

Today we are all being counted...it's national Census day when our government surveys the numbers of people living in every household and collects information, such as their ages and nationalities. The results are used in the planning and budgeting for schools, rubbish collection and health services.

There's been a census every 10 years since 1801, with the exception of 1941 because of the War. 1921 none in Ireland because of their civil war.

Scotland have chosen to delay their count until 2022 because of Covid.

The numbers have got bigger...

1801 population 8.9m

2011 just greater than 63m

Now around 66m but we will find out!

Censuses are common throughout history. They're a useful tool for the purposes of taxation and subsequent funding of public services. There are x3 of note in the Bible...

Earliest recorded was just after the Israelites had escaped from Egypt. God commanded it, so that the 12 tribes of the nation would provide their fair share of the animals that were sacrificed in the tabernacle. Moses did the counting and its results are found in the aptly named book of Numbers.

In the first book of Chronicles there's a record of the census that David ordered. He wanted, it seems, to know how many fighting men he had so he could boast about his power. God was not pleased with David and it didn't end well for the nation.

The third census is the one that we hear about every Christmas - the one that Caesar Augustus ordered to be taken of the entire Roman world when Quirinius was governor of Syria. It was the reason why a heavily pregnant Mary travelled with Joseph to Bethlehem and gave birth to Jesus in the city of his ancestor David.

Perhaps numbers feel scary, if we feel maths isn't our strong subject!...Counting leads to numbers and over the last year of the pandemic our world has been awash with them - and the resulting statistics and claims that are said to be based on data. Bamboozling!? In the last few years, Grahame and I have been helped by listening to the radio 4 program 'More or Less' presented by Tim Harford. An economist, a writer and a gifted communicator in how to delve into the way numbers are sourced and presented. He often asks the question, "Is that a very big number?"

His latest book is *How to Make the World Add Up* : 'Statistics are vital in helping us tell stories...If we are willing to let them, they help us see things about the world around us ...that we would not be able to see in any other way.'

Numbers help us make sense of the world.

We count in church - how people many come.

I find myself every week at Zoom noticing how many 'participants' we have - recently the numbers have been regularly in the eighties. From memory in the early weeks it was 50-60. Being 'successful' is not simply about the headcount, but if supposing the participants had dwindled to may 10 to 20 each week we would have started asking ourselves serious questions about what we were doing!

Precovid, a count was done every year over 4 Sundays in October to give what is called our "Usual Sunday Attendance". This number is important - influences the size of our Parish's Common Fund payment to the Diocese : our contribution to the running of Anglican church.

In recent weeks, the PCC have been working on the Parish Profile which will inform Bishop David and the Diocese about what the church here is like as they seek to appoint our new vicar. Yes, there are numbers, because they tell part of our story - how many come all the groups that meet, how many baptisms there are each year, and inevitably how much money we have in our accounts!

Counting the numbers happened in the early church - in the book of Acts we learn how the number of believers grew as the gospel was shared in Jerusalem.

'About 120' when Matthias was chosen to replace Judas, growing to 'about 3000' on the day of Pentecost.

By the beginning of chapter 4, there were about 5000 believers, not even counting women and children.

After that it must have got difficult to count everyone, because 'The numbers of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly'.

Then and now each number represents a person and the most important reason for counting is that every person matters to God.

Jesus counted too...

He counted outstretched arms as much as heads; he counted people on the edge of society and the lost. He focussed on 5000 (that's a big number!) men, women and children out in the wilderness who needed feeding. He told stories about the one lost son among two, the one lost coin among ten and the one lost sheep from a flock of 100. He might say, "The shepherd needed to count the 99 to know that one sheep was missing!"

Embedded in our gospel reading today is a number that is definitely very big, yet may not even seem like a number...ALL

*When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all men to myself.*

All is the number that makes sense of what Jesus was about to do and the enormity of what he did on the cross.

When the Greeks arrived to ask for Jesus, the 'not yet' in his mind became 'the hour has come' to do what my Father sent me for.

It was to be the fulfilment of what the Lord declared in Jeremiah, "The time is coming when....I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."

All the wickedness and all the unnumbered sins of all mankind stretches our minds to the utmost limit of understanding, but somehow these were carried by Jesus to the cross and nailed there as he died.

Perhaps over the final two weeks of Lent we can let that number sink in once again. Each of us is counted in those ALL for whom Jesus died, those ALL who Jesus longs to draw in to be children of God and bring his light and life and hope to the world that needs it so very much.

Lesley Brown