



CSJ Parish Magazine

February and March 2026



“There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” — Galatians 3:28

Welcome to the February & March 2026 Magazine

Dear friends,

A very warm welcome to our February and March edition of the parish magazine. These early months of the year often feel like a bridge between seasons — the cold of winter still with us, yet the first signs of spring beginning to stir. Snowdrops in the churchyard, lighter evenings, and the gradual return of birdsong all whisper the same quiet promise: renewal is on its way.

In the life of the Church, this is also a time of preparation. As we journey through February and into March, we find ourselves approaching the solemn and beautiful season of Lent. It is a time to pause, reflect, and open our hearts once more to the transforming love of God. Lent offers us the opportunity to consider where we are being called to grow, to let go, and to deepen our life of prayer, service, and compassion.

Within these pages you will find details of our services, opportunities for study and fellowship, updates on parish projects, and stories of the many ways our community continues to serve and care for one another. I am continually grateful for the generosity, creativity, and faithfulness of so many — volunteers, staff, worshippers, neighbours, and friends — who help the parish to flourish.

As we step into this new season together, may we be attentive to the small graces of each day and hopeful for the new life that God is bringing forth among us.

Parish Magazine Printing – A Gift of Generosity

We are very grateful to one of our parishioners who has kindly covered the cost of professionally printing this new bi-monthly parish magazine. Their generosity has made it possible for us to share news, stories, and updates in a beautiful and accessible way across our community.

If you would like to make a donation to support future issues of the magazine, contributions would be most welcome. Please use the bank details on the inside back page, marking your gift with the reference “**Magazine**”.

Every donation, large or small, helps us to keep sharing the life and ministry of Cowley St John more widely — thank you for your support.

Your Voice Matters

We warmly invite **articles, stories, reflections, poems, photos, memories, recipes, prayers, or book recommendations.**

You might write about:

- something that has inspired you
- a moment in church life that has stayed with you
- an act of kindness you witnessed
- a book that challenged or nourished you
- a memory from parish life in years past
- something creative or joyful you want to share
- or suggest a hymn or prayer for the back page

Whether long or short — a paragraph or a page — **your contribution helps us reflect who we truly are: a community made up of many voices.**

To contribute to the next edition (deadline for copy 10th March), simply email:

vicar@cowleystjohn.co.uk

Thank you for being part of this community, in whatever way you are able.

May this issue of our parish magazine be a blessing to you — a sign of hope, warmth, and belonging.

With every blessing,
Revd Martha

A Message of Thanksgiving for our Volunteers and Staff

On Sunday 18th January, our parish will gather for our annual Volunteer Appreciation Day — a moment in the year set aside to pause, to give thanks, and to recognise the extraordinary network of people whose generosity makes the life and ministry of Cowley St John possible.

Volunteer Appreciation Day is not simply a date on the calendar. It is a reminder of a profound truth at the heart of Christian faith: God calls people to participate in extraordinary work. From the earliest days of the Church, communities of believers offered their gifts — some to preach, some to serve at tables, some to encourage, some to lead, some to pray. St Paul describes this beautifully in 1 Corinthians 12: “Now you are the body of Christ, and individually members of it.” Each part matters; each part is indispensable.

When we look at our own parish, we see that body alive and active in so many ways. Volunteers and staff serve quietly and faithfully in places often unseen: preparing the church for worship, organising rotas, reading and interceding, tending the churchyard, welcoming newcomers, caring for children and young people, supporting the homeless through cooking meals, offering pastoral care, managing finances, arranging flowers, maintaining our buildings, singing in the choir, providing governance and oversight, and so much more.

Taken individually, each contribution is an act of service. Taken together, they form a tapestry of love — a visible sign of Christ at work among us. The theology of volunteering is, at its heart, a theology of grace. We serve not to earn favour, but because God has first served us. Jesus kneels to wash the feet of his disciples and says, “I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you” (John 13:15). When we serve one another, we reflect that same love — a love that is patient, generous, and freely given.

Volunteer Appreciation Day is our chance, wholeheartedly and publicly, to say: thank you.

Thank you to every person who gives time, skill, prayer, compassion,
and energy.

Thank you to our staff, whose work so often goes beyond what is
seen.

Thank you to those who step in quietly when help is needed, and to
those who serve week after week with steadfast commitment.

Thank you to the many newcomers who have offered their gifts this
year, bringing fresh ideas and enthusiasm.

Thank you to those whose ministries are largely invisible — for God
sees, and we give thanks.

We also recognise that volunteering is not only about what we offer; it is also about who we become. Service shapes us. It deepens our discipleship, strengthens our community, and reveals Christ to others in ways words alone cannot. To serve is to grow.

As we look ahead to the coming year, may we continue to build a parish rooted in gratitude, generosity, and shared purpose. May each one of us find encouragement in knowing that our gifts matter, that our presence makes a difference, and that together we are participating in God's ongoing work of renewal in this place.

Thank you — each and every one of you — for being a blessing to this parish and to the wider community we are called to love.

Every blessing,
Mthr Martha

Walking the Lent Journey Together



Lent arrives each year like a gentle but persistent invitation — a beckoning into the quiet places of the heart where God waits to meet us. After the brightness of Epiphany and the joyful busyness of the new year, Lent calls us to slow down, to pay attention, and to remember who and whose we are.

The early Church described Lent as a *springtime of the soul* — a season for growth, tending, pruning, and renewal. Just as the earth prepares itself for new life, so we prepare our hearts for the mystery of Easter. But Lent is not meant to be a gloomy or punitive season. At its core, it is a journey into freedom.

Jesus's 40 days in the wilderness show us that Lent is not about testing our willpower but about discovering again what sustains us.

When stripped of distractions, Jesus leans entirely on the love of the Father. Lent invites us to do the same.

Across the centuries, Christians have shaped their Lenten practices around three pillars:

1. Prayer – making space in our crowded lives to listen and speak with God.
2. Fasting – letting go of something in order to make room for something deeper.
3. Almsgiving – turning our hearts outward in compassion and generosity.

None of these practices are ends in themselves. They are pathways that lead us toward greater love — for God, for neighbour, and for ourselves.

In our parish, Lent also offers us an opportunity to walk this journey *together*. To pray as a community. To explore scripture. To share meals. To reflect on our calling as a church in Cowley. To support those in need. To ask honest questions. And to prepare collectively for the joy of the Resurrection.

This year, you might choose one small Lenten practice:

- setting aside five minutes of quiet each day
- reading a Gospel slowly, week by week
- giving something up, or taking something up
- offering an act of kindness or charity
- joining a midweek service
- taking a weekly walk in silence
- putting aside a small daily gift for someone in need

Whatever you choose, please remember that Lent is not measured in success or failure. It is a journey of grace. Even the smallest movement toward God is met with God's enormous love.

As we enter this holy season, may Christ walk beside us in the wilderness, steadying our steps. May we discover again the truth that we do not make this journey alone. And may our hearts be renewed so that, when Easter dawns, we are ready to recognise the risen Lord in our midst.

Praying for a blessed Lent when it arrives

Mthr Martha

News from St Alban's



The community at St Alban's has very much valued the new radiant heating in church and the Air Source Heat Pump which keeps the newly painted hall and refurbished kitchen at a constant temperature. The new ping-pong table in the hall is used and enjoyed by all ages after Sunday services.

It was wonderful to be joined by the Byrd Chorus and the combined SSMJ and SA choirs for the Charles Street carols in early December, and to welcome a large congregation of neighbours and young families. Week in week out, we enjoy listening to the choir and singing together. Our school age servers and coffee team continue to be a huge support. Laudate services this autumn have given us an opportunity to share ideas about scripture in the context of our life experiences, while doing craft activities.

We look forward to welcoming everyone from the whole parish (and beyond) to the Shrove Tuesday Fish and Chip supper and Talent Show on Tuesday 16th February from 6-8pm - more details to follow in the parish bulletin soon. If you like to tell a joke, sing a song, read a favourite poem, or do any kind of short performance, please let David know.

Fr David

Reflections of a new Churchwarden

Following my recent appointment as churchwarden I've been reflecting on the positive, uplifting and inspiring achievements in the parish during 2025, many of which I've been privileged to be part of. A good platform from which to look ahead with prayer and confidence. We made a parish commitment to a year of prayer and renewal during 2025. We've prayed hard and faithfully and asked God to be our loving, guiding and helpful hand as we sought to engage more fully and effectively with our community and discern where best to apply our energy and God given talents.

Prayers have been answered beyond our expectations. It's been wonderful to develop new teams working in unison to engage with many community agencies and witness remarkable growth in many areas. As I've been 'the buildings man' on the PCC for some time I'll summarise what's been achieved to date as we've sought to make our churches more accessible, safe, warm, well-lit and comfortable.

Ss Mary & John Church:

* New and more efficient heating and lighting installed throughout.

- North Chapel redecorated and new seating
- Toilets refurbished and decorated
- Comprehensive CCTV cover round the perimeter of the church to deter crime and anti-social behaviour. The recordings have aided Thames Valley Police investigations on a number of occasions.
- Audio Visual units provided to North Porch Entrance and Church.

St Albans Church and Hall:

- Hall, toilets and kitchen refurbished and redecorated. Removal of gas boiler and installation of an air sourced heat pump which supports heating and hot water supplies in those areas and reduces our carbon footprint.
- Church - obsolete gas heaters disconnected, and new electric infrared high level heating-units installed (plan to remove the redundant wall heaters and redecorate the church early this year).
- Church lighting upgraded
- Electrical power supply increased to 3 Phase capacity to support demand

So, to 2026....an ongoing year of prayer and renewal to discern God's will and give thanks for His love and support.

We continue to place our faith in God to provide as we look to the repairs required to Ss Mary & John Church tower, provision of additional, accessible toilet facilities and provision of kitchen and server. All of which requires comprehensive planning, seeking of permissions and successful financial grant applications.

Thank you for electing me churchwarden.

Rodney Burr



Christmas at St Mary and St John

Music & Music Scholars Update

Since the last parish magazine, we have enjoyed a wonderful sequence of music for Christmas and Epiphany, and, as always, have been very proud of the achievements of the choirs in the parish. Our usual loyal groups of singers continue to grow, and it was good to have music sung jointly with East Oxford Community Choir, the Byrd Chorus as well as our local brass band, Oxford Silver Band throughout the Christmas season; the Community Carol Service was a particular highlight.

Much of what we have achieved has been through programming music carefully, planning how anthems and hymns can reflect the liturgy and enhance our worship. We hope that there is something for everyone in the various styles, genres, composers that we have chosen. The Christmas music list included traditional favourites from Darke, Poston and Rutter as well as less-known anthems by Mendelssohn, Quartel and MacMillan. It was particularly good to sing the MacMillan Mass throughout Advent at St Mary and St John and the congregation have been joining in enthusiastically with this setting. In Epiphany we introduced music by Sweelinck, Tallis and Stanford, and it was a particular joy to include two carols from The Cowley Carol Book, commissioned for our parish in 1901.

Our three choral scholars continue to provide a strong lead, though we are still on the look-out for a soprano - do let us know if there is anyone in your circles who might fit the bill.

In the meantime, we are well underway with planning for Lent and Easter, leading towards the Holy Week journey. We are always pleased to welcome anyone to join the choir - it is not as large a commitment as you might think - do let us know if you'd like to give it a go!

Lawrence and Alex

Music at St Albans Advent and Christmas 2025

This Advent on two occasions I was joined in the organ loft by brass players from the City of Oxford Silver Band, Alex on the cornet and Tess on the trombone. They played with me during my organ voluntaries and added a Christmassy feel to the music.

On Christmas Day itself, we invited wider family members and others to join us in singing our choir anthem with a 'ping and sing' rehearsal a few days earlier and were pleased to have a total of nine singers, although only one man!

Susanna Gimson

Would You Like to Be Baptised or Confirmed?

An Invitation to Explore Faith More Deeply

From time to time people ask, quietly and sometimes a little nervously, "How do I know if I'm ready to be baptised?" or "Is confirmation for me?" These are beautiful questions, because they arise from a heart that is awakening to God — a heart sensing that there may be a next step on the journey of faith.

Baptism and confirmation are two of the most joyful moments in the life of the Church. They mark not only individual commitment, but also the welcome and support of the whole Christian community.

Baptism — Beginning the Journey

Baptism is the gateway into Christian life. In baptism, we are named as God's beloved children, washed in the grace of Christ, and welcomed into the fellowship of the Church. It is a sign that God's love comes first — before our achievements, before our mistakes, before our questions.

People of any age can be baptised. Some come as infants, carried in the arms of parents and godparents; others come as adults, choosing freely for themselves. All are equally precious in God's eyes.

Confirmation — Owning the Faith for Yourself

Confirmation is the moment when someone who has been baptised (often as a child) chooses to affirm their faith publicly, with the support of the Church and the blessing of the Bishop. It is a step of maturity: a way of saying, "This faith matters to me. I want to follow Christ and grow deeper in his love."

Preparation for confirmation usually includes a short course of teaching and discussion, space for questions, and time to reflect. It is not about having all the answers — it is about being willing to explore.

Both Are About Relationship

At their heart, baptism and confirmation are not ceremonies to "get done," but relationships to enter into. They are about discovering who we are in God, and how God calls us to live.

You do not have to feel holy, clever, or certain to begin this journey. You simply need to be open.

Is This Something You Are Thinking About?

If you are curious, sensing a nudge, or simply wondering what these steps involve, I would love to talk with you. There is no pressure and no obligation — just an open conversation about where you are and what God might be stirring in your heart.

We also warmly welcome young people and adults who have never been baptised, as well as those baptised as infants who now wish to explore confirmation.

A Community That Walks With You

In this parish, no one journeys alone. Whether you are brand new to faith or have been attending for years, you will be supported by prayer, friendship, teaching, and the love of the whole church family. If you would like to explore baptism or confirmation — for yourself or for a child — please do get in touch with me on 0747 290 90 11 or Vicar@CowleyStJohn.co.uk

I would be delighted to walk with you.

Every blessing as you consider the next step of your journey with God.

Mthr Martha

A message from St John's Care Home

For the Feast of Christ the King, we sang 'When I survey the wondrous cross' at the start of our Distribution of Holy Communion at St John's Care Home. Afterwards I was aware of a humming which continued to the end of the service and beyond. The lady humming is blind and rarely communicative. She wasn't a regular churchgoer in her adult life, but her husband says she remembers with affection singing in the local chapel as a child.

Another of our dozen or so 'regulars' was recently wheeled in first and was sitting on her own for a while. She has early-stage dementia but is still eager to talk. Coming into the lounge where our services are held, I overheard her talking to the figure of Christ on the Crucifix: 'I was telling someone earlier about the legend of the little birds who stole the nails from your cross.' This lady told me on an earlier occasion that the Cross moved her to tears.

An early recognition with a care home congregation is that however severe the disability or constraint the essential spark of personality remains. Often a flicker of the eyes or a movement of lips witnesses to engagement with worship that almost certainly is deeper than we might guess. To the extent that engagement sparks memory and warmth of familiarity, then therapy may be in process also.

It is wonderful also to see one person with difficulties helping another, and to get residents delving into memory as we chat before and after the service. One resident remembers visiting Bethlehem at Christmas. We hear the story often, but each time it comes afresh.

Once a month the Rev. Stephanie Bullock from Old Marston officiates at Eucharist. As someone who trained to become a doctor and spent many years as a hospital chaplain, her service at St John's is highly appreciated. Quality of worship is critical in a care home setting. We have recorded choral accompaniment for our hymns and Rev. Stephanie's homilies are thoughtful and challenging. I do my best to follow her example.

We're a varied community that includes a retired thatcher, a farmer's wife, a nurse, a speech therapist, a friar, and a truck driver. Others have held positions of authority; four archbishops have been resident in the century-and-a-half of St John's existence as a place of

sanctuary, for most of that time under the care of the Anglican order of All Saints Sisters of the Poor. Incapacities have brought us together and worship binds us with love, hope, and, carrying on the Sisters' ethos, not a little charity.

Graham Jones, Reader

New Church Chairs Appeal

As part of the renewal of St Mary & St John's Church, we are delighted to share plans for the installation of new church chairs and choir stalls. The total cost of this project is estimated at £25,000 (£150 per chair).



These chairs will replace the much-loved but ageing ones that have served the church for many decades and are now affected by woodworm and wear. The new seating will be comfortable, durable, and designed to last for generations to come. Because it is difficult to secure external grants for church furniture, we will try to raise these funds within the parish. Any contribution, large or small, will make a real difference and is deeply appreciated. Donations may also be made in memory of a loved one or an anniversary. A small commemorative plaque can be attached to a chair to honour their name and legacy within our worshipping community or registered in a book for record keeping.

If you would like to contribute, please use the reference “**Chairs**” when making your donation (payment details on inside back page), and contact Mthr Martha or the Parish Office for details about plaques and the book of memory.

Thank you for your generosity and for helping us continue to make our church a beautiful, welcoming space for all.

Latest update: we already have 12 chairs in the North Chapel and have raised more funds. We are now looking to raise about £11,000 for the main church. Thank you for your support.

Cowley Haven Homes: A New Chapter of Hope, Hospitality, and Long-Term Parish Sustainability

Over the past year you will have heard more and more about *Cowley Haven Homes*, a bold and compassionate project rooted in our parish's commitment to serve those most vulnerable in our community. As planning continues, we want to share the vision more fully, explain why this work matters so deeply, and outline how it connects to the long-term flourishing of the parish.

"I was homeless, and you housed me" — The Gospel at the Heart of the Vision

In Matthew 25, Jesus gives us a striking picture of what faithful discipleship looks like: "I was hungry, and you gave me food... I was a stranger, and you welcomed me... I was naked, and you clothed me... I was homeless, and you housed me."

These are not abstract ideals but concrete acts of mercy. Cowley Haven Homes is our parish's response to this Gospel imperative — a direct, practical expression of Christ's call to love our neighbour with courage, tenderness, and integrity.

What Is Cowley Haven Homes?

Cowley Haven Homes is a small, parish-led modular housing scheme providing secure, dignified homes for people experiencing homelessness in East Oxford using the unused site plot at the back of 14 Magdalen Road.

Working with the National Church Housing Project and drawing on best practice from across the country, our aim is simple and transformative:

- to offer stable housing
- to foster community and support
- to build pathways out of homelessness



This is not merely a housing project; it is an act of Christian hospitality grounded in prayer, justice, and compassion.

Why It Matters: The Need in Our Community

Homelessness across Oxford continues to rise, driven by soaring rents, insufficient affordable housing, and increasing social need. Our parish sees this reality every day — through The Porch, in pastoral ministry, through conversations with families, and simply by walking our streets.

Temporary shelters provide relief, but only long-term, safe accommodation coupled with relational support leads to real change. Cowley Haven Homes will offer precisely this.

Honouring the Cowley Fathers' Legacy

The Cowley Fathers, whose ministry shaped the heritage of our parish, were renowned for their commitment to the poor, the homeless, and the marginalised. Their work began with a radical expression of Christian service and community. Cowley Haven Homes continues this legacy. It is a 21st-century expression of the same theological conviction: Christ is found among those who are vulnerable, and the Church must respond with generosity and courage.

Support and Funding: A Vision Recognised

We are delighted that this initiative has already attracted significant support from charitable trusts and grant-making bodies who see both the social impact and the sustainability of the scheme.

Importantly, the Diocese has also expressed interest in supporting this work. Because nothing like this has been attempted before in the Diocese of Oxford, Cowley Haven Homes has the potential to become a pioneering model for parish-led housing — one that could inspire and equip other churches across the Diocese. Diocesan funding would enable us to complete essential capital works and strengthen partnerships as we move into the next stages of development.

An Investment in the Parish's Future

Alongside its social mission, Cowley Haven Homes is a key part of our long-term financial sustainability strategy. Once established, the scheme will provide a stable, reliable income for the parish, supporting:

- ongoing ministry and worship
- children's and youth work
- pastoral care
- building maintenance and development
- community outreach and mission

This means Cowley Haven Homes will serve both the immediate needs of our neighbours and the long-term resilience of the parish — ensuring we can continue to be a strong, thriving Christian presence in Cowley for generations to come.

A Parish Called to Hope

Cowley Haven Homes invites us to live out the Gospel in ways that transform lives and strengthen community. It is a project rooted in prayer, courage, and the deep conviction that every human being is beloved of God.

As we move forward, we ask for your continued prayers, enthusiasm, and support. Together, we are building not only houses, but hope.

“Whatever you did for the least of these, you did for me.”

May our parish continue to be a place where these words take flesh.

Mthr Martha

Candlemas Day (the feast of Our Lady's purification) is signalled by the snowdrops in the churchyard which are a reminder of this day. The snowdrop came to be known as the symbol of Our Lady's purity.

Enjoy your search for the snowdrops in the churchyard and see how many you can find.



Children's Work Update: Growing Faith, Growing Community

Over the past few months, our children's ministry has continued to flourish in exciting ways, supported by the dedication of our Children's Worker and our strong partnerships with local schools and nurseries. It is a joy to see so many children and families engaging with the life of the parish, discovering faith, and feeling at home in our church community.

Regular Visits to St Frideswide and SMJ Schools

Our Children's Worker now makes regular visits to both *St Frideswide* and *St Mary & John* primary schools, helping at assemblies, supporting classroom learning, and helping staff create worship that is creative, inclusive, and rooted in Christian hope. These sessions continue to be warmly received by pupils and teachers alike. Children are encouraged to explore biblical stories, reflect on values, and consider what faith looks like in daily life. We have also enjoyed welcoming classes into church. It is always a delight to hear their voices filling the church space with curiosity and enthusiasm.

Growing Connections with East Oxford Primary School

Our relationship with *East Oxford Primary School* has strengthened, with new opportunities for engagement. The children's openness and willingness to explore stories of love, forgiveness, and justice remind us of the power of faith to speak across differences. This partnership reflects our deep commitment to serving the whole community of East Oxford — offering hospitality, shared learning, and practical support wherever we can.

Comper Nursery: A Joyful Starting Place

Our youngest neighbours at *Comper Nursery* continue to bring smiles to our faces. We look forward to welcoming Comper children and staff to the church at key moments in the year, helping even our smallest community members feel that the church is a familiar and friendly place.

A Vision Rooted in Faith and Welcome

Children's work is not an "extra"—it is central to our calling as a parish. Jesus places children at the heart of the Kingdom of God, and so we, too, rejoice in placing them at the heart of our community. Our vision is to offer spaces where children are safe, seen, loved, and encouraged to grow in faith and confidence. Please continue to hold our Children's Worker, our schools, and our families in your prayers — and if you feel called to volunteer in any aspect of children's work, we would be delighted to hear from you.

Miriam Atoro, Children and Families Worker

The 'Art of Dying'

In his well-known poem Henry Scott Holland said: 'Death is nothing at all, I have only slipped away into the next room'. In Western society we do not understand how to die. Dying is as natural as being born – but we are afraid. Death has become a medical condition, and with modern medicine we put it off as long as possible. We pretend the inevitable won't happen.

Studying past Christian traditions can help us today. The Medieval *Art of Dying* helped people to prepare for death while they were very much alive. These customs were gradually written down in books and pamphlets. Put simply, they told people to face up to death, let go of past pain, cherish loved ones, and make wills and practical arrangements to smooth the pain of parting. The fashionable trend for *Swedish Death Cleaning* is a modern version. It tells us to sort out our clutter and reduce it to the essentials, let go of things with painful memories and keep reminders of love. The process helps us to understand what our lives have been about.

Our secular society confuses time and eternity. Most people believe that time – where we are born, live and die – is the only life we have. Sadly, all science can do for us is to prolong our life here. For Christians time and eternity exist in parallel. The mystery of Christ's death and resurrection is the point where time and eternity meet. We do not have to wait until we die for eternity to begin. We enter the Kingdom of God when we open our hearts to Jesus. We see glimpses of heaven in the moments when we feel God's presence. Each of us moves along our spiritual path through prayer, love, and care for others. Life after death is simply a continuation of our spiritual journey on earth.

Throughout human history death has been at the centre, not the margins of life. The *Art of Dying* encouraged people to think about their own death every day. Facing up to the certainty of death gives each day a sense of the fragility and wonder of life. People with terminal illness say it helps them to make the most of the time they have left. When we put death at the centre of life everything else falls into place. It gives our stories a beginning, a middle and an end. It can free us from old patterns of behaviour; we can see our problems in perspective and live in the moment.

Buddhism teaches that *sickness, old age and death* were the ugly secrets hidden from the Buddha growing up in his palace. When he left home he was shocked to see them with his own eyes. Our society values us in the prime of our lives, but not when we are old or sick and can't work or pay our bills. Sickness, old age and the approach of death are great teachers of wisdom if we can open our spiritual eyes. As we get older we can't do what we did, daily tasks take longer and we lose interest in things we used to enjoy. The mystery of ageing is that as we become less active, we spend more time resting in the presence of God. Remember how much babies sleep as they grow used to human life. We sleep more as we prepare to leave our human bodies and move on into the spiritual realm.

In past times people understood the physical process of dying better. They were more in tune with their bodies and could feel death approaching. Then, a sudden death was a bad death because the person had no time to prepare or say goodbyes. Now, we think a sudden death is a good death because the person does not know anything about it. Medieval Christians believed that death was a gradual process, not a single moment in time. When a dying person stopped eating it was a sign their soul was preparing to leave the body, although loved ones might encourage them to eat and stay with them. After death the soul took around three more days to leave the body. Prayers were said and people came to say goodbye. After the funeral, services were held seven days, thirty days and a year later. They helped the soul on the journey through purgatory, a period of life review, and into the presence of God. They also helped the people left behind to come to terms with their loss.

The things which go best in life tend to be those we prepare for – exams, job interviews, weddings, holidays. Preparing for death should be no different. It is an opportunity to right old wrongs and hurts, tell people we love them, and allow them to care for us in our last years. The spiritual life has been described as one long process of relaxation, as we come to understand who we are. Accepting our own death means we can relax on our journey with God in time and eternity.

Virginia Bainbridge, December 2025

New Bereavement Group Meeting

From 12 noon-1pm on Tuesday 27 January there will be a lunch meeting (with sandwiches provided) at St Mary and John's Church during which we will discuss funeral practicalities and theology. Dr Virginia and a funeral director will be present to guide and answer questions.

Everyone is welcome.

Love, Death and Eternity

On Death and Dying is the title of the book by Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross M.D., which helped to start the hospice movement in America. The book drew on her experience as a young Swiss medical student at the end of World War Two. She questioned the medical assumption that lives must be prolonged at all costs – because Science has not proved there is life after death. A clergyman at a church I attended was speaking about his ministry to patients in the local hospice. He was surprised to find it was the Christians who were most afraid of dying. All the great faiths teach that death is not the end, but this belief is strongly rejected by education, the media and most of the population. Christians and followers of other faiths share the doubts of our rational society. Churches don't really discuss death and the afterlife – perhaps they are embarrassed by such old-fashioned notions?

As a reaction *New Age* books have brought 'near-death experiences' to public attention. These are common in all cultures and tell the same story. On leaving the body the person travels up a long tunnel of light. To welcome them is the Love which created the universe in the human form shaped by their religion on earth – Jesus, the Virgin Mary or a divine figure of another faith. In meditation we too catch glimpses of eternity. We connect with the Divine life-force embodying love, joy, peace and Marian Dunlop's other *Words of Life*. St. Paul says that the world's wisdom is foolishness compared with God's (1 Corinthians 1:17-28). On the spiritual path everything is upside-down from how society sees it. Even our bodily decline and the winding way into dementia prepare us to let go as we approach eternity. Dr. Kubler Ross called another book: *Death: the final stage of growth*. It is the mystery our society is most afraid of. St. Paul describes our glimpses of eternity: 'For now we see through a glass

darkly: but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know even as also I am known.' (1 Corinthians 13:12).

So, what is the meaning of life? Julian of Norwich tells us in the *Revelations* from her own near-death experience in 1373: 'So I was taught that love is our Lord's meaning. And I saw very certainly in this and in everything that before God made us, he loved us, which love was never abated and never will be. And in this love, he has done all his works, and in this love, he has made all things profitable to us, and in this love our life is everlasting. In our creation we had beginning, but the love in which he created us was in him from without beginning. In this love we have our beginning, and all this shall we see in God without end.' (Chapter 86).

Virginia Bainbridge. 2020

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Virginia.bainbridge123@btinternet.com



Special Bereavement Poems

Death is Nothing at All

Henry Scott Holland (1847-1918)

Death is nothing at all
I have only slipped away into the next room
I am I and you are you
Whatever we were to each other
That we are still
Call me by my old familiar name
Speak to me in the easy way you always used
Put no difference into your tone
Wear no forced air of solemnity or sorrow
Laugh as we always laugh
At the little jokes we always enjoyed together
Play, smile, think of me, pray for me
Let my name be ever the household word that it always was
Let it be spoken without effort
Without the ghost of a shadow in it
Life means all that it ever meant
It is the same as it ever was
There is absolute unbroken continuity
What is death but a negligible accident?
Why should I be out of mind
Because I am out of sight?
I am waiting for you for an interval
Somewhere very near
Just around the corner
All is well.
Nothing is past; nothing is lost
One brief moment and all will be as it was before
How we shall laugh at the trouble of parting when we meet again!

The Ship

Henry Scott Holland (1847-1918)

I am standing upon the seashore.
A ship at my side spreads her white sails to the morning breeze
and starts for the blue ocean.
She is an object of beauty and strength.
I stand and watch her until at length she hangs
like a speck of white cloud
just where the sea and sky
come to mingle with each other.

Then someone at my side says: "There, she is gone!"

"Gone where?"

Gone from my sight. That is all.
She is just as large in mast and hull and spar
as she was when she left my side
and she is just as able to bear her load
of living freight to her destined port.
Her diminished size is in me, not in her.
And just at the moment when someone at my side says
"There, she is gone!"
there are other eyes watching her coming,
and other voices ready to take up the glad shout,
"Here she comes!"

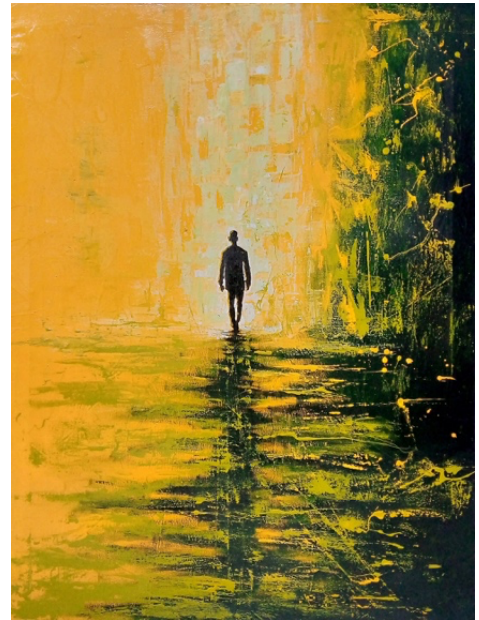
And that is dying.



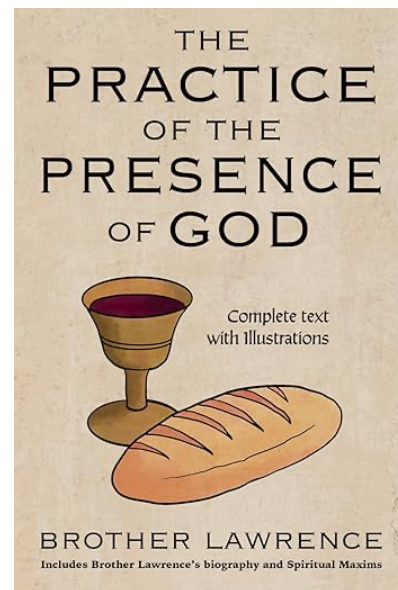
Let Me Go

Christina Rossetti (1830-1894)

When I come to the end of the road
And the sun has set for me
I want no rites in a gloom filled room
Why cry for a soul set free?
Miss me a little, but not for long
And not with your head bowed low
Remember the love that once we shared
Miss me but let me go.
For this is a journey we all must take
And each must go alone.
It's all part of the master plan
A step on the road to home.
When you are lonely and sick at heart
Go to the friends we know.
Laugh at all the things we used to do
Miss me but let me go.
When I am dead my dearest
Sing no sad songs for me
Plant thou no roses at my head
Nor shady cypress tree
Be the green grass above me
With showers and dewdrops wet
And if thou wilt remember
And if thou wilt, forget.
I shall not see the shadows,
I shall not fear the rain;
I shall not hear the nightingale
Sing on as if in pain;
And dreaming through the twilight
That doth not rise nor set,
Haply I may remember,
And haply may forget.



Reflection on the book: *The Practice of the Presence of God*
Learning to Live Each Moment with God



Few spiritual writings are as simple — or as quietly revolutionary — as Brother Lawrence's *The Practice of the Presence of God*. Written in the 17th century by a humble Carmelite lay brother who worked in a monastery kitchen, this small book has travelled across centuries and continents because it touches something universal in the human soul: our deep longing to remain close to God in the midst of ordinary life.

Brother Lawrence discovered, almost by accident, that God was just as present among the pots and pans of the kitchen as in the stillness of the chapel. Washing dishes, peeling vegetables, mending sandals — these became for him moments of profound communion. He writes, “The time of business does not with me differ from the time of prayer.” In other words, *every* moment is an invitation to encounter God.

This is the heart of his “practice”: not a technique, not a method, but a gentle returning, again and again, to the awareness that God is near.

Brother Lawrence understood something that many of us struggle with today: God does not wait for us to be perfect, or serene, or uninterrupted before speaking to us. God meets us in the noisy kitchen, the busy office, the school run, the hospital waiting room, the late-night worry, the simple joy of a shared meal. His presence is not earned; it is *given*.

One of the most liberating aspects of Brother Lawrence's spirituality is its honesty. He admits freely that he is often distracted, forgetful, impatient. But rather than despairing, he simply turns back to God — with humility, with humour, and with trust. Every return, he suggests, strengthens the heart.

There is deep theology in this simplicity. To practise the presence of God is to believe, truly believe, that God's love saturates the whole of life. It is to live as though Emmanuel — God with us — is not only a Christmas proclamation but a daily reality. It is to experience holiness not as a rare event but as a way of being.

For us, this may be one of the most needed spiritual gifts of our age. We speak often of busyness, fragmentation, and overload. We long for peace but rarely find the space to sit still. Brother Lawrence reminds us that God is not confined to our quiet times or our Sunday worship. God is found in the breath between activities, in the unnoticed moments, in the tasks we perform without thinking. Perhaps this is why his writing continues to resonate: it is accessible, hopeful, grounded, and deeply human.

As you reflect on his words, you might like to ask:

- Where do I sense God's presence most easily?
- Where do I forget God is with me?
- How might I gently turn my heart toward God in the middle of my day?
- What ordinary tasks could become places of prayer for me?

Brother Lawrence's gift to the Church is the reminder that God is not far off; God is closer to us than our own breath. His life whispers a simple truth: if we seek God in all things, we will begin to find God in all things.

May we learn, like Brother Lawrence, to cultivate that quiet awareness — to discover that every moment, no matter how ordinary, can become a doorway into the love of God.

Mthr Martha



Join In – Groups, Teams & Volunteering

Our parish life is shaped and sustained by the many hands and hearts who give their time, gifts, and presence. Whether you have been part of the church for years, have only recently begun attending, or are simply curious to try something new, we would love to welcome you into the rhythm of our shared life. There is no experience required for any role — simply a willingness to join in. Training and gentle support are always provided.

Ways to Get Involved

- Hospitality Team

Help with refreshments, serving at special events, or welcoming at services and events.

- Choir & Music Group

All voices welcome — whether confident or quietly curious.

- Churchyard & Gardening Group

A friendly outdoor team meeting every Wednesday morning caring for our green spaces, wildlife areas, and memorial garden.

- Toddler Group Helpers

Come and support play, chat with parents and carers, and help create a warm, safe space.

- Pastoral Visiting Team

Visiting those who are housebound, isolated, or in need of companionship and prayer.

- Serving, Reading & Intercessions Rotas

Take part in our worship by reading, and leading prayers.

- Altar Servers & Sacristy Team

Assist in preparing the altar, serving at the Eucharist, caring for linens and vessels, and helping ensure our worship is reverent and beautiful. A wonderful way to learn the rhythm of liturgy.

If you are unsure where to begin, simply speak to Mthr Martha or one of the curates after a service or email: vicar@cowleystjohn.co.uk

There is a place for everyone, and your presence — whether weekly, monthly, or occasionally — truly makes a difference.

“Now you are the body of Christ, and individually members of it.” —

1 Corinthians 12:27

Mthr Martha

Reflections on temptation

From *Murder in the Cathedral* by T.S.Eliot

Temporal power, to build a good world,
To keep order as the world knows order.
Those who put their faith in worldly order
Not controlled by the order of God,
In confident ignorance, but arrest disorder,
Make it fast, breed fatal disease,
Degrade what they exalt...

Now is the way clear, now is the meaning plain;
Temptation shall not come in this kind again.
The last temptation is the greatest treason:
To do the right deed for the wrong reason.
The natural vigour in the venial sin
Is the way in which our lives begin.

Events & What's On

Men's Breakfast

We plan to hold another Men's Breakfast for fellowship and discussion on Wednesday 18 February from 8.35am onwards at St Mary and St John (right after Morning Prayer). Tea/coffee, croissants, pastries, and other light refreshments will be served. Please talk to or email Matthew or David to let us know if you plan to come (so we have numbers) and don't hesitate to ask us any questions. We are very much looking forward to the chance to eat, talk and pray together.

Fr David and Fr Matthew

Weekly Wednesday Coffee Morning

Every Wednesday at 10:00am – St Mary & John's Church
Sponsored by the Oxford Community Foundation

All are warmly invited to our weekly Wednesday Coffee Morning at 10:00am at St Mary & John's Church. The church is open for everyone — whether you're looking for company, a listening ear, a quiet moment, or simply a good cup of coffee.

Thanks to the generous support of the Oxford Community Foundation, we are able to offer this welcoming space each week for friendship, conversation, and community connection.

Come along, bring a friend, and enjoy a relaxed and friendly start to your day. We look forward to welcoming you!

Sponsored by the Oxford Community Foundation

COFFEE MORNING



“The church is open for everyone — whether you're looking for company, a listening ear, a quiet moment, or simply a good cup of coffee.”

Where
Every Wednesday at 10:00am – St Mary & John's Church, Cowley Road, OX4 2AJ

Contact Us

Phone	0747 290 90 11
Mail	vicarcsj@gmail.com
Website	http://cowleystjohn.co.uk/

<http://cowleystjohn.co.uk/>



Sunday Morning Cafe Church

St Mary & John's Church
Cowley Road

Short **All Age** Service with Continental Breakfast
Every Sunday 8:00 – 8:30am (Term Time)

Enjoy a light breakfast together with a simple time of prayer and worship

Fresh pastries and drinks
Peaceful start to your Sunday before sports and other events
Everyone warmly welcome

St Mary & John's Church, Cowley Road, Oxford
OX4 1UR



Baby & Toddler Playgroup

At St Mary & St John's Church, Cowley Road
Every Wednesday (term time) at 9:00am – 10:00am

01865 792717
children@cowleystjohn.co.uk



The Arts Society Oxford Tours: February 2026


Lizzy Rowe, who's an experienced Oxford tour guide and speaker, will be leading three tours of SS Mary and John and Bartlemas Chapel in February 2026. Her audience will be members of the local Arts Society, and the intention is to spend a morning each time looking at both venues and walking between them. As you know, there's a plenty of history to discuss, ranging from royal patronage in medieval times to Father Benson and the Cowley Fathers. And there's also a huge amount to look at and admire, although Lizzy (who also teaches Art History in primary schools) will focus in particular on the beautiful stone carvings in the church and the wonderful stained-glass windows (especially Sir Ninian Comper's strawberry signature! – see below from the south window). Ruth Waddle has been very helpful already but, if anyone has anything particular they'd like to highlight, Lizzy would love to hear from you. And do say 'hello' if you see us in February!



Stories • Strength • Scripture

Founded by *Miriam Atoro – Minamon the Storyteller*, **Faith-Driven MODA** is a faith-based fellowship and podcast that offers encouragement, reflection, and belonging for **migrant women 45 +**. Each month, the group meets for story-sharing, prayer, and friendship in a warm, supportive space.

Join our **Monthly Circle** — *First Friday, 9.30 – 10.30 AM* at **St Mary & St John Church, Cowley**.

 Tune in weekly for uplifting stories, cultural proverbs, and devotionals that refresh the spirit.

 faithdrivenmoda@gmail.com  +44 7375 623 614



Open Space is a meal and reflective service for the queer community and affirming allies hosted at St Mary & St John's, Cowley on the last Sunday of the month. The meal is for everyone, of all faiths and none, queer and allies. The service is informal, held in the side chapel, with beanbags and chairs for us to gather around the altar. It is an ecumenical service drawing from across the Christian tradition. Our values are inclusive and relaxed, aiming to be fully accessible and adaptable to people with disabilities and intentionally neurodivergent friendly. The meal seeks to suit all dietary requirements and is always vegan and nut free. We encourage people to come to what they feel able to. Some come just for the meal, others come for the quieter, more reflective part of our time together.

We founded Open Space because we – a parishioner and an ordinand on placement – saw that there was a need for an active community in Oxford for themselves and other queer Christians and their allies. Open Space launched in March 2025, with three leaders – Emma Pritchard (from Cowley St John); Joel Kelling (ordinand training at Cuddesdon, on placement at CSJ); and Aym Fulljames (from the University Church) – and has grown to include the Rev'd Matthew Schrecker (curate at CSJ) and the Rev'd Naomi Gardom (curate at the University Church). We want it to be a safe space in which those who have felt hurt by the church or have been excluded on account of their sexuality or gender expression, can feel at home, and belong. There are lots of ways to get involved if you are interested. We would be delighted for volunteers to help with setting up and tidying away, reading, playing music, and giving reflections. Please do reach out to us if you are interested, or speak with Emma, Joel, or Matthew after a service.

Our next meal and service will be on the Sunday 25th January on the theme of Light.

We hope to see you there.

Come as you are, you are loved.

Support for Those in Need: Discretionary Fund

We are blessed to have a generous discretionary fund available to support those facing hardship. If you, or someone you know, is in need, please feel free to contact Mthr Martha in confidence. If you would like to contribute to the fund and help support others in need, please also speak to Martha. Thank you for helping us care for one another.

Comment from a beneficiary: *Thank you again so much for the help, we were able to use it to put towards a cot and bedding for our daughter which will be coming tomorrow Thank you once again for all the help you have given to me and my family, it means the world to me.*

Little acts of kindness

‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’

Please send in stories of acts of kindness, however large or small, which have had an impact on you or someone you know.

Sometimes God’s grace is revealed in the simplest moments. Recently, someone in our congregation found themselves in real need of an iPad for their work. Miraculously, at the same time, another member of the congregation happened to have a spare iPad — in perfect working order and simply waiting for a purpose. When the stories reached us, the church became a gentle conduit, connecting one person’s need with another’s generosity. The iPad found a new home, the recipient felt supported, and the donor was delighted to see it make a meaningful difference. No fanfare — just a grace-filled act of kindness. These are the moments that remind us what it means to be the Body of Christ: offering what we can, when we can, and discovering that even little gestures can become blessings.

May we continue to be a community where small acts of generosity quietly transform lives.

Dates for your diary

JANUARY			
Sunday 25 th Conversion of St Paul		Services in both churches as usual Week of prayer for Christian Unity	
	6pm	Open Space	St Mary and John
Wednesday 28 th	12pm	Community lunch	St Mary and John
FEBRUARY			
Sunday 1 st Presentation of Christ (Candlemas)		Services in both churches as usual	
	5.15pm	Evensong	Bartlemas Chapel
Friday 6 th Candlemas	10.30am	Seasonal Meditation	St Mary and John churchyard
Sunday 15 th The Transfiguration of Our Lord		Services in both churches as usual	
Tuesday 17 th		Talent show	St Alban's
Wednesday 18 th Ash Wednesday	10.30am 7pm	Said Eucharist Sung Eucharist	St Mary and John With Imposition of Ashes
Sunday 22 nd First Sunday of Lent		Services in both churches as usual	
MARCH			
Sunday 1 st Lent 2	10.30am	Farewell to Rob Gilbert	Joint service at St Mary and John
	5.15pm	Evensong	Bartlemas Chapel
Sunday 8 th Lent 3		Services in both churches as usual	
	11.30am	Ignatian with Virginia and Jack	St Mary and John
Sunday 15 th Lent 4 - Mothering Sunday		Services in both churches as usual	
Wednesday 18 th	8.35am	Men's breakfast	St Mary and John
Friday 20 th (Spring Equinox)	10.30am	Seasonal Meditation	St Mary and John churchyard
Sunday 22 nd Passion Sunday		Services in both churches as usual	
Sunday 29 th Palm Sunday		Services in both churches as usual HOLY WEEK BEGINS	

Seasonal meditations 2026
Saint Mary & John churchyard

Fridays 10:30am to 11:30 - SMJ Churchyard - Come Rain or Shine
All Welcome!

Seasonal Meditations in the churchyard is a gentle sharing of poetry, song and silence following the rhythm of Christian and Celtic festivals through the year. Together we explore how these seasons are reflected in the natural world and what they may offer us about faith, renewal and hope in our daily lives.

For further information:

gabyhock1@gmail.com or bethisolde@gmail.com

6th February - Candlemas –beginning of Spring
20th March - Spring Equinox – mid Spring
1st May- May Day - beginning of Summer, Beltane
19th June Summer Solstice – mid Summer
31st July - Harvest festival, beginning of Autumn, Lammas
25th September Michaelmas – Autumn Equinox, mid-Autumn
30th October All Souls, All Saints, Halloween - beginning of Winter, Samhain
18th December Winter Solstice –Christmas – mid-Winter

Donations via Bank Transfer

Name: COWLEY SAINT JOHN PCC

Sort Code: 08-92-99

Account Number: 67325896

Donations via Cheques Payable to:

Cowley Saint John PCC, and send to:

The Vicarage, 271 Cowley Road, Oxford. OX4 2AJ

The parish is committed to promoting a safer church.

The **Parish Safeguarding Officer** is Miriam Atoro.

Miriam can be contacted **with any concerns** at
safeguarding@cowleystjohn.co.uk

Or you can contact the Vicar, Revd Martha Weatherill:

vicar@cowleystjohn.co.uk or 0747 290 90 11

The **Diocesan Safeguarding Team** can be reached on 01865 208295 or
safeguardingreferrals@oxford.anglican.org for urgent safeguarding concerns.

*O Christ, the Master
Carpenter, who at the last
through wood and nails
purchased our salvation,
wield well your tools in
the workshop of the
world, so that we, who
come rough-hewn to your
bench, may here be
fashioned to a truer
beauty by your hand. We
ask this for your name's
sake. Amen.*



Composed by George MacLeod, the founder of the Iona Community, this was the first prayer I voluntarily decided to commit to memory. I originally heard it prayed by George MacLeod himself when, in 1971 or thereabouts, he led a weekend retreat for the Anglican chaplaincy at the University of Lancaster. At the time, I did not realise what a towering figure MacLeod was ... but I remember that he used this prayer more than once, that weekend. It created an image in my mind of Jesus learning the carpenter's trade in Joseph's workshop, before wielding the tools of his ministry in the world, and dying on a cross that another carpenter had made. That image has never ceased to be a compelling one. The brevity of the prayer was also an attraction, especially because it is in such contrast to the immense scope of its reference.

Dr Graham James, former Bishop of Norwich

We wish everyone a fulfilling and joyous 2026