

## The rise of civic religion?



By chance I was in my home town of Harpenden on Sunday, and after the 9.45 Mass many people from the Catholic church went down the road to the United Service of Remembrance round the War Memorial on Church Green.

It's years since I have been present for this. I have memories of a few hundred people scattered around the green in the centre of town. But this Sunday there must have been a crowd of over two thousand people, spilling onto the surrounding roads. Perhaps it has been growing over the years; perhaps it was particularly large this year.

It was very moving, and very Christian! Prayers, hymns, readings. The names of the dead were read out. And it's so easy to forget, but the whole town was gathered round a standing cross (see the old postcard above). I've wandered across the green a thousand times over the years (we moved to Harpenden when I was four), but I've hardly stopped to reflect that the focus of unity for the town was and still is the Cross of Jesus Christ. And when people want to reflect on death and life, remember their loved ones, or just come together as a community conscious of itself and its history – they gather round the Cross.

I'm not suggesting that everyone there had faith, or even that Christianity is on the increase in

Hertfordshire (who knows?). But the huge crowds present this Sunday made me wonder if there is a deepening hunger for community and for a sense of connection with those in the past. Maybe we are more aware of our military than we used to be; maybe it's the patriotism of the Jubilee or the communitarianism of the Olympics and the Paralympics; maybe we just long to feel more connected.

This was civic religion at its best: people still broadly connected with the nation's Christian faith, even though there would be various shades of belief and unbelief; people finding that this faith gives them a unity with each other, and a way of making sense of their human struggles, that perhaps they wouldn't find in any other place.

And a final note about purgatory: It was an ecumenical service, but I was fascinated how each prayer spoken was actually a prayer for the dead. We kept hearing phrases like: 'May they find the fulfilment in God they were longing for'; 'May they rest in peace'; 'May they come face to face with the Lord'. All of these 'may they...' prayers suggest, theologically, that there is still something to be achieved or worked out for those who have died. In other words, this wasn't just a service of remembrance – whatever the service sheet suggested – it was also a service of prayer for the dead. I don't think this was very conscious or theologically explicit, but it shows how hard it is to just remember the dead without actually praying for them – at a psychological level. And a Catholic would add that this makes theological sense as well!

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