

“Every Answer Matters”



The title of this reflection is a quotation from the top right-hand side of the Census form sent around to residents in Australia concerning all the people who were in their house on the night of 11 August 2026. It instructed the readers to go online, or ask for a paper form, and answer questions about themselves and all the people with them, even babies, and submit their answers to the Bureau of Statistics. We were told that these answers were important, compulsory and mattered, as they would be used to inform and guide decisions made by politicians and those concerned with local public services, such as transport, schools, hospitals, etc..

The picture above can seem to have no obvious connection to the title. It is of a tomato bush with a few small tomatoes visible, (seen on the left), and which came up in our backyard under a hedge. I did not plant it and I meant to pull it out, but forgot to do so. Then it produced flowers and a few small tomatoes. I responded by watering it and the trailing branches were held up from the ground using string, sticks and branches of the hedge. Since then, the plant that was nearly discarded, has produced more flowers and over 20 small tomatoes for us to eat and enjoy.

To make this leaflet possibly even more confusing, I wish to link the above stories about the Census and a tomato plant, to the account in John 6:1-13 of Jesus feeding 5,000 hungry people using five small loaves of barley bread and two fish. In John's Gospel, this food came from a small boy, and was all the food available so late in the day, and in the deserted place where the people

had been listening to Jesus.

It was obviously impossible to feed all these people with so little food, but the bread and fish were, rather reluctantly, brought to Jesus by the disciple, Andrew. Surprisingly, Jesus accepted the food, and told the disciples to get everyone to sit down on the grass. Jesus then thanked God for the food and gave it to the people to eat. Afterwards the disciples filled twelve large baskets with the leftovers.

Now to bring these stories together, starting with the Census. “Every answer matters”, we were told on the Census form. That included the answers we might have thought were of no interest to anyone, except perhaps ourselves, as they involved ourselves. This fact can lead us to realise that not only the answers mattered, but that the people who supplied the answers, including ourselves, family, friends, and strangers, also mattered.

We might then ask, if we all matter, who are we? In the Census we were asked our name, date and place of birth, did we own or rent the house we lived in, and about our education, work, and so on. For Christians, the basic answer to ‘who are we?’, can be very simple, but matters. We are part of God’s creation and God’s loved children. We belong to God and are related through God to all other human beings on our planet. It does not matter what age, gender or race we are, or if we are healthy or sick, rich or poor, etc.. What matters is that we all have a close relationship with a God who loves us and whose Spirit dwells within us, whether we know it or not.

Further, we not only belong to God, and have a family relationship with all other people, but we are also connected to all of God’s creation surrounding us. Being members of God’s inclusive family, we are called to not only respect, reverence, and care about other people, but also nature. We know how important it is to care for nature, because we need it to survive as it gives us food, water, air, a suitable climate and place to live, etc.. My experience with the tomato bush, reminded me that even things that seem small and perhaps useless, can be of value when given a second chance. The tomato bush, growing in the wrong place and therefore regarded as a weed, when cared for and treated as a plant that mattered, gave us fresh tomatoes to relish.

In the Gospel story concerning the feeding of the 5,000 people by Jesus, the food used did not come from some large Store, but was a small amount of bread and fish belonging to a young boy who gave it to help others. Andrew

took it to Jesus who used it to feed all the people, with plenty left over. It did not matter that it was so little, what mattered was that it existed, was given to Jesus and used.

In the three situations described, acts of caring and love took place, and as a result people were helped. In the Census, every answer mattered and needed to be done carefully because the answers could eventually help the people who filled out the forms, as well as other people who used public services. The tomato bush under the hedge could have just withered and died, but the few acts I did to care for it, showed it mattered and enabled it to give us enjoyable food. In the feeding of the 5,000 hungry people, a boy's food brought to Jesus mattered, and was used by Jesus to feed the large crowd. Without that food being made available by the boy, perhaps the people would not have been fed by Jesus.

In conclusion, not only every answer mattered in the Census, but every person and their actions, and every plant matters to our loving God, and can matter to us. The caring acts of people in these stories, demonstrate and remind us how small and sometimes overlooked acts of love that we and others perform, matter. They can reveal God's care and love for all of creation, and often lead to unexpected beneficial consequences, some that we may never know about.

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