

Sydenham Life

March 2026

In and around the parish of St Bartholomew

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Asking questions

Are there any questions you are afraid to ask? I wonder at what point we start to become afraid to ask questions? Are there questions you would be afraid to ask in church?

Children are always asking questions; what's this? How long...? Why not? What does %&!@ mean? Why is it like this? Driven by unfettered curiosity and wonder at the world they are, in their young lives, just discovering. But at some point, as we get older, we stop asking questions, or at least most of us do.

At its worst, religion contributes to this, claiming to provide absolute certainty that answers all the questions. Sometimes this comes from a misguided desire to bring the kind of comfort of certainty that some of us claim or appear to want. At other times it's a more sinister desire to control people, their behaviour and loyalties. The worst of our politics tries to buy into this or at least to follow its model. In times of disruption and uncertainty, like the present, this appearance of certainty can make absolutists, fundamentalists and authoritarians frighteningly appealing.

But it is in the questions, the wondering, the acknowledgment of mystery, that real truth is to be found, that the wonder of life may be discovered.

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Nicodemus, a Pharisee and religious leader comes to speak to Jesus at night. He begins with a statement about Jesus' words and actions; there is a sense that he wants to be able to fit Jesus into his existing religious certainties. But with a few surprising words, Jesus forces Nicodemus to start asking questions, to wonder about new possibilities and discover that questions lead to a far greater truth, a wider world in which God's mercy, love and goodness are offered in a far more expansive way than the fixed religious certainties of the Pharisees could allow for.

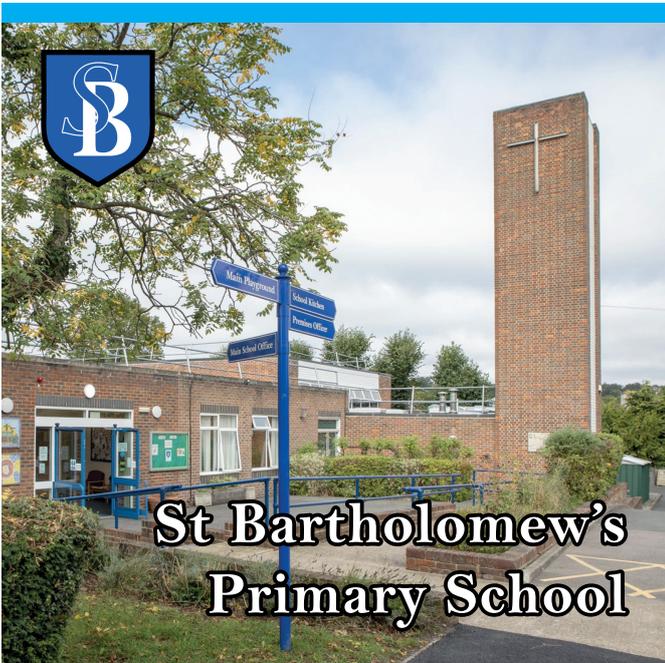
Church should never be a place where we are afraid to ask questions. Religion should encourage and inspire curiosity, not shut it down. That doesn't mean that we don't believe certain things to be true – there is a substance to our faith. But that's actually the point. Our faith, our trust in God “who

so loved the world” and sent the Son “not to condemn... but so that the world might be saved”, should give us confidence to keep asking questions, to keep wondering, to keep exploring.

May we always be inspired by the curiosity of children and keep wondering at the world around us and asking questions of our God.

Rev'd Jim





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From the Editor

Large conglomerates that deal with artificial intelligence (AI) would have us believe that they have the answer for everything. There are a number of advertisements that engender this feeling, which come to mind. The one with girl in the atrium with a designer rucksack on her back and headphones on her head looking forward in amazement and wonder. There is the one I recently saw on television where a gentleman sits down. He gives certain commands and screens of data are generated with bar charts. Then he says apply intuition and more stuff is generated. It is good marketing but AI cannot apply intuition as I understand it. Artificial intelligence may be predictive and analyse copious amounts of data but that is not intuition.

I am not saying that AI is not extremely helpful. It can after the correct prompting give great information, and this is called prompt engineering which can greatly assist you. It can find information that would take hours to locate. I asked Co-pilot what was prompt engineering and it gave me an extremely smart answer and which I do not have the space to go into.

I am in the camp of people that think it is a wonderful tool and it assists us in many ways, but so were X-rays and the stethoscope. Man has shown great genius in fields of music, science and the arts over many thousands of years to the present day. Presently AI depends on large amounts of electricity, water, and energy and is in the hands of large corporations. However, I can imagine a time when we might own our own personal artificial intelligence centres.

In the digital world everything is clean and logical apart from the occasional hallucination. The reality is the world is full of things that we presently do not want to think about: disease, extreme weather anomalies and pandemics. In addition, there are individuals who will attempt to misuse AI for their own nefarious purposes, causing social tension and reinforcing prejudice. AI itself is developed by human beings with their own prejudices.

I just happen to think that we have not reached the pinnacle of human achievement. There may be someone out there or will be born in the future with special abilities who will go beyond what is presently known. Human skills, interaction and observation have made the difference and will continue to do so.

I recently watched a video about a Mexican immigrant called Celi who lives in New York. He has been making twenty-five thousand bagels a week by hand for 17 years. The thing about handmade bagels is the body heat interacts with the yeast making an altogether different tasting bagel than the ones you buy in the supermarket. The contact makes all the difference and cannot be artificially replaced; perhaps this has come about by evolution over many millennia. I have also heard of surgeons who are considered to have green fingers and their experience and touch can fix anyone.

There is one thing we should keep in mind. AI, like large pharmaceutical companies, is not something benign and cuddly. They are there to make significant profits for their shareholders. I am not sure that AI companies are all that concerned where they get their raw material. Respected artists such as Paul McCartney and Elton John campaign for copyright protection rights of artists. They do not do so for themselves, but for all those that are coming after them. I personally do not understand why artists should not be compensated if their work is used. It is really the responsibility of the government to protect all citizens and not to deprive individuals of their livelihood so large corporations could earn even more money. And it is also about the individual choices that we as citizens make that will determine our future.

Geoffrey Cave, Sydenham Life Editor



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A brief history of the Forbidden City



The Forbidden City in Beijing, China

The Forbidden City, located in Beijing China is a historic palace complex that served as the imperial palace for Chinese emperors from the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) to the end of the Qing dynasty (1644-1912). Built on Beijing's central axis, the position of the Forbidden City testified to its significance to Chinese politics and culture. It was so named Forbidden because access was barred to commoners and access is exclusively for only the emperor, family and designated officials. Its designs mirror the cosmos order, with colours and layouts reflecting imperial authority. The Forbidden City's vibrant colour palette held profound meanings. Features such as the red walls symbolised prosperity and happiness while yellow roofs tiles signified royalty and authority exclusive to the emperor. The complex alignment reflects Confucian and feng shui principles. Every element from the towering columns and gilded decorations, the curved roof to the phoenix carvings all symbolised the emperor's divine right to rule. It was during the Qing Dynasty that the current layout of the Forbidden City emerged. It occupies 178 acres of land, equivalent to approximately 100 football fields. The outer court used for ceremonial and the inner court for residential. At the heart of the Forbidden City lies the Hall of Supreme Harmony, the largest wooden structure in China. This grand hall was the setting for imperial ceremonies such as coronations, imperial weddings and other official state functions. The Forbidden City is a UNESCO world Heritage site and one of the most visited museums in the world. It remains a symbol of Chinese history and architecture, attracting millions of tourists annually. It stands as a testament to China's imperial history and architectural grandeur.

Construction of the Forbidden city began around 600 years ago in 1406 when Hongwu Emperor's son Zhu Di became the Yongle Emperor of the Ming Dynasty. He was the third emperor of the Ming Dynasty and he moved the capital from Nanjing to Beijing. The construction

lasted 14 years and required more than a million workers. It was completed in 1420 spanning over 178 acres and featuring around 980 buildings. The complex claims to consist of 9,999 rooms in total. The Forbidden City is the world's most expansive and well-preserved timber-frame historical palace complex in the world. It was home to 24 emperors, 14 of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) and 10 of Qing Dynasty (1644-1911). It holds a vast collection of over 1.86 million cultural objects based on Ming and Qing imperial collections. The cultural relics housed epitomise the achievements of Chinese civilisation, reflecting the cultures of the Ming and Qing courts and those who lived and worked within its walls.

From 1420-1644, the Forbidden City was the set of the Ming dynasty. In April 1644, it was captured by rebel forces and part of the Forbidden City were set on fire. However, the fighting did not last long and by October the Manchu had achieved supremacy in Northern China and became the new ruler of all China under the Qing Dynasty. After the Manchus crossed the Great Wall, they adopted Confucianism, employing the institutions of rituals and music of the Han Chinese to govern the Qing state. Kangxi (r.1661-1722) was China's longest reigning emperor for sixty-one years. He consolidated Manchu rule, expanded the empire to include Tibet and Mongolia. He fostered stability, promote the arts, literatures and even welcomed western knowledge and Jesuit missionaries. The Forbidden City has undergone multiple refurbishments and reconstructions. Changes were made to its spatial layout, interior decoration and buildings materials which demonstrated how this living monument has evolved over the past 600 years. Notable emperors like Kangxi and Qianlong undertook significant renovations and additions.

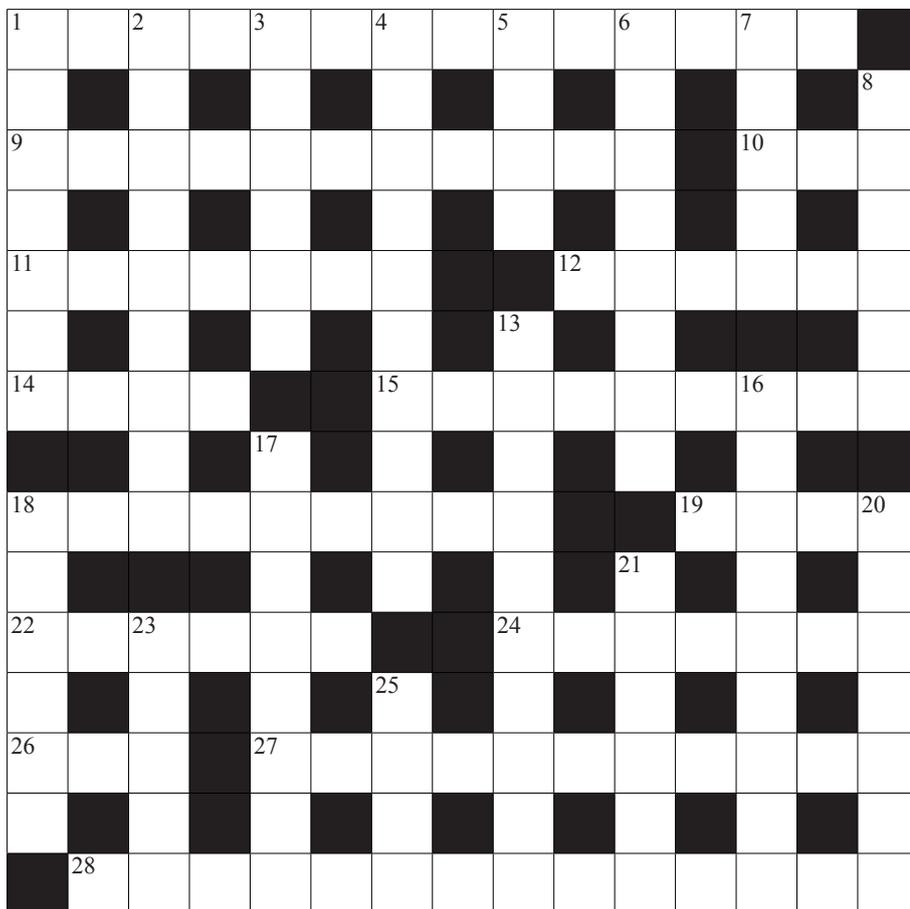
The Qing court maintained close relationships with neighbouring regions. Foreign scientific knowledge, technology and culture were introduced to China by Jesuit missionaries. Emperor Qianlong (r.1736-1795), a scholar

who studied 6 languages, Manchu, Chinese, Mongolian, Uyghur as well as Sichuan and Tibetan dialects. In 1793, a British embassy led by Lord George Macartney (1737-1800) attempted to establish trade and diplomatic relations with the Qing emperor. Gifts that epitomised British industry were presented. However, the Qianlong emperor was unimpressed and the embassy failed. In 1860, during the second opium war, Anglo-French forces took control of the Forbidden City and occupied it for about a month until the end of the war. In 1900, Empress Dowager Cixi (1835-1908) fled from the Forbidden City during the Boxer Rebellion, leaving it to be occupied by forces of the treaty powers until the following year. The Boxer Rebellion was an uprising; the boxer embarked on an armed campaign to drive all foreigners out of China. In 1912, the Forbidden City ceased being the political centre of China and the last emperor of China Puyi (1909-1911) abdicated. However, he remained in the inner court until he was evicted after a coup in 1924. The Palace Museum was then established in the Forbidden City in 1925. The film 'The last emperor of China' (1987) which portrays the life of Puyi was film in part within the Forbidden City.

In 1933, China was invaded by the Japanese forces. National treasures in the Forbidden City were evacuated and part of the collection was returned at the end of World War two, however, the other part was evacuated to Taiwan in 1948 under the order of Chiang Kai-Shek whose Kaomintang was losing the Chinese civil war. In 1965, the public were finally able to see this small but high-quality collections as the core of the National Palace museum in Taipei. Some damage was done to the Forbidden City after the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. During the cultural revolution (1966-1976), further destruction was prevented when premier Zhou Enlai sent an army of battalion to guard the city.

The Qing court was an important patron of arts and culture. They witnessed many innovations in technique, decoration and material. They sponsored the compiling, editing, printing and preserving of books, like a modern-day publishing house and library. The court also collected, researching and catalogued ancient artefacts much like a museum. Their effects laid the foundation for the appreciation and study of these artefacts today.

Dr Jitna Por



- 22. Scientists very quietly backed the Spanish disruption (6)
- 24. Mob upset about bereavement flower (7)
- 26. A time from another age (3)
- 27. News: one girl replaces ten in after-school punishment (11)
- 28. Collection of ancient writings, late second era, lacking king, moves down the page. (4,3,7)

Down

- 1. XL fits around if secure (7)
- 2. Type of western pasta (9)
- 3. Entering eg. Gateshead, say (6)
- 4. One orbital primarily is in a state where electrons are stripped. (10)
- 5. Convert tun ring to old style (4)
- 6. 20-1 odds of Everton winning EPL without loss? Crazy! (8)
- 7. Arson destroyed sailor's navigation equipment (5)
- 8. Yearned, being married, to ditch husband (6)
- 13. Naked babes ruined breakfast food (5,5)
- 16. Six balls and cycling tablets abound (9)
- 17. Obscure learner deduces incorrectly (8)
- 18. Change to be more like Homer's son? (6)
- 20. Pizza vendor misbehaving in Sodom (7)
- 21. Mthr Bea replaces unknown element in collapsed thorax. Conceit! (3,3)
- 23. Quiet part on a radio show (5)
- 25. Yearn for topless booty (4)

March – Mthr Bea

Across

- 1. I had evidence of debt stored in a safe place for extreme caution (14)
- 9. Hot metal kitchen implement (8,3)
- 10. Reject metal egg (3)

- 11. Mthr Bea quietly files devices (7)
- 12. Celebrity Church's formality (6)
- 14. Additionally, one monster... (4)
- 15. ... (prize toad) broke a wrist bone (9)
- 18. Fiancee orbited Bea almost vigorously (5-2-2)
- 19. Studied colour aurally (4)

Artificial Intelligence – Friend or Foe?

Artificial Intelligence has arrived in our lives rather like an enthusiastic new church volunteer: eager to help, occasionally confused, sometimes brilliant, sometimes baffling, and prone to doing exactly what you asked rather than what you meant. It's the sort of thing that makes you wonder whether humanity's future is bright, or whether we've all accidentally signed up for a very complicated rota.

Let's start with the good news. AI can be genuinely helpful. It can remind you of birthdays, suggest recipes based on the three things left in your fridge, and even draft polite emails when you're feeling decidedly impolite. Doctors use it to spot illnesses earlier, teachers use it to support pupils who learn differently, and some vicars have been known to ask it for sermon ideas (though the Holy Spirit remains the preferred source). In short, AI can save time, reduce stress, and occasionally make you look far more organised than you really are.

But — and there is always a “but” — AI also has its quirks. It can misunderstand instructions in spectacular ways. Ask it to write a shopping list and it may decide you need twelve kilos of lentils. Ask it to summarise a document and it might confidently summarise the wrong one. It's a bit like that well-meaning church member who volunteers for everything but occasionally puts the hymn numbers up backwards.

Then there's the question of accuracy. AI can be wonderfully clever, but it can also be confidently wrong — which, as we all know, is the most dangerous kind of wrong. It doesn't “think” or “understand” in the human sense; it just predicts what words are likely to come next. This is impressive, but it also means you shouldn't trust it with your tax return, your medical diagnosis, or the church accounts.

Some people worry that AI will take over the world. Others worry it will take their jobs. Most of us simply worry that it will take our passwords and scatter them to the four winds. These are understandable concerns. Like any powerful tool, AI needs wise use, good boundaries, and the occasional reminder that it is not, in fact, in charge.

From a Christian perspective, perhaps the most important thing to remember is that AI is a tool, not a person. It cannot love, forgive, pray, or make a cup of tea at the right moment. It cannot sit with someone who is grieving, or rejoice with someone who is celebrating. It cannot offer compassion, grace, or a listening ear. Only people can do that — people made in the image of God, with hearts capable of kindness and courage.

At this point, I should confess that the 500 words above were written for me by Copilot, Microsoft's inhouse AI, as an illustration of what it can do (other AI sources are available). If you've already tried it, you'll know how easy it is to use. If you want facts, it is worth crosschecking with other sources, because AI can occasionally sound authoritative while being mistaken. Even so, it can be extremely useful — though I have never used it to write a sermon.

The biggest fear is that AI will take jobs away from people. It can efficiently perform all kinds of datagathering and reviewing tasks currently done by human beings. You

could argue that this frees us from admin and drudgery and allows us to focus on the person-to-person interactions that our different callings are meant to be about, whether teachers, doctors, priests, and so on.

Even so, some jobs will inevitably disappear, just as they did during the Industrial Revolution. The water trough at the junction of Kirkdale and Jews Walk is a reminder of the horse-drawn era; when the “horseless carriage” arrived, many livelihoods vanished. Yet new kinds of work emerged in their place. Will the same happen with AI? Probably — though perhaps not immediately. Are we prepared for that period of uncertainty?

There is also a challenge for the creative arts. If AI can write music, books, sermons, lessons and coursework, will there still be space for human creativity? I believe there will; creativity is part of being human. But we may need to guard against becoming too lazy to use it.

The Church of England has discussed the impact of AI in General Synod. They affirm the value of “purposeful work”, and call for guidance on how “emerging technologies can serve the common good rather than deepen inequality”, because “without meaningful work we risk losing a sense of purpose and belonging” (Becky Plummer). This echoes the wider concern that technology should enhance, not diminish, our shared humanity.

We must resist the temptation, on the one hand, to regard AI uncritically as the great solution to all our problems, and, on the other hand, to overlook ways to harness it for the common good. There is a right middle course — and with wisdom, humility, and a little patience, I believe we can find it.

Father Michael Kingston

February – Solution

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Book Review – *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow* by Zoulfa Katouh

This one took some time to take home.

I went back and forth about when the right time to read this book would be. Something indicated that this would be a fantastical one with an associated cost for engagement. Would we be ready?

The delivery, pace, formation of sentences and communication of ideas are all absolutely fantastic. There are instances where you pull yourself out of the narrative just to savour the authors unparalleled writing abilities.

Only the most stoic of persons will remain unmoved by this storytelling.

The dimensions of characters manifest slowly. When the scope of the landscape becomes clear it is a revelation; one I believe the author hinted at but carefully fostered.

This is not an easy read; it reflects opposing manifestations of the human condition. It opens you up to foreign worlds and ways of being.

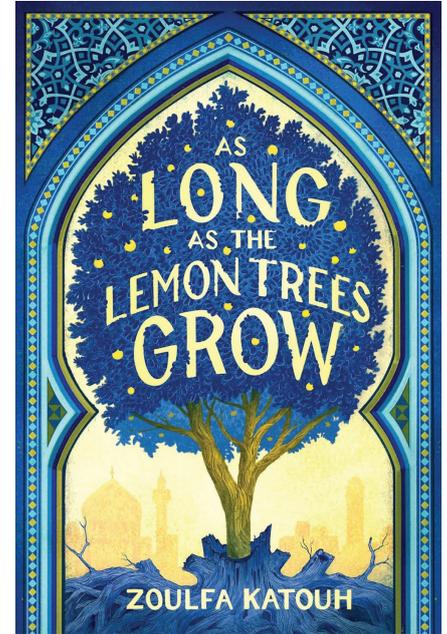
It balances the idealistic with an unyielding unrelenting brutish nasty short reality many have come to know.

Hope juxtaposed tied annihilation are delicately interwoven in a tapestry with depth on an elemental scale.

We are transported to a present so different to our own. One in which the not knowing is the everyday. Uncertainty is the staple but determination and faith remains.

You steady yourself... you count how many pages to the end not because you relish the conclusion but, your mind calculates runs permutations on outcomes given the remaining paper. What could be given how much we have left, could there be more, surely... and the questions persist, in at least this readers mind.

Walk with gratitude in all that you have taken for granted – step stably one foot, walking stick or wheel after another. We all have our certainties



those we don't even consciously fathom and this will bring the magnitude of what we should be grateful for to light.

Daniel Springer

Autumn in Wells Park



Much loved gardener Terry Morley retired in August 2025 after a 40-year career with Lewisham council. Monika Mitchell, Chair of the Sydenham Wells Park User Group, recalls his time working in the park

Terry Morley started working for Lewisham back in the 1980s, before Glendale took over the parks contract.

He began his gardening career

at Mayow Park and took courses to build up his knowledge as a botanical gardener. As a result, he knew the Latin names of many plants and trees and knew what time of year trees and shrubs should be pruned. He was a very interesting man. He knew the history of Wells Park and wrote a brief history of the area which he gave me.

Twice a year the flowerbeds would be replanted with summer and then winter plants. He mowed the grass area around the flowerbeds making sure they had their lines – as proper lawns should have.

He took an interest in all the visitors to Wells Park and everyone knew him. The day he retired so many people came up to him and said, "Thank you for looking after

Wells Park so well".

During the autumn you would hear him clearing the leaves and he would compost them. When the tractor wasn't working (which was quite often!) he would wheelbarrow the leaves to the compost area.

He told me about the aviary and animal corner in Wells Park. Also, in 1994, the remains of a Victorian building fell down and it was demolished to make way for a new works depot. The bowls pavilion, the old toilet building and park keeper's hut with the old rain shelter were all demolished due to a combination of old age and vandalism.

We miss Terry enormously – Wells Park and Mayow Park won't be the same without him.

Monika Mitchell



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