Address on numbers, especially seven

My daughter once Iived in a house numbered 13.
I remember giving her address to someone, and they said, "Oh dear, I couldn't live in a house with that number." That person was very superstitious. But superstition goes back a long way and there's still a lot of it about.

Numbers go back thousands of years before Christ - long before the birth of the Jewish nation. They were used in business, in maths, and in early science by those in ancient civilisations. People then were fascinated by numbers. They used them to put value on things. 1 meant very good, but things got worse as you got near 12.  Twelve plus one was unlucky.  So being superstitious has come a long way.
You may have heard the phrase "I've got his or her number". Not phone number. They had discovered what sort of a person he or she is.

So numbers, used in many different ways, have fascinated civilisations form the very distant past. They have fascinated the Jews and the Christian church ever since.
Numbers has a book of the 0ld Testament to itself. It got its name from census- taking, more than one, which the Jews took over the years between their escape from captivity in Egypt to their settling in Canaan. That was over a period of 1500 years, starting in about 3000 BC.

Remember, the Jewish nation started as no more than a caravan of escaped slaves; then families merged into groups. These became extended families, becoming larger groups over the years. So a census would be taken at each stage. Eventually they became separate tribes, each with their own traditions. They were known as the twelve tribes of Israel, and in the course of history they were like two separate entities, one called Israel and the other Judah - rather like our Church of England with its two provinces of York and Canterbury. The Jews eventually realised that they would be stronger as one nation, under a King, and with a capital city - Jerusalem.
So the book of Numbers, written by Jewish scribes and lawyers about 1000 years BC, was an attempt to put together forgotten history. But there was a big religious side to it as well, and the use of numbers acquired a kind of mystique.

As you read or hear the New Testament, you catch the use of what are called mystical numbers. This morning we heard the story of the feeding of the 4000. You thought, “Surely it was 5000?” You were right to think that! They are just two different accounts of the same event. The numbers tell you there were a lot of people. Put the stories side by side and you see other curious things. One story says there were 7 loaves and a few fish, the other says 5 loaves and 2 small fish. The numbers are figures to tell you that it was miraculous. A huge crowd was fed on very small resources. As the story goes on, 7 baskets of food were left over. Another version tells you there were 12 baskets!
This kind of thing is found in the gospels and other NT writings. Over the years preachers and commentators have read all sorts into them, especially the number 7.
There were seven words of Jesus on the cross. Seven sections of the Lord's Prayer. Seven deadly sins. Seven works of mercy, seven sacraments - and so on. Seven is one of the most commonly used mystical numbers. "Mystical" because we are not to take them literally. They are meant to capture our attention and help us to remember what they describe.  Here's an example: Jesus was once asked how often we should forgive others who have offended us. "Till seven times?" asked his questioner. "No," said Jesus. "Not seven times, but seventy times seven". A mystical way of saying always.

At the end of this service, we will sing George Herbert's well-known hymn, ‘King of Glory, King of peace’. He plays with that mystical seven, in the way Jesus did:
"Seven whole days, not one in seven, I will praise Thee".
He reminds us that we need to praise God as often as we can.
So there you have it. Numbers are important in so many ways!