organ (3)

# ‘Things will never be the same’

Five years ago (so recently/only five?) we were in the midst of the pandemic of the Covid-19 virus, lockdowns, social-distancing, and daily death-counts. In September of 2020 we were between the two major lockdowns, the government had offered us vouchers to eat out, yet we all knew we were not yet out of the woods.

I kept an electronic diary during Covid of headlines, web-links, statements by politicians, and my own reflections on them. Recently I have been reviewing those reflections in light of the passage of time. There are two major strands of thought that kept recurring in public discussion:

## **‘Things will never be the same’, 4 May 2020; ‘Lockdown is a life-changer’, 27 June, 2020**

By May the UK was in its seventh week of lockdown, and the isolation seemed to be entering a new phase. I called it ‘the Wall’. Up until then people had, for the most part, found ways of coping and surviving. There was a great burst of creativity and communal care, revealed on social media. People said, ‘Things will never be the same after covid-19’ about many things: being able to hear birdsong; clean air in the cities; having time to step away from the rat-race and think about what is really important in life; people looking out for each other; appreciation of the value of those who are in the service industry, health care, and education.

In June *The Times* reported that nearly half of adults under 70 planned to make life-style changes to spend more time on the aspects of the lockdown that they enjoyed: more exercise, more time with family, less commuting, a slower pace of life.

Many people acted on these determinations. Working from home became normal, so thousands rejected the daily grind of commuting and the high cost of city living and moved to small towns and villages, continuing to work from home.

By the end of Summer, however, exhaustion was setting in—like hitting that ‘wall’ in the last stretch of a long-distance run, when one’s whole being cries out to give up—and only grit and determination break through to the goal-line. The problem was, we were not in the last stretch, and we didn’t know when that would be. The more common refrain now was, ‘Please can we get back to normal.’

We were not half through, yet.

## **Well-being over the economy?**

In May 2020 *The Guardian* reported on polls that found a majority of people (8 out of 10) wanted government ministers ‘to prioritise health and wellbeing over GDP’ during the crisis [10 May 2020]. Fiona Harvey observed, ‘Measures of the UK’s quality of life should replace the publication of purely economic indicators, campaigners and politicians have urged, as polling has found a substantial majority of the public want ministers to focus on improving health and wellbeing over economic growth.’

At the same time, however, on the other side of the Great Pond, President Trump (in his first term of office)

‘suggested the country may need to accept the reality of more deaths in order to start reopening the economy.’ “‘We have to be warriors,” Trump told Fox News’ John Roberts when asked if Americans should expect additional deaths as the country looks to reopen. “We can’t keep our country closed down for years.” He had earlier said “Will some people be affected? Yes. Will some people be affected badly? Yes. But we have to get our country open and we have to get it open soon” [Guardian, 10 May 2020].<sup>1</sup>

Here, then, were two responses to the pandemic’s revelation that life on this planet is precarious and that global extinction is a distinct possibility: on one hand, we need to change our values regarding what matters most to human life; on the other hand, it’s the economy that matters, regardless of the cost in human life.

Five years later, the demands of a GDP that must rise constantly have challenged determination for change. Employers demand people return to office desks; Heathrow’s third runway is back on the agenda; targets for zero-emissions are abandoned; in Southeast London the sounds of birds are again drowned out by the insistent sound of traffic. So much for change.

## **The virus revealed how wholly interwoven our world is**

A final reflection on looking back. Within a few weeks of the first outbreak in China every part of the world was infected. Every exposure to the virus was person-to-person, hastened by international travel. The last places to be struck, interestingly, included the Appalachian hills of America, and even ‘untouched’ peoples in the Amazon were infected. It is no surprise, then, that it was the most libertarian nations—US, UK, most of Latin America—that suffered the most deaths. In these societies personal rights are more important than the community’s health. There is no comfort in observing that the virus gave the lie to rugged American individualism, the myth of ‘I am a rock, I am an island’.

The fact, as opposed to the myth, is that each of us does have an effect on everyone around us, and beyond. Covid-19 revealed just how every human being is woven into bundles of relationships that ultimately reach around the world. In terms of the virus, it was frightening how quickly death was able to spread to every region on the planet. Yet, on the other hand, it is amazing to see in this the solid evidence of just how inter-related we are as the human race—regardless of nationality or race, or even wealth, we are connected through near-infinite networks of relationships that constantly interweave, interact, and influence each other, for good or for ill. We saw examples

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1 <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/may/10/britons-want-quality-of-life-indicators-priority-over-economy-coronavirus>; <https://www.theguardian.com/world/live/2020/may/06/coronavirus-update-cases-uk-live-news-us-task-force-trump-covid-19-usa-world-europe-deaths-brazil-brasil-israel?page=with:block-5eb3152d8f08a7a22-bb3e215#block-5eb3152d8f08a7a22bb3e215>



of both sorts of influences during the pandemic, life-risking care for each other as well as callous profiteering. As ever, the choice of response is up to us.

I wonder. I simply wonder... what would society look like today if things really did change? If human well-being

began to take precedence over the GDP? It is, at the least, worth revisiting those qualities of life that we found most desirable to hang on to five years ago, and considering how to promote them for our futures.

*Revd Dr Dwight D Swanson*

## Supporting the community, two wheels at a time

A few years ago when I was missing riding my bicycle in America I decided I also wanted a bicycle here. So I bought a bicycle from the only bike shop I knew of here in London – Finches Emporium in Forest Hill. It turned out to be a very good deal (both the bike and getting acquainted with the shop). I purchased my bike a few days prior to our return to America, hence I had no provisions for storing it. Why did I buy it at that moment in time you may ask, if I was not prepared to house one. We went into the store just to look at possibilities, when I fell in love with this particular bicycle, of which there was only one. I purchased the bike anyway from the store despite having no place to store it. The store graciously offered to keep the bicycle for me for the duration of my lengthy absence (2-3 months) at no charge. After my initial purchase they continued to service my bike needs, from installing different pedals on the bike so my granddaughter could ride it in my absence and repairing a badly needed new tyre, to just plain maintenance questions. They are always so pleasant even when all I am seeking is an answer to a question. In addition, they are innovative in my bike problem needs.

I long understood driving a vehicle on the left side of the road; what I didn't realise was that bicycles in the UK are also different from America. In America the right hand controls the rear brake and the left hand controls the front brake. Here in the UK it is reversed. For those of you who don't bicycle let me explain the significance of that. When cycling one must always apply the rear brake before the front brake to prevent a forward fall from your bike. If the front brake is applied first you stop abruptly and will be flipped forward over the handlebars – needless to say a dangerous landing.

And why the difference you ask? When hand signaling in America, because you cycle on the right side of the road, one uses the left hand to signal so your right hand can continue to work your rear brake. In the UK cycling on the left side of the road one uses the right hand to signal so the left hand would control the rear brake. Another change to accommodate to lest I injure myself.

One day this past year a friend of mine made an observation that drew my attention to the wrought iron fencing at the front of the property where I reside. He had observed two high-grade, good quality bicycles chained to the fencing that had been there for two-plus years. The rescuer in me was once again awakened. The bicycles' owners needed to be found and reunited with their cycles. I sent a message to my community WhatsApp group asking if anyone knew who the owner(s) of the



Unsplash / Meir Ozer

cycles were. When the ownership question could not be ascertained, I decided the next best thing to do would be to donate the cycles to a worthy cause. Someone out there in our community surely had to be in need of a bicycle. Hopefully two youngsters or young adults.

Getting the bikes unchained proved to be a challenge. They were not only chained so as to prevent anyone from liberating the bicycles, but they were also chained with a commercial-grade chain and lock. A mere bolt cutter was not up to the challenge. It required enlisting our builder friend to bring in a professional-grade grinder to sever the links, which he willingly did for us. Now to get the bikes up to working condition. One of them was missing a seat and seat post, otherwise good servicing should make them road-ready for some youngster.

Back to our faithful bike shop. When we explained the bike situation to the bike shop they agreed to service the bicycles without charging a fee as a contribution to the community. It is so nice to see businesses extending themselves for the good of the community. Much thanks to them for their help as we were now ultimately able to donate two good bicycles to the community in time for the summer holidays.

Now I am not trying to preach, that's the vicar's job, but a couple of thoughts to share regarding bicycle safety. One of the things I learnt about cycling is that people will only watch out for things that can injure them. A car only watches for trucks or lorries, not bicycles. A motorcycle watches out for cars and lorries, not bicycles. Only pedestrians watch out for bicycles.

My last plea: For part of my career I worked as a nurse in a spinal cord injury unit. I saw many head and spine injuries. So please, please wear a helmet when you cycle, and don't just put a helmet on your child's head. Your head matters too!

*Geri Falconer-Ferneau*



## Services at St Bartholomew's Church

Sunday – 8am Holy Communion, 10am Parish Eucharist  
Wednesday – 6pm Holy Communion.

Open church for prayer, quiet and reflection Monday 10:00-12:00,  
Tuesday & Wednesday 17:00-18:00, Thursday 11:30-13:30,  
Saturday 10:00-12:00. Rev Jim is usually available during open  
church to discuss Christenings, Weddings, to pray or simply to chat.

### Vicar – The Reverend Jim Perry

Email: revjimpery@mailfence.com

Tel: 020 3422 5343

### Assistant Curate –

#### Mother Bethany Austin

Email: contact@motherbea.com

Tel: 07549 003895

*The church is open every Saturday morning  
between 10 am and 11am for anyone to drop in.  
A member of staff is always available.*

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