

Sunday 21 March 2021 may, or may not, be a memorable date for you. But, for all of us in Northern Ireland, it had the significance of being Census Day. In this jurisdiction, the Census happens only once every 10 years. The explanatory leaflet issued to households mentioned that the information collected is used to help make decisions about how services such as education, transport and health are planned and funded. The Northern Ireland Statistics & Research Agency (NISRA) website indicates that publication of Northern Ireland-level population and household estimates is planned for summer 2022.

Censuses are, of course, nothing new. You may well be familiar with some of these in the Bible. The registration exercise ordered by Caesar Augustus, and described in Luke 2, is perhaps the best known. However, what's in my mind for this editorial isn't that. In fact, rather than any count in Scripture, I have been impressed by some biblical references to things that can't be counted. Three of these are found in Psalm 40.

Innumerable Problems Confronting Man

"Innumerable evils" – these words are used by David in Psalm 40:12. He says that the evils have surrounded him. Some translators take the 'evils' to be troubles. Do *you* feel surrounded by so many troubles that you have lost count of them? See how the psalmist responds: he looks to the Lord. In verse 11, he acknowledges the Lord as the source of tender mercies and loving-kindness. He also acknowledges the Lord's truth as being able to provide constant protection. In verse 13, his prayer is urgent, and includes a recognition that deliverance is the Lord's prerogative.

We can see from verse 12 that David is not solely beset with 'evils', but with his own iniquities (i.e. sins) – these are "more than the hairs of [his] head", and he is "not able to look up". In a similar vein, Job exclaims, "How many are mine iniquities and sins? Make me to know my transgression and my sin" (Job 13:23). We would all do well to ask this. It is a scriptural principle that God punishes iniquity: e.g. see Amos 3:2. Indeed, the same Hebrew word denotes both 'iniquity' and 'punishment'. That is why we need a Saviour! Referring prophetically to the Saviour's sin-atoning work upon the cross, Isaiah wrote: "He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed" (Isaiah 53:5). Under the new covenant, God says of His believing people, "their sins and iniquities will I remember no more" (Heb. 10:17).

Innumerable Projects Completed By God

In Psalm 40:5, David writes of “[God’s] wonderful works which [He has] done”. He first says they are ‘many’, then that he cannot recount them in order to God, and finally that they are more than can be numbered. It seems that, the more he considers what God had done, the more he realises its vastness and multiplicity. Commenting on this verse, Spurgeon writes, “Creation, providence, and redemption, teem with wonders as the sea with life.” Under ‘Creation’, we could consider the stars: “tell [count] the stars, if thou be able to number them” (Gen. 15:5); or the intricacies of the human body (Psalm 139:14). Under ‘providence’, we could think of how God preserved Joseph, and over-ruled so often in the details of his life, bringing him through many trials, and all with an over-arching purpose (Acts 7:10). Under ‘redemption’, we could reflect on the vast number of the redeemed (Rev. 5:9; Rev. 7:9), the comprehensive forgiveness they experience (Luke 7:47; Col. 2:13-14), and the great price that was paid by the Redeemer (Matt. 20:28; 1 Peter 1:18-19) ...

Innumerable Plans Conceived By God

Immediately after referring to God’s wonderful works, David writes of God’s thoughts (Psalm 40:5). The word ‘thoughts’ includes purposes and plans. David links God’s thoughts toward us with His works. Matthew Henry observes, “All His wonderful works are the product of His thoughts to us-ward. They are the projects of infinite wisdom, the designs of everlasting love”. Jeremiah 29:11 is a well-known verse that refers to God’s thoughts towards His people. In context, these thoughts, “of peace, and not of evil”, were to those undergoing divine chastisement. It is remarkable, and deeply humbling, to realise, as David did, that God has “thoughts toward us” (Psalm 40:5, NKJV). Here’s an extract from another psalm where he rejoices in this:-

“How precious also are thy thoughts unto me, O God! how great is the sum of them! If I should count them, they are more in number than the sand” (Psalm 139:17-18).

Notice how personal it is: thoughts unto me. Take time to read Psalm 139, and you’ll see that David recounts the Lord’s deep knowledge of him, and care for him, right from his earliest existence in his mother’s womb. No wonder that he describes God’s thoughts as ‘precious’, and their number as ‘vast’!

Paul, too, reflects on God's thoughts. Taking a global and eternal perspective, he is inspired to write:-

“O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out! For who hath known the mind of the Lord? or who hath been his counsellor? Or who hath first given to him, and it shall be recompensed unto him again? For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen.”

(Romans 11:33-36)

Amen.