Plymouth Unitarian Church

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The ever more secular Sunday

Opening video/music

HANDEL – Hallelujah Chorus – Messiah Organ Solo by Jonathan SCOTT

YOUTUBE – 4.16 minutes

Welcome + Introduction

Welcome to everyone, both here in church and joining us online.

Today's service explores how Sunday in Britain has changed over the last hundred years, from 1926 to 2026.

This service was written by Steve who, as many of you know, is far more comfortable writing services than leading them.

As a result, today's reflections will be shared by members of the congregation.

The service is presented in three parts and includes readings, hymns, and a number of short video clips.

In August last year, Steve wrote a service with an atheist theme entitled Losing My Religion, and his original intention was to write another atheist themed one.

However, as is often the case when preparing a service, the theme gradually developed in an unexpected direction.

Rather than becoming an atheist-themed service, it evolved into an exploration of the increasingly secular nature of British society and the impact this has had on religious life in our country.

Through reflections, memories, and observations, today's service considers how attitudes towards Sunday, worship, community life, and

faith have changed over the past century, while inviting us to reflect on what these changes might mean for the future.

The music played at the beginning of our service was Handel's Hallelujah Chorus, performed on the organ by Jonathan Scott.

Steve chose this piece because organ music was once the standard accompaniment in churches across Britain, filling sanctuaries with sound long before modern technology transformed the way worship music was led.

As you can see, our church still has an organ standing in the corner.

It is a reminder of a time when such instruments were central to church life.

I wonder when it was last played during a service? The reality is that it will almost certainly never be played again.

The decline of church organists reflects wider changes in society. Advances in technology have made alternative forms of musical accompaniment readily available, while falling church attendance has reduced the number of people learning and maintaining the traditional skills needed to play these magnificent instruments.

The opening music was a poignant reminder of a rich musical heritage that was once at the heart of worship.

But first, as always, we begin with the lighting of our chalice, a symbol of our free religious faith.

Chalice is lit

Opening Words

We have two sets of opening words.

The first is from the Hebrew Bible, or what we used to call the Old Testament.

Genesis Chapter Two verses two to four from the Good News Bible.

By the seventh day God finished what he had been doing and stopped working.

He blessed the seventh day and set it apart as a special day, because by that day he had completed his creation and stopped working.

And that was how the universe was created.

Our second reading comes from the 2019 film The Two Popes, which Steve watched on Netflix.

The film explores the relationship between Pope Benedict XVI (16th) and the future Pope Francis during a period of significant change within the Roman Catholic Church.

In one particularly poignant scene, Pope Benedict reflects on the challenges facing Christianity in the modern world and laments the decline in church attendance.

He observes: Our churches are beautiful, but empty.

It is a simple but powerful statement.

Across Britain, many churches still stand as magnificent buildings, rich in history, tradition and faith.

Yet, compared with previous generations, fewer people now attend worship regularly.

The words spoken in the film capture both the beauty that remains and the challenge faced by many churches of ALL denominations as they seek to maintain a living faith in a rapidly changing society.

Hymn One

Purple hymn book Number 11 - Blessed spirit of my life

Part A

The first part of this service will examine the nature of religious life in Britain from 1926 to the end of the 1940s, considering the role of faith in society and daily living.

So, let us picture Britain on a Sunday 100 years ago.

A Sunday in 1926 would have looked very different from a Sunday in 2026. Perhaps the closest comparison today would be Christmas Day or Easter Sunday, when most shops are closed and normal routines are interrupted.

A century ago, this was not the exception but the rule.

Sunday was set apart from the rest of the week and was strongly shaped by Christian beliefs and traditions. It was regarded as a day of worship, rest, and family life.

For many Britons, Sunday began with attending church. Families would walk to their local church dressed in their Sunday best.

Men commonly wore suits and ties, while women wore dresses and hats.

Children attended Sunday school and were generally expected to be on their very best behaviour.

Church attendance was not simply a matter of personal faith.

It was often viewed as part of being a respectable member of the community, and choosing not to attend could attract criticism or disapproval.

Shops were closed, and many forms of public entertainment and organised activities were restricted by law or local custom. The pace of life slowed considerably.

Sunday lunch was typically the principal meal of the week, often a roast dinner shared with family. Afterwards, the family would go for a walk, spend time together at home, or even attend a second church service in the evening.

For children, Sunday could feel particularly restrictive.

In some communities, games and organised play were discouraged, and playgrounds and swings might even be closed. The expectation was that the day should be observed with a sense of reverence and restraint.

Whether one in 1926 was particularly religious or not, Sunday was still very much the Lord's Day.

Society itself encouraged participation in its customs and traditions, and there was little opportunity to ignore them.

In 1926, the Church exerted a profound influence over almost every aspect of British life.

Its presence could be seen in education, marriage, funerals, public holidays and, perhaps most significantly, in shaping the moral values of society.

The Church was not simply a place of worship.

It was a central institution within the nation, closely intertwined with British identity and tradition. Its connection with the monarchy reinforced its importance, with the Crown and the Church together symbolising continuity, stability and national unity.

For many people, Christianity was not merely a personal faith but an accepted and often unquestioned part of everyday life. Religion provided a common framework through which individuals understood their duties, their communities and their place in the world.

In the 1930s Britain suffered the Great Depression, which brought widespread unemployment, leading to significant poverty and hardship across the country.

In response, churches and religious organisations played a vital role in supporting struggling communities.

One such organisation was the Salvation Army which provided both practical and spiritual support to people facing unemployment, poverty, and hunger.

Keyways they assisted included soup kitchens and cheap meals, hostels and shelters for homeless men and women, distribution of food, clothing, and basic necessities, as well as advice and support.

Churches also provided religious services and pastoral care, offering hope and community during a period of widespread hardship.

In many cases, it is likely that some people approached churches not for pastoral care, but because attending services formed part of an informal, transactional exchange for receiving aid.

Even today, some people approach the church not primarily out of religious conviction, but for the practical support it can offer: a free cup of tea or coffee and a biscuit, a warm place to sit for an hour on a cold winter’s evening, or simply a welcoming environment where they can find a measure of comfort and dignity.

For those experiencing homelessness, church grounds may also provide a place of refuge, as they know there is unlikely to be anyone there during the night to move them on.

The wartime years from 1939 to 1945 saw Britain unite as never before. Faced with the threat of invasion and the struggle for national survival, people from every background were called upon to contribute to the war effort.

During this period, churches played a vital role in supporting their communities.

Church halls became rest centres, emergency shelters, first aid stations and food distribution points.

They provided temporary accommodation for those made homeless by bombing and assisted in reuniting displaced families, including evacuated children separated from their parents.

The idea of Britain as a Christian nation was frequently promoted by both political and religious leaders.

Faith was often presented as part of the country's moral foundation and as a source of strength and resilience during a time of great uncertainty.

Of course, history reminds us that in times of war, both sides are often convinced that God is supporting their cause. Religious belief can inspire courage and sacrifice, but it can also be claimed by opposing nations pursuing very different objectives.

In summary, the wartime British church was far more than a place of worship. It was a chapel, a community centre and a welfare organisation all rolled into one, providing both practical assistance and spiritual support to a nation under immense strain.

In 1948, the creation of the welfare state, including the establishment of the National Health Service, marked a profound change in British society.

For the first time, the state assumed responsibility for providing comprehensive support to its citizens, offering protection and care from the cradle to the grave.

People increasingly looked to public services rather than charitable institutions to meet many of their needs.

This expansion of state provision was one of the factors that contributed to the growth of secularism in Britain.

The Church was no longer the primary source of assistance for the poor, the sick and the vulnerable.

Responsibilities that had once been carried out largely by religious organisations were increasingly undertaken by government agencies and secular institutions.

Rather than being the principal provider of welfare, churches increasingly came to complement the work of the welfare state.

They continued to support their communities through pastoral care, charitable outreach and social action, but within a society where many of their former functions had been assumed by public services.

Over the decades that followed, much of the Church's traditional role in education, welfare, social care and poverty relief was gradually shared with, and in many cases superseded by, the state and a growing number of secular organisations.

This shift reflected wider changes in British society and helped reshape the relationship between religion, community and public life.

Two historical factors in this period that contributed to the growth of secularism were the Communist Revolution in Russia in 1917 and the profound impact of the two World Wars.

Communist ideology generally opposed organised religion, viewing loyalty to the state and its political system as taking precedence over religious belief.

As communist governments came to power, many religious institutions faced restrictions and persecution.

Meanwhile, the First and Second World Wars brought loss and suffering to millions of families across Britain.

Many people lost loved ones, endured hardship, or witnessed the devastating consequences of conflict.

For some, these experiences strengthened their faith and reliance on God during difficult times.

For others, the suffering they witnessed led them to question traditional religious beliefs and the existence of a loving and caring deity.

As a result, the years following the wars saw significant changes in attitudes towards religion and faith across British society.

Video CLIP

We now have a short video clip for you to watch about Plymouth in the blitz that Steve found on YOUTUBE.

He loves the PATHE newsreels with their cut glass accents and found this clip for you to enjoy.

Churchill visits Plymouth (1941) – YOUTUBE – 1.04 minutes

Hymn 2

Hymn 2 is Number 233 in the Green Hymn Book called Others Call it God.

Part B

In the second part of the service, we look at the growth of British secularism in the 1950s and 1960s.

I want you to think of the 1980s BBC television adaptation of Miss Marple starring Joan Hickson, arguably the definitive portrayal of the character and, for many, the benchmark against which all others are judged.

Many people look back on this era with deep nostalgia, viewing 1950s Britain as the last decade before, in their eyes, everything began to go terribly wrong for this country.

Picture Reverend Leonard Clement, the vicar of St Mary Mead, chatting amiably with Miss Marple over a pot of tea on a warm summer's evening in the vicarage garden.

It is an image of tranquillity that remains deeply embedded in the British imagination.

That quaint and charming vision of the English village, with the parish church serving as the heart of community life, is a powerful and evocative one.

Indeed, it has proved so enduring that a number of contemporary right-wing political movements and parties, vying for influence and power, often invoke it as an idealised version of Britain to which they believe the nation should return.

The 1950s is often seen as the swan song of Britain as a global superpower.

The nation was now led by the young and glamorous Queen Elizabeth II and her dashing husband, the Duke of Edinburgh.

The Church remained an important part of daily life for many people, but the decade also marked the beginnings of a growing consumer culture, one of the key influences in Britain's gradual secularisation.

The 1950s witnessed the end of rationing and a general rise in living standards and prosperity.

New domestic appliances, such as washing machines and refrigerators, reduced the burden of household chores and gave families more free time than ever before.

Television rapidly became the dominant form of home entertainment, bringing with it a new world of advertising that constantly encouraged people to buy the latest products and embrace modern lifestyles.

As leisure time increased, weekends increasingly became associated with recreation and enjoyment rather than religious observance.

At the same time, a distinct youth culture began to emerge.

Whereas previous generations of teenagers often dressed much like their parents, young people in the 1950s developed their own fashions, music, and identity.

Just look at those wonderful and iconic styles of the era.

These social and cultural changes did not bring about an immediate decline in Christianity, but they marked the beginning of a profound shift in British society, one that would gradually transform Britain from a nation where Christian faith shaped much of public and private life into a far more secular society.

The Swinging Sixties marked the point at which the influence of the Church in British society entered a steep and seemingly irreversible decline.

Its authority over younger generations, which had once been taken for granted, was largely broken.

The 1960s were arguably the most radical and transformative decade of the twentieth century in terms of social and cultural change, particularly across the United States and Western Europe.

A countercultural revolution was underway, often referred to as the Age of Aquarius, giving rise to influential movements such as Civil Rights, Feminism, Gay Rights, and Environmentalism.

Many young people rejected what they saw as the conservatism, deference to authority, consumerism, and rigid social expectations of the 1950s.

To them, the Church was often perceived as part of the traditional establishment that upheld these values.

Rather than looking to religion for purpose and identity, many increasingly turned to music, friendships, popular culture, and personal experience as sources of meaning in their lives.

The decade also witnessed growing interest in non-Christian faiths and spiritual traditions.

Eastern religions and mysticism, in particular, became fashionable among some young people, a trend popularised in part by the influence of The Beatles.

At the same time, the Sexual Revolution challenged long-established moral conventions.

The introduction of the contraceptive pill, changing attitudes towards premarital relationships, the passing of the Abortion Act 1967, and the Sexual Offences Act 1967, which partially decriminalised homosexuality, all reflected a society increasingly making moral and social decisions through the lens of public policy, personal freedom, and individual rights rather than traditional Christian teaching.

Video CLIP

We now have a short video clip starring Michael Caine where he discusses the 1960s.

The swinging sixties with Michael Caine – BBC London News

YOUTUBE – 2.09 minutes

Reading

Instead of a reading, we now cross the Irish Sea for a short summary looking at the dramatic decline of the Church in the Republic of Ireland, a country where religion once exercised an extraordinary influence over both public and private life.

If you want to see an example of the decline of a church's influence in public life and politics, few countries illustrate it more clearly than Ireland.

Until relatively recently, Ireland was one of the most devoutly Catholic nations in the world.

The Church exercised enormous influence over Irish society, shaping not only religious life but also education, healthcare, social policy, and public morality.

For much of the twentieth century, the Catholic Church was woven into almost every aspect of Irish life and national identity.

Many young people in Ireland have moved away from Catholicism for a variety of reasons.

Among the most significant have been the devastating clerical sexual abuse scandals and the mistreatment of vulnerable women and children in institutions such as the Magdalene Laundries and Mother and Baby Homes.

These events severely damaged public trust in the Catholic Church and its moral authority.

At the same time, Irish society has undergone profound social and cultural change.

A growing liberal outlook among the population has often been at odds with traditional Catholic teachings on issues such as same-sex relationships, reproductive rights, priestly celibacy, and the ordination of women.

In recent decades, Ireland has legalised divorce, introduced same-sex marriage through a popular referendum, and voted to permit abortion in the early stages of pregnancy.

These developments represented a decisive shift in public opinion and demonstrated a willingness among many Irish voters to move away from the Church's historic influence over social policy.

The election of Leo Varadkar as Taoiseach (T-SHUCH) in 2017, as an openly gay man and the son of an immigrant, further symbolised the transformation of modern Ireland into a more socially liberal and diverse society.

This change is also reflected in the priesthood. Decades ago, many Catholic priests serving in Britain were Irish born.

Today, vocations increasingly come from countries such as Poland, the Philippines, and Nigeria.

As a result, the once-powerful link between Irish national identity and Catholicism has weakened considerably, with church attendance and religious affiliation showing a marked generational decline.

Interlude

Video CLIP

We now have a video clip for our interlude, presented by the National Churches Trust.

The National Churches Trust is a UK charity dedicated to supporting, protecting and promoting church buildings of historic, architectural and community importance across the country.

There is also another organisation, the Churches Conservation Trust, which looks after around 350 historic church buildings that are no longer used for regular worship, ensuring that these important parts of our religious and architectural heritage are preserved for future generations.

Our video gives us an opportunity to reflect not only on the changing role of the Church in British society, but also on the remarkable buildings that centuries of Christian worship have left behind.

Every Church Counts - A six-point plan to save the UK's church buildings.

YOUTUBE – 5.27 minutes

Part C

In the final part of this service, we turn our attention to two major events in Britain, from the 1980s through to the early 2020s, that had a significant impact on the life and influence of the Church.

The first change is in the way we shop, which has been transformed beyond recognition over the last fifty years.

Sunday is no longer the quiet day it once was. When most members of our congregation were young, virtually every shop was closed, and Sunday was widely observed as a day of rest.

Today, most shops open on Sundays, albeit for shorter hours, reflecting a society that has become increasingly focused on convenience and consumer choice.

Thanks to the rise of the internet, we now live in a 24-hour shopping culture.

With just a few clicks, we can buy almost anything at any time of the day or night. Shopping is no longer limited by opening hours, and the traditional rhythm of the week has changed dramatically as a result.

Sunday has in reality become little more than a second Saturday.

There was a time when Sunday brought families together.

With most shops closed and fewer distractions competing for people's attention, families were more likely to spend time together, whether at home, visiting relatives, or attending church. Sadly, for many people, that is no longer the norm.

There are still many in Britain who believe that most shops should close on Sundays to give workers and families a shared opportunity to spend time together including a campaign group called Keep Sunday Special.

It raises an interesting question: would we really suffer if general retail shops were closed for one day a week?

As long as local convenience stores remained open for essential purchases, most of us would probably cope perfectly well.

Cinemas, theatres, restaurants, and other leisure venues could continue to operate, but I suspect many people would not object if large retail stores closed their doors on Sundays.

The difficulty for retailers is that they face fierce competition from online shopping.

Profit margins can be tight, and for some businesses the loss of a single day's trade could make the difference between survival and closure.

In an age when consumers can shop online twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, many retailers feel they simply cannot afford to give up any opportunity to make a sale.

Whether that has improved our quality of life is another question entirely.

While we have gained convenience, we may also have lost something valuable: a day that felt different from the rest of the week, a day for family, community, worship, and rest.

The Covid-19 pandemic of 2020 to early 2022 was arguably the most disruptive event to religious life in Britain since the Second World War.

In March 2020, a global pandemic brought much of the world to a standstill as countries entered periods of lockdown in an effort to slow the spread of the virus.

Places of worship of all faiths were affected. Churches, synagogues, mosques, temples, and other religious institutions were forced to close their doors for long periods, bringing public worship and many community activities to an unprecedented halt.

Like countless congregations across the country, our own church was suddenly unable to meet in person.

Faced with this challenge, our minister at the time, Kate, embraced modern technology to maintain contact with her congregation.

Church life continued throughout those difficult months, although in a very different form.

At first, we received emails from our minister, and then each Sunday she began broadcasting a short video service from her kitchen.

Our wonderful church reopened for a few months around September and October 2020, but with all the restrictions we came to know so well: masks, social distancing and people carefully spaced apart.

We closed again in November, reopened briefly in December, and then shut once more from the beginning of January until around May or June 2021.

During that particularly hard winter lockdown of 2021, Kate would come into the church completely alone to film a service, which was then broadcast on our website and YouTube channel.

It was a strange time, wasn't it?

Steve says that he found that third lockdown, between January and April 2021, the most difficult of all.

Working full-time from home, day after day, he began to feel incredibly isolated.

He then discovered that St Andrew's Minster, a nearby church, was opening for Sunday worship. Places of worship in England were permitted to remain open during that third lockdown, provided strict Covid precautions were followed.

And strict they certainly were. You had to wear a mask, numbers were limited because everyone had to be spaced apart, there was no congregational singing, and you had to book your place online beforehand.

Every Sunday the minister would warn the congregation that they could not guarantee the church would still be open the following week. But it was. Week after week, after week, they opened their doors.

Although Steve would not describe himself as especially religious, those Sunday visits became enormously important to him.

It was the routine, the chance to see and speak to another human being, and simply the feeling of doing something normal again.

It gave him a sense of stability at a time when very little in life seemed stable. He says he will always be grateful to St Andrew's for that. Quite simply, it helped get him through.

But when the pandemic finally receded, church life did not simply return to how it had been before.

Many people had become accustomed to not attending church every Sunday.

Others had discovered the convenience of watching services online, through Zoom, YouTube or a church website.

What had begun as an emergency response gradually became a permanent part of church life.

Today, many churches continue to broadcast or upload their services online.

In some ways, churchgoing has become a little like online shopping: you choose the option that suits you.

You can come to church and listen in person. You can join the service live on Zoom from the comfort of your own home, possibly still in your pyjamas. Or you can watch it later on YouTube whenever it is convenient.

The pandemic did not end church life, but it fundamentally changed the way many people experience it.

Thank you for listening

Chalice is extinguished

Closing Music – (only if time permits)

Our closing music is a Video CLIP from Channel 4 news about what happens to unused churches.

Channel 4 News – What happens to unused churches? YOUTUBE 3.19 minutes.

Notices

Tea and Coffee