

St Nicholas Parish Church, Prestwick

The Thought for the Week

Sunday 20th March 2022

Well, before I forget, I must sit down and fill out the Census after I have written these few words, as this forthcoming Sunday is Census Day in Scotland!

The first Census that I have any memory of was the one in 1971 as my Mum was one of the Census enumerators. Designated to the village of Houston in Renfrewshire, she was in her element as, before she was married, she worked in the Office of ICI at Crosslee, the neighbouring community to Houston, and so she knew so many of the locals and their families very well.

One sunny afternoon, when I had no lectures at University, I drove her across from our house in Johnstone in my wee white Vauxhall Viva (how proud I was of my first car with its red seats, until the engine went on fire a few years later, but that's another story) and I sat and read whilst she went along South Street, North Street, Manse Crescent, knocking on doors and being invited in to carry out her remit. Little did I know how long she was going to spend in folks' homes, as she caught up with people she hadn't seen in years! Now you know why I am such a blether – I inherited that gene from my dear wee Mum! Fifty years later, I am so relieved that, in those days, Houston was a sleepy Renfrewshire village, whereas today, it is a burgeoning community, with swathes of new homes, a dormitory for Glasgow!

In 1981, she was appointed to conduct the Census in Howwood, but that didn't take her nearly so long, as she didn't know so many folk in that village!

The Census is held, of course, every ten years, the last one taking place in 2011, and this one was postponed from last year because of Covid.

The form tells us that “the Census collects information about where you stay and the people who stay there.... that information helps make decisions about how public money will be spent in schools, road, healthcare and other important services in your local community.”

It covers such topics as household relationships; employment, education and qualifications; religion and ethnic group.

In the Census just over ten years ago, over 390,000 people in the UK identified themselves in their religious affiliation as “Jedi Knights”, fictional characters who are guardians of peace and justice in the “StarWars” galaxy, able to wield a supernatural power known as the Force! That figure is more than the number of Jewish and Buddhist figures combined. Out of that total, 14,000 of them are living in Scotland. Well, I really don't know if any of them are living in Coylebank to be honest!

The story is told of a Census being held in the 1950s and this particular enumerator climbed the four flights of steps in the tenement block in Partick, just off Dumbarton Road, in the west end of Glasgow, ready to start at the top and work his way down.

He knocked on the first door and there was a great scurrying of feet and quite a commotion on the other side, and by and by the lady of the house, looking quite harassed, opened the door, wiping her wet hands on her apron.

“Good afternoon,” said the official, “I am here for the Census. Could you possibly tell me how many children live in this house?”

“Well,” began the lady, “there’s Jimmy and Andrew, then Christine and Peggy. Then comes wee Davie and his twin sister, Annie...”

“Excuse me, Madam,” he interrupted, “I am not interested in names. What I want is numbers.”

“Listen, Mister,” said the mother of the house, rather annoyed at his officious manner, “there are nae numbers live here, only names!”

Sometimes the Kirk seems to be obsessed with numbers, and each year the Session Clerk has to fill in a statistical return to send to Edinburgh about the number of Communicants on the Roll, the number of children in the Sunday School and attending worship, the number of Elders and Office - bearers. Often Mark Twain’s wise words come to mind that there are “lies, damned lies, and statistics”, a phrase describing the persuasive power of statistics to bolster weak arguments.

Even in mediaeval times, the Church was infatuated by numbers – about the number of those who would get into heaven and the number of those who wouldn’t. At that time, the vast majority of Christians operated on the assumption that they were not going to be among that number who would be “saved.”

And the idea that not everyone gets to be in that number of the redeemed did not pass away with the Middle Ages.

Many Christians still expect that number to be limited.

In the final book of the Bible, the Book of the Revelation of St John the Divine, written by John when he was a prisoner for his faith on the island of Patmos, the Devil’s island of the ancient world, St John speaks of the number of 144,000, the final total of the number of men and women who will be admitted to heaven. These are the ones who will be “sealed for God”, marked as “God’s own.” These will be the ones with the “stars in their crowns” as the old Gospel song has it.

It is that precise number that today the Jehovah’s Witnesses believe will be the final total. Yet, it always surprises me that they go round knocking on doors to encourage and inviting folk to join them. Are they not a tad apprehensive that the more of them there are, the less chance they will have of being the chosen ones?

When you read your Church History books, you soon ascertain that every denomination down through the years has seen itself as “God’s Elect”.

There is a doggerel verse I love which I often quote,

“We are God’s chosen few;

All others will be damned –

There is no place in heaven for you,

We can’t have heaven crammed.”

You know, ruling people in or out of heaven, is not some quaint innocuous theological game.

It isn’t merely theoretical; it has consequences.

If someone thinks you are unworthy of the next life, they undoubtedly think you are unworthy of this one too.

The annals of history are littered with the battered bodies of everybody's excluded infidels and heathens.

What matters is what Jesus has to say on it.

Our Lord makes it very simple.

In that Parable that He told about the separation of the sheep and the goats, He said, "As much as you have fed the hungry and clothed the naked and visited the prisoner and tended the sick and welcomed the stranger; whatever you did for the least of My brothers and sisters, you did for Me.

There it is – no theological wrangling; quite simply, being there for others in compassion and love and mercy includes you in that number.

That, thank God, is Jesus' way of conducting His Census!

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