



Priest in Charge Report for the Annual Meetings

Reflections on the life of Severn Loop in 2024

Some key statistics for the year:

- Around 255 Sunday Services.
- 50 Sunday Zoom services- each week at 6pm.
- 6 Forest Churches- Thank you to those who hosted them- at Huffley, Preston Montford, Little Ensdon, Pimhill, Plex and Bomere Heath.
- 12 monthly communions at Isle Court Nursing Home.
- Around 200 home communion services and home/ hospital visits- the vast majority done by Joyce- with those who cannot get to church.
- Around nine services in church held for our local schools, and about 40 'Open the Book' worship assemblies across Bicton and Bomere Heath schools.
- About 34 regular monthly social events at Bicton, Bomere Heath and Shrawardine (coffee mornings and Stepping Out Café).
- Weekly Coffee and Play in the Mission Church.
- 8 services on Easter Day- including a sunrise service at Battlefield.
- 8 carol services and 10 Christmas services.
- 6 weddings.
- 9 baptisms.
- 35 Funerals and/or burials of ashes.
- 221 people on our monthly email list.
- New worship teams and Montford and Shrawardine and Bicton- to take lay-led services.
- Termly Loop 'Prayer and Praise' evenings.
- Various fundraisers and/or special events around the parishes.
- A Loop trip to the Community of the Resurrection in Mirfield.

As we look back over 2024 (already five months into 2025!), we've just finished our *Festival of Hope*, with all of our churches and/or churchyards telling resurrection stories in what can often feel like a dying world. Why? Well, because they are our story- they help us to understand that question of how we reach *this* time and place, from the place of the empty tomb- which is so often where we leave popular culture on Easter morning, as we turn from full churches hearing the resurrection account and singing *Thine be the Glory* with gusto, back into our everyday lives- lived for us as small worshipping communities in a society that largely forgets to push the question further of what this empty tomb might mean.

And that, in a way, is a metaphor for where we find ourselves as Severn Loop Parishes at this point in our life together. Last year (when we thought about 2023), we spoke at length about getting back to life after Covid, about being in top gear again, firing on all cylinders... whatever you want to call it. What happened next? Well, in many ways there were lots of encouragements in 2024- we were busy, we are, I think, thought well of in our communities. We are trusted, we are working hard to be a hope-filled, prayerful and welcoming presence. To keep the Easter analogy going, we might say that we are seeing the sun rise on Easter morning.

And that analogy takes my mind to Battlefield. In 2024 for the first time we held a sunrise service there on Easter morning. I think seven hardy souls attended. This year it was nine- I'd like to get up to eleven next year! We then followed it up with an empty tomb reflection area- which is there now actually (it is in fact our family tent with the camping table inside with a white sheet on). But that space, feels a little bit like the space in which we sit today. Contrary to what the media might tell us about the place of faith in contemporary culture, and having got through some very fragile times, we are not dead! We are alive and there is a space carved out into which God's Spirit can get to work. The trick is to pay prayerful attention so that we discover what that looks like, rather than try to clutter it up with our own (often good) intentions. The empty tomb and Christ gone on ahead of us is an image brimming with potential.

And that's perhaps where many of the beloved folk of Severn Loop are hovering- having come to church on Easter morning, or on Christmas Day, or on Remembrance Sunday, or for a funeral, wedding or baptism, they've heard the Gospel- through our words and our actions, through our kindness, our welcome, our love- they've been told about the power of Christ and the possibility of life in all its fullness. But what's the next move?

Well, to some extent we hope to encourage the next move through our *Festival of Hope* and our continued invitation to join in with the life of the local church. In the book of Jeremiah, there is a description of a vision of God's people- of all people- that they/we will not need to be schooled in the love of God, they will just know it- 'no longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the Lord', for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord'.

I wonder if that's our prayer- that we might be midwives to that move- God opening up a whole new way of life that is lived out of confidence in the divine love which underpins everything. So be of good heart as we greet 2025 and live in it fully- the adventure continues, and we are all invited to join in. ... I'll just share that passage again, and a bit more- because it feels right for today...

'I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the Lord', for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.'

Friends- fellow pilgrims- I am SO grateful for your company, your wisdom and your ministry. As that passage from Jeremiah reminds us, we are all part of God's mission- from the least of us to the greatest. Thank you for welcoming people Sunday by Sunday. Thank you for doing what you can- the many hidden jobs that keep our church communities functioning. Thank you for speaking well of the life of the local church, and for living it well, so that people feel able to come to us when the questions get too big, too painful or overwhelming. Thank you just for being a prayerful presence. And whilst we're thanking people, our churchwardens are amazing and work so hard, and of course we have the wonderful company of Joyce and Peter. We couldn't do it without them, and we rejoice in their ministry with gratitude!

I looked back at last year's APCM report, and I ended it by asking you to pray. This time round I'm going to do the same, but first of all, thank you for your previous prayers because they have been answered. I asked for prayers for more workers to bring in the plentiful harvest- and we have our curate, Dave, joining us at the end of June. We also have a scattering of new folk in our congregations. I asked for prayers for some administrative help, and we now have Rosie, our Severn Loop Administrator. I asked for prayers for how we make use of seasonal moments in our open spaces, in a pilgrimage-style way, and we have our *Stations of the Resurrection*, doing just that.

For the coming year, please pray for Dave and his family, as he prepares to join us. Please pray too for our round of confirmations and for our new youth study group- *Loop Life*. We continue to prayerfully consider how we might introduce an informal service for families, and to deepen our presence in our local schools.

But as always, our first response to all that we've reflected on is to give thanks- for God who loves us first and invites us to join in, in the pattern of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. We give thanks for one another, for the continuing adventure, for the encouraging signs we notice. We acknowledge that it's not always easy- there is suffering and there is joy, but we know which is the greater. As we travel through 2025 and onwards, we look forward with hope.

Here is a prayer that you might like to pray for us all:

God our Creator and Redeemer, help us in Severn Loop to grow in holiness, unity, effectiveness and people.

Draw us closer to you and to those around us.

Give us enthusiasm in our faith, and wisdom in sharing it with young and old.

Open our eyes to new opportunities, our lips to sing and speak of you, and our hearts to welcome the stranger.

Grow your kingdom in us and in the world,

through the intercession of our Lord Jesus Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.