

# Sunday 2nd June 2024

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[ 0 : 00 ] I do have numbers open. We won't be going through it verse by verse in this sermon. Let's just pray before we start. Father, we thank you that you know the human heart better than anyone. I thank you that you know our hearts here today better than anyone.

Please will you do us good. Please will you bless us. Please will you direct our eyes to your loveliness, your holiness and to your son the Lord Jesus.

We pray that in Jesus' name. Amen. First slide. Numbers sound boring, don't they? Especially if you're not a numbers kind of person or an engineer.

But they're really not. They're incredibly powerful things. In fact, they can define things. In fact, start defining you if you're not careful.

The last number of likes on your Insta post or your Snapchat convo. It's a bit dangerous, isn't it?

Here's a few more examples. Number one.

[ 1 : 08 ] That number means something, doesn't it? It's one of the defining dates of the last century. What about this one? Anybody know what that number is?

If you're in the NHS, you might know. That's the number of hospitalisations in 2023. So that number, 19,000, 19 million?

Every one of those numbers represents somebody cared for, hospitalised, treated by the NHS. It's a powerful number, isn't it? There's a set of dates which defines a life.

Date of birth, date of death. Fairly powerful, isn't it? Or how about this one? Someone who's really made their number work for them. That's Cristiano Ronaldo, in case you didn't know.

And his number's basically become a brand. Or this one, possibly the most defining number in history. Numbers do matter, don't they?

[ 2 : 13 ] And the trouble is, you can end up swinging between this feeling of, well, that's all I am. Just a number. A historical statistic.

Or somewhere maybe slightly deeper in our psyche that we don't really want to admit. Thinking, yes, I am a number. And that number is one. I'm number one.

In my world. And we can't really explain why this one is wrong and why that one's probably not such a good idea. And it's really hard to find some balance somewhere in the middle. Isn't it?

How can we get away from that, I'm just a number, or I'm number one, to somewhere where we matter, we know our value, but also we know our place?

Well, into that problem God speaks. Numbers chapter one, the Lord spoke to Moses. And those words occur again and again in Numbers.

[ 3 : 13 ] I'm going to do something that I've never done before in church. And I may never do again, depending on how this goes. I'm going to do a card trick. Because I'm not very good at card tricks, I'm going to need some help.

Can I have a volunteer? Don't worry, you won't have to do anything more difficult than pick a card. That helps. Yes, okay, Annika, thank you. I thought for a minute it was going to be nobody there.

Okay. By the way, I should just show you, this is how amateur I am. It's a real pack of cards, ordinary pack of cards, 52. Okay, in there. Is this a pack of cards?

Can you just verify that for me? Yeah. Good, okay. Could you please pick a card for me?

Whichever one you like. Yep, that one's fine. Absolutely. Can you show it to everybody else, please?

I'm just going to turn my back to make sure that nobody can see it. Everybody can see it, rather, apart from me. Right, put it back. Thank you very much. You may stay here for just a moment.

[ 4 : 13 ] Oh, you thought you were going then, didn't you? I'm just going to pull your card out of the pack, okay? Okay. Do you think I can do this? Sure. Not a ringing vote of confidence, was it?

This is your card. Was that your card? Thank you. What a wonderful volunteer. Give her a round of applause. Thank you. But this is the point.

Okay, you may feel like you're just one in a pack of 52, and we all look exactly the same. Why would God see me, know me, when God says, that was your card?

All right, so if you remember nothing else today, just remember that. As we look at our passage, God shows us that we're more than a statistic, more than a number. But we're not number one either.

But we have a place in his plan. Okay, so bear that in mind as we go through today's passage. God knows our number, and he gives us our place. We're going to deal with that in sort of three questions.

[ 5 : 18 ] First question, am I just a number? Let's start with that, because we've yet to see that we're not. If you read through chapters one to four, then you will have noticed some phrases keep coming back.

They keep repeating, don't they? And one of them is that God's people were counted. Very simple. That's the whole point, really, isn't it, of this first chapter and a half?

God's people were counted. And you know the Bible counts in families. Did you pick that up as we read that first section? The Bible counts in families. In this case, families were represented by men 20 years old or more.

And we'll see why that is in a moment. But what that means is that every person, whether it's directly or indirectly, who is in God's people, is taken into account. Did you get that?

Every person represented by 20-year-old men was counted at this place, at this time. Because they all count in God's eyes.

[ 6 : 15 ] And second, if you were reading along, you will have noticed that the other phrase that occurs again and again is that people were listed by name. Listed by name.

So they're not just a number. They have a name. And in fact, that name is important enough to God to be known, recorded in the Bible, and remembered.

See, we count. And God knows us by name. We count. You might be thinking, why were they counted exactly?

Well, there are two reasons. But I think the first reason is the one that Ian referred to at the beginning. They were counted so that they would know who needed looking after. Who needed to be cared for.

Who needed to be accounted for by the leadership. Just like we do. You know, when we take kids out to their groups or on a school trip or whatever it is. You do a head count, don't you? You count them in.

[ 7 : 13 ] You count them out. Hopefully the numbers add up. Beginning and end. Because then you know you haven't lost any. Just like Jesus talks about with the parable of the lost sheep.

In the New Testament story that Jesus tells. One hundred sheep. The shepherd knows that there are a hundred. And he counts them in. Gets to ninety-nine. One missing.

How does he know unless he counts them? One missing. What does he do? He goes after that sheep, doesn't he? Unless they've been counted. Would he have known?

Of course, Jesus is the good shepherd. The one who goes after even the one lost sheep. So, we count. God knows us by name. But a definite number also means something else, doesn't it?

It means that you're either in the count or not in the count. You're in or out. And that pulls through, doesn't it, to acts.

[ 8 : 18 ] We were looking at acts a few weeks ago. Over the last few weeks. And again and again, what do we see? We see, and this many were added to their number. And that many were added to their number.

You see? That's why we have a concept of membership. It's really just asking the question, do you want to be counted? As part of us? But I think even more importantly than that, if you have that feeling this morning, or ever, that you are wandering through the desert of life, and you don't really know whether you are seen.

Do I count? Am I just a historical statistic? Is there anybody who knows me? And God says, yes. He says, yes, you count.

You count. If you believe in Jesus, you belong to his people. And God tells us, as we march towards our home in glory, then we count. And he knows our name.

But again, if you were paying attention when you were reading through these chapters, you will have picked up this third phrase, which crops up again and again. And it's describing people who were counted as those who were able to serve in the army.

[ 9 : 33 ] Does that ring a bell? So God's people were expecting opposition. It wasn't necessarily going to be an easy ride for them between Mount Sinai and the Promised Land. There was going to be difficulty on their way home through the desert.

So what did they need to do? They needed to sign up. Say, yes, I'm here. I'm up for it. I'm going to prepare. I'm going to get disciplined. Because that opposition is coming.

So God is saying, be fighting fit. That's what I want you to be. I want you to be fighting fit and ready to be counted when your number's called. Does that language make you feel a little bit uncomfortable?

That military language of total commitment. A little bit uncomfortable. There's just too many bad examples in history, aren't there? Of militant groups who have that kind of language and we kind of go, hmm.

And we've kind of swung the other way, haven't we, towards individualism in our time and in our culture. So you do you. You do you. But what's that produced?

[ 10 : 41 ] Fragmented families, isolated individuals, people who don't want to be counted in, people who don't want to be counted in, they want to keep their options open. Don't want to commit.

They can't be counted on, therefore, either. Sadly, sometimes even in churches. And next to the Bible's call to be fighting fit, to stand up and be counted, and next to that alternative that culture offers us, just you do you, we need to ask this question.

How much did Jesus commit? Well, we know what Jesus did, don't we? He left the comfort, convenience of a loving, eternal, safe home in heaven.

And he willingly limited his options to walk the wilderness with us, eventually die on our behalf. He stood up to be counted, didn't he?

Can you hear that call? If you hear that call, Monday morning when you have this conversation, how was your weekend? Standing up to be counted gives us the ability to say something like this, I went to church and do you know what?

[ 12 : 01 ] Do you know why I went to church? Because God's family and God's presence is just the best place to be changed, to grow, to be known, to be loved, to help me get closer to home. So here's a healthy balance of counting as an individual, knowing our value, and at the same time being part of something bigger.

You see the Conservatives this week proposing national service or some form of it. Hope all you young people are looking forward to that. It's not the solution though, is it? Solution is signing up for heavenly service, standing up to be counted for God.

Represent, represent your family, represent your people, represent your Lord, keep a watch. So, be fighting fit when your number's called.

But our second question, where can I find my place? Am I just a number? No. Well then, where can I find my place in this world? See, we're much better at having a sense these days of how big the world is, aren't we?

For TV and social media, the world was a fairly small place. The trouble is, the better our understanding of how big the world is, the smaller we feel.

[ 13 : 28 ] I don't know if you've seen those films when they do the zoom out thing. They start with the character, whatever he's doing outside his house, and then they look at the street, and then it zooms out to the town, and then the country, and they're completely lost from view at this point.

And then eventually, you're looking at the whole globe. So it's that feeling. Big world, little me. And when it's that big, we just ask, don't we, well where's my place in all of this?

In this huge, sprawling human campsite that I'm a part of? Where do I fit? But to answer that, we need to ask another question. And that's this.

Who's at the centre? Because we can really only find our place by reference to the thing that is most important, that is central. Right?

Important to us, but the most important thing in the world. It's a bit like having a compass. You don't really know where you are, or even where to go until you've found north. So, what's at the centre?

[ 14 : 36 ] Well, our world says, you are. You're at the centre of your world. You're in the middle. Follow your, your own ideas. But actually, the longer we live, the more we realise that that answer is

too small.

we're not built to be the centre of the universe. What happens when we believe that is it builds up our ego and it builds up our expectations of the world around us and it builds up even the pressure on us that we put on ourselves until at some point it just goes pop.

And that's because we're built to worship God, not be him. And so, it's not surprising that in numbers we find that we're not at the centre of the camp. The graphic update.

Here's a picture of the camp, diagram of the camp. God is at the centre of the camp. God, at the tent of meeting, is at the centre of the camp, physically in the middle of his people.

See? Where can I find my place? Not at the centre of the camp. That's God's place. And actually, it's just worth noting that that makes our God different from anybody else's God.

[15:58] Because all the other gods out there that are worshipped are up there, far away, unreachable, untouchable, transcendent. But our God is both high and far above us.

And at the same time, here, in the middle of us. Right here. That's why the New Testament says that Jesus tabernacled amongst us. That's the literal word.

So where can I find my place? Not in the centre of the camp. So where then? Well, Numbers tells us that too. Hope you will have noticed that the tribes were arranged, as we were reading, around the tent of God's presence.

So that's where our place is. That's where God's place was with his people, despite their wandering hearts. He knows what's just happened at Sinai, and still he chooses to be in the middle of his people by his gracious presence.

And that's where our place is. Our place is in his gracious presence. So in fact, the answer to the question, where can I find my place, isn't a place at all. It's a person.

[17:16] Our place is with God in his presence, growing as we see his goodness, protected by his guidance, day by day. That's our place, in his gracious presence.

Now, if you got really into the detail of this passage, you will have realised that there's some weird stuff going on with the arrangements of the camp. Really weird. Things are not in the order that we would expect.

So you would think the descendants of the oldest son of Israel, they'd get the pride of place, right? Because that's how those societies worked. The oldest son, that's Reuben.

No. And then you might think, well, I know, the children of Joseph, he was the favoured son of Jacob, wasn't he? He was the one who ended up in Egypt and became second only to the Pharaoh and God blessed him.

So his descendants, they get pride of place, right? Ephraim and Manasseh, the two tribes. No. They don't get pride of place.

[18:22] Either. Well, then maybe it's the most faithful and well-behaved of those children. They get pride of place. Benjamin, Simeon. But we don't find that.

In God's arrangement of his people, we find that the Levites are closest to the tent of meeting. And we'll come back to that. And then if you delve into the detail even further in chapter four, what you find in the arrangements of the Levites is that the people looking after the most holy, most special stuff to do with the tabernacle are not the descendants of the oldest son of Levi.

They're the descendants of the middle son of Levi. Why is that? And again, if you were paying attention when we read, you will have heard that it's Judah who's placed on the east towards the sunrise along with Moses and Aaron.

The place from where the light dawns. Why is that? Judah's not a very attractive character. you read some of the Old Testament stuff about him. But that is God's choice.

And it's only later that we learn that of course Jesus comes from the tribe of Judah. So all of us find our place in God's gracious presence.

[19:45] All of the Israelites, all of God's people were in his presence. They're in the camp, aren't they? Not outside somewhere. But how God arranges us in church, in our place of work, in our family, in our world, that's his decision, isn't it?

Not ours. And it might not even seem logical to us how he decides to arrange things. So maybe you're struggling in your place. You think, I don't know why I'm here.

It doesn't seem natural or logical to me. God sees the whole camp. It's his camp. Isn't it? And you're in his gracious presence.

And you're going home. So it is okay. It is okay. Next slide, Dave.

Thank you. Did you notice there's another repeated theme in these chapters? No one can truly be close to God, can they? Only the priests and the Levites get anywhere near.

[ 20 : 54 ] For anyone else who approaches, the penalty is death. And in fact, even the priests, if they approach at the wrong time or in the wrong way, the penalty is death.

And that's why the Levites are arranged around the tent. They're a kind of a buffer to make it safe. That's the proximity problem. What do we do about the proximity problem?

Why is that? Why is it that people can't get close? The answer is, according to the book of Numbers, God's holiness. You see, he's so good, he's so good that anything bad that comes near him is just blasted into outer space.

It's a bit like having a nuclear reactor in the middle of the camp. Everything that it touches becomes radioactive.

And that is a problem, isn't it? The proximity problem. But although it's a problem, we really do want him to be holy, friends. Because his holiness in that sense is our protection against evil, isn't it?

[ 22 : 06 ] If we can get near to him somehow, and nothing bad can be in his presence, then we will be safe. Then we will be safe. And if God was not like this, if he was not supremely good and couldn't have anything bad in his presence, then he'd just be like one of us.

How could he be a victorious saviour then? We are all a mix of good and bad, aren't we? We have each done things that we shouldn't.

If you don't believe me, just read the Ten Commandments and then come and tell me hand on heart that you've kept everyone. We just can't, can we? So naturally speaking, naturally speaking, we cannot come near God.

That's the proximity problem. Now what do we do about it? Did you notice all the other references to redeeming the firstborn?

That we read about as we went through. Especially when it came to the Levites. Did you notice that? We read two chunks about that. What's going on there? Well it's a reference back to Egypt.

[ 23 : 16 ] The text explained it a little bit, didn't it? When God struck down the firstborn, after Egypt rejected God and rejected God and enslaved God and enslaved his people, everybody stood under that judgment in that land.

The firstborn represents everyone. And even Israel only escaped, you remember, because of the blood of the Passover lamb. And that is what's going on with the buying back of the firstborn here. You see the Levites are ransomed, they are bought back and so they can come near to God again. redemption solves the proximity problem.

That's what this text is telling us. Redemption solves the proximity problem. What does the New Testament tell us? The New Testament tells us that Jesus is God's firstborn, his one and only son, doesn't it?

It tells us that he is the Passover lamb who dies in our place to free us from slavery. Buy us back from the curse of death. And the New Testament also tells us that he rises as the firstborn from among the dead, giving us hope of life with him forever in his presence.

[ 24 : 36 ] So God buys us back if we trust in the blood of Jesus, the Passover lamb. Do you know what happens then? Jesus' nuclear goodness becomes ours.

And then we can freely be in God's presence, can't we? In the presence of his perfect goodness, and we can be made holy by that radioactive goodness.

Redemption solves the proximity problem, see? I wonder if you thought about what it would be like to be a Levite in the camp. Probably not.

I'm going to invite you to think about that now. What would it have been like to be a Levite in the camp? It would have been busy full time, keeping and caring for what is good and holy, close to it physically a lot of the time, and you would have represented that goodness and holiness, wouldn't you?

To everyone you met. Every time you set foot outside your tent, people would have known, oh, there's a Levite, and they'd all be reminded of the goodness and holiness of God. But more than that, more than that, everyone would know that you'd been brought back by God because all of the Levites were redeemed, weren't they?

[ 25 : 58 ] Wouldn't that be something? To be walking examples of Jesus' work of redemption to the people of the world around us? To be always in God's presence through his Holy Spirit in your heart.

To bring his holiness and goodness to those around you when you step outside your door to be Levites to the world. That's what we are if we're Christians.

God has brought us back and he's made us holy and now we are Levites to the world. Not because you try hard but because God has redeemed you.

See, that's why God has brought us back and made us part of this number so that we can be Levites to the world. So, do I count?

Am I just a number? Where is my place? Jesus says that every hair on your head is numbered. Doesn't he? He's gone through hellfire to buy you back and bring you into his camp to make you his.

[ 27 : 07 ] So are you just a number? No. And yet at the same time there's no room for our heads to swell in God's people, is there?

Because if we look left, right, there's 99 others who Jesus has redeemed who are just like us. We might just be the one card in the deck of 52 but God knows that number.

He gives us our place. It's his people and it's his gracious presence in the camp that makes us holy, that makes us safe.

It's his leadership that will guarantee that we get home. So if you want to get rid of that feeling of just being a statistic or the illusion that you being number one is what it's all about and you want to be seen and known for the whole of your journey through the wilderness of life and you do that by trusting Jesus, trusting that he's brought you back and then your name is listed, not in the book of numbers, not even in the Bethel membership list although that would be great.

Then your number and your name are written in the Lamb's book of life. You count your places with him.

[ 28 : 30 ] Amen. Let me pray. Amen. Lord God, we thank you. We thank you that you see each one of us, that you see our hearts, and that you have made a way for us to be in your camp, in your presence without compromising your amazing goodness and holiness.

We thank you for the Lord Jesus. We thank you that he is a good shepherd who goes after the one straying sheep. Please help us to trust in him.

In Jesus' name. Amen.