

Sunday 16th October 2022
Numbers 1:1-4, 17-19, 45-50 & Matthew 28:16-20
Rev.Melville Crosthwaite
Brightons Parish Church

Sermon keypoints:

- Gathering
- Giving
- Groups

If like me you're a fan of tennis and, in particular, Andy Murray, you'll understand why I say that as long as he is winning it's a joy to watch but as soon as the score is not going his way well, I don't know about you, but I often have to leave the room. I can't bear the tension.

In any sport from football or rugby to ice hockey, cricket to tennis, if you don't count the goals, the tries, the runs or the points, you don't know who's winning.

Well, what about the church? How can you tell who's winning in the church?

I can remember when every Church of Scotland had to count the number of people attending communion at least once annually and send it into Presbytery who in turn sent it in to 121 and that exercise was supposed to be a good way of keeping count of how many people attend a church regularly. So, someone who is in church every Sunday for example but happened to miss the twice or thrice yearly communion because they were away on holiday or they were unwell, well, they were counted as a non-attender whereas someone could roll up once a year just to keep their name on the congregational role and be counted as regularly attending. What a piece of nonsense! Thankfully, those days are gone.

We need to be wise when it comes to counting numbers in church. Obsessing over numbers as a so-called measure of success can cause wrongful pride. Which church do you go to? Oh, I go to !!!!!!! church. Oh, how many people go on a Sunday? Um, just a few. Oh well, I go to Brightons Church and every Sunday there's at least 200 in church.

I/we wish. Well, sometimes anyway!

Rural congregations, for example, have no opportunity whatsoever to gather in that kind of number of people. But we can go too far in the opposite direction, if we dismiss keeping numbers, keeping track of numbers all together.

Interestingly, in his book *Anatomy of a Revived Church*, consultant Tom Rayner discovered, completely unexpectedly, and I might add, that revitalized congregations were counting. They were keeping track of their numbers.

So, continuing the series based on this book that Scott began two Sundays back, and I'm doing what I'm told Scott, if you're watching this morning, we come to *Who's Counting?*, that's the title of my sermon, *Who's Counting?*, and we begin firstly with Gathering.

Now, just in case anyone is thinking this isn't very biblical can I remind you of our first reading from the Old Testament that Margo read to us. Numbers is called Numbers, in English it's not known as that, in the Hebrew but it's known as Numbers in the English translations because it takes its title from the first few verses. As Margo read to us, we heard that, instructed by The Lord, Moses was told 'You and Aaron are to number by their divisions, all the men in Israel 20 years old or more who are able to serve in the army.' and that was in verse 3.

Now, let me give you a little bit of background to Numbers because it's one of those books that well, if we're honest, we don't read that much you know with the people who decide 'Right, I'm going to read the Bible from the very beginning.' Genesis, Exodus and then they get to Leviticus and yeah, the struggle and of course Numbers comes next so maybe skip over it but it's actually quite an interesting book. It came at a pivotal point in the history of God's people. Having been rescued from Egyptian slavery, the people of God arrived at Mount Sinai. God had provided for their spiritual and their physical needs. He'd given them the Covenant Law by which to live and a Tent of Meeting in which to worship and also a system of sacrifice to ensure forgiveness of sins. So, in Numbers, the people of God, the Israelites, are finally ready to make the journey to Canaan, the Promised Land.

Now, counting the number of men suitable for army service was part of that preparation. To set off along the way they would learn some valuable lessons about holy living, the importance of good leadership, the dangers of temptation and perhaps, most importantly, that God is gracious and keeps His promises.

Now isn't that bang up to date for the 21st century? The kind of things that we need to know as individual followers of Jesus but also as a church community and congregation and family.

Our aim, of course, is not to enter into the land of Canaan but, as Jesus commanded us in our second reading, our aim is this 'Therefore go and make disciples of all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them everything I have commanded you.' That's Matthew 28 verse 19 as Margo read. That is our aim.

Just for a moment, to go back to the people of Israel, in order to ensure that they could defend themselves Moses counted the Israelite men who could fight should that be needed and, as we know, the journey to the promised land did not go rather smoothly but rather lonely, rather long, longer than this sermon is going to be, 40 years exact and well, a lot of problems on the way. But, in order to work out if what we are doing in church is actually reaching people outwith the church, we actually also need to count numbers.

Now, one group of church leaders, sensing that things in their congregation were declining, called this consultant who wrote the book to ask for help, and he analyzed

their Sunday worship attendance over the past 10 years. In the words of one elder the results were breathtakingly shocking.

Now, to their credit the leaders of that congregation didn't panic nor did they stick their heads in the sand and refuse to change, you know that well-used phrase in the Church of Scotland 'Well, if it sees me oot, it'll day fine!' Well, actually, it won't. They didn't panic, they didn't refuse to change, instead they decided to take seriously their mission to their community and they began to prayerfully plan. Their focus changed. In other words, from being inward to being outward.

So, by engaging with where people's actual needs were, showing that they cared, sharing God's love slowly, new people started to come and they kept track of church attendance because they reckoned that if what they were doing was working then it would increase and, in fact, in that congregation it did, So, Gathering is my first point.

My second point is Giving. Financial giving can make more people more nervous than any other subject in church life especially if that congregation is behind budget and it can also make more people more apathetic if that congregation is doing well. Now, I don't know if Brightons still has a Deacons Court. Have you still got? You do, well, in Larbert East we had a Deacons Court as well, but we changed over to the new constitution a couple of years before I retired in preparation for what was coming but a number of years ago a lovely godly church member left quite a large legacy to the church. It was actually a quarter of a million pounds and that's, I can say that because it's out in the public domain. When the Deacons Court learned about this, I saw the pound signs appear in their eyes and I told them, I'm usually quite a gentle person, but on this occasion, I was less than gentle, and I said to them 'I can see what you're thinking so, if you think that money is going to be used to pretty up the church building, or if you think you're going to invest it in something like the lottery then you'll be looking for a new minister.' Well, to their credit, they realized what I was saying. That money was invested with the Church of Scotland and is used to finance 80 percent through its interest, 80 percent of the salary of the part-time family worker in the church. Parish Outreach worker. So, money can be a blessing if it's used in a godly way.

I know of other congregations, I was ministering one who received a legacy and the congregational board in that church sat back and folded their arms, whereas the other congregation with which it was linked wasn't so, wasn't so fortunate in one sense and they worked hard and they were the ones who increased their financial giving and saw life in the church. You see, congregational giving is an indicator of leading trends of the spiritual state of the congregation and, interestingly, in this book, Rainer discovered that people often stop giving before they stop coming to church altogether. So, if someone is struggling for whatever reason and stops giving it is a pastoral matter not just a financial one.

So, before we rub our hands together and start counting the offering, here are three simple principles to note that come from the book, and they're biblical as well, and I share them with you in the hope that your Deacons Court will take them on board and

prayerfully consider them. It may be that you're already doing them so forgive me if I'm doing repeat, saying something that you're already doing.

But the first is a systematic approach to first-time givers works wonders. People need to know that they are appreciated. That's actually a Biblical principle, to show someone, you know, to thank them, to be kind to them.

Secondly, tie money to mission. Using an offering to showcase how givers are supporting God's work is the surest way of making sure that it continues to be supported.

And thirdly, thank generous givers because it appears that some people don't even know if anyone in their congregation cares that they are supporting their congregations. Now, I'm not saying that about Brightons. That is just a general principle that has been discovered in the study of the anatomy of revitalized churches.

So, that leads us thirdly to Groups, I hope you notice the alliteration Gathering, Giving, Groups, specially done for you. Seven out of ten revitalized churches also tracked attendance at groups associated with their congregations.

Now, take, for example, James had been a minister at a certain church for 12 years, it was in decline before he was called to be the minister but that decline continued gradually in his time too, so the church decided to get serious about Jesus' command in Matthew 28. and to make some more disciples. They track Church attendance but also Church groups. It enabled them to see where the greater spiritual fruit was growing in terms of the groups connected with the congregation and they also discovered, incidentally, that those who had stayed with the church through its decline were all part, every single one of them, was part of an existing group within the church. So, they learned from this that pouring resources into groups that were working was the way ahead instead of wasting energy and time on those groups that weren't, and the growth in that congregation was slow but steady. The trend reversed and it went up. Everybody in the congregation didn't have to do everything or go to everything. Remember our passage in Numbers where the Levites the members of the tribe of Levi, the Levites, weren't counted as fighting men because their job was to take care of the worship side and the tent of The Lord's presence. In other words, people should use their God-given gifts where they are most suited. Not forced into doing that which isn't their gifting. So, if you aren't good with children, resist all pressure to go and teach children. If you aren't good at finance like me, get your wife to do it and make sure you've got people in the congregation who know what they're doing. We don't have to do everything. We don't have to go to every group but there's all always something where we can become more involved and use our gifts and that way, the church family grows.

So, who's counting? It's a proven fact that revived churches are. They are counting people who are gathering for worship and incidentally, remember to include those who are worshipping online because there are still people who, after the pandemic, are worried about coming back to church and there are people who are two and a half years

older and a wee bit more frail but they can still watch online and, if you're watching today, you are part of the worshipping community of Brightons Church just as much as everyone sitting in the pew.

So, growing churches are counting people who are gathering for worship. They're also counting how people are giving financially and of their time and talents, and also the groups in which people are involved.

This is not about counting for counting's sake. Nor this about counting so we can boast about our increased church attendance. This is about counting for accountability. We are all accountable to The Lord, for how we are serving Him in our church congregations.

Now, Rainer did not expect to find this aspect of counting amongst churches that were revitalized but, when he did and thought about it, it made sense because, if what a church is doing for example in worship is still seeing decline then it isn't working. Hard questions need to be asked and that isn't just about the minister, in case anybody thinks that I'll blame Scott.

Do you know, a number of years ago, my wife and I went to a church, I won't say which church it is, it was in Falkirk Presbytery where I knew, as Presbytery Chaplain, that the minister was struggling and when we arrived at the door there were two elders that were greeting people and I knew who these Elders were because one was a Presbytery Elder and the other was an additional Elder on Presbytery and when they saw us walking towards them this is what they did - they looked us up and down, folded their arms and turned their backs. That's true. An utter disgrace! No wonder the minister was struggling. And that's why what's happening in church is not just the minister, it's the entire congregation. I can't tell you what a joy it is to hear you singing this morning. It's absolutely amazing. I can sense that you're worshipping The Lord.

So, if what's happening in worship is not working, it's everyone's responsibility, together. It's about the entire congregation, to seek where God is leading because you see, what really matters, is making disciples of Jesus. It's what he commanded us to do, and that's why I'm going to reissue my challenge that I raised with the children earlier. Those people that you've thought about that you could invite to church. Please do it. If they say no, then you've done your part. Maybe God will work on them. But maybe go back in a wee while and try again and pray for them.

You see, let's not forget that along with His command to make more disciples, Jesus also said this 'And surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age.'

Amen