

6<sup>th</sup> July 2025

## Counting

**“Go number the stars in the heaven, count how many sands on the shore.”**

*Martialis, Epigramma*

29,717! A random number, you might think. But not for me! For this is the number of the first *Guardian* Crossword I've managed to complete which was composed by the compiler *Carpathian*. A significant number for me, on a significant day. Will I remember that number in a few days' time? Probably not. But does it mark something significant? It certainly does.

Some numbers are worth remembering: dates; attendances; achievements; years of service. Others are interesting, but their significance quickly fades. Do I remember how many sermons I've preached, couples I've married, babies I've baptised, funerals I've conducted? No, I don't, even if counting them mattered. And I reckon I'll leave the stars in the heaven and the sand on the shore for now too ...

Before I trained as a minister, I studied Maths. I still count random things: every step in a staircase as I go up or down; the people sitting on the top deck of a bus; the number of carriages in a passing train; how many seconds the traffic lights are at red. Does counting these things matter? Not at all. Why do I do it, then? I have absolutely no idea. It seems that counting is in my psyche. But ...

In the Bible's Book of Judges, there's a story of God's servant, Gideon, who – typically for the Old Testament – is leading his people into battle for a righteous cause. He counts his soldiers. There are thirty-two thousand. (Some counting, eh?) “Too many,” God says. “Tell the ones who're scared to go home.” Twenty-two thousand skedaddle. 10,000 are left. “Still too many,” God says. “Take them to the water and let them drink.” The ones who kneel and drink 'like dogs', unaware of their surroundings, are dispatched home. And the ones who cup the water in their hands, drinking with watchfulness and care, are deemed ready for the battle – a mere 300. And God says, “These will do for me.”

Counting? I fear that in Church and community life, there's too much emphasis on counting things that aren't really important. Quality is what matters! Commitment triumphs over numbers. Where is our faith, that remarkable things that can be achieved with a few diligent, loyal servants?

### **A prayer for today**

*“Count your blessings,” the old song says. Sorry! That's too many to count!*