

# You Count!



Every ten years, since 1801, a national census has taken place. For centuries, governments around the world have used a census to obtain information from individuals that can be used as a reference point to gauge shifts and trends within a population. This information is a necessary tool, for both national and local governments, in helping to plan future services and facilities and to develop strategic policies that will benefit citizens. It is, for example, important to have a sense of the overall size of a population when it comes to questions of taxation and needs for housing. The census in 2021 showed a rise in population over the past decade for England and Wales of 6.3% with a population of 11.1 million over 65 and 10.4 million under the age of 15. The shift in demographics has implications for government, as we are all aware, in providing for ageing communities and the provision of more social care etc.

In recent times the questions asked in a census have become more contentious, not least when asking about gender identity and religious affiliation. Where questions would in the past have been answered straightforwardly, the option 'prefer not to answer' is now a given. Suspicion about how data is used, and increasingly abused by some, and the need to protect personal information, a right now enshrined in law under GDPR, make for devising census questions a more sensitive business than ever before.

What questions will be asked in 2031? How do you feel about filling in a government questionnaire knowing that it is a criminal offence not to do so?

This act of compulsion is part of the Christmas story, even if historically factually incorrect. Mary and Joseph are forced to be counted. They must travel to Bethlehem because the Roman Emperor, Augustus, wants to maximise who needs to pay taxes. In this regard, Mary and Joseph are simply a number – a common experience when it comes to paying taxation. The problem with being reduced to being a number is the dehumanising effect this has on the soul. The prospect is dispiriting – left to being nothing more than being there to be utilised for someone else's gain.

Fortunately, this is only the beginning of the journey for the Holy Family and not the end. Gathered together in the stable, made warm by the generosity of a publican, surrounded by the transforming love of the birth of a baby – let all Heaven sing - Mary and Joseph know that, despite all their trials and tribulations, they matter to God. For God loved the world so much that he made Mary and Joseph know that they counted – so much more than a number.

*I pray that this Christmastide You too will know that you matter – know that You too are so much more than a number!*

God Bless

*Revd Mark Bailey*