

THE FIRST CHRISTIAN SERVICE IN AUSTRALIA

First Christian Sermon in the Colony of New South Wales (Psalm 116:12-13)

(Sermon preached on 1st February 2009 in St Philip's Church York Street, by Bishop Ray Smith at the 221st Anniversary of the First Service held in the Colony of New South Wales that was conducted by the Reverend Richard Johnson on 3rd February 1788.)

The First Fleet sailed from Portsmouth in England on 13 May 1787 bound for New South Wales. The fleet consisted of two Royal Naval ships, the *Sirius* and the *Supply*, and nine transport vessels. There were almost 1400 persons on board, 786 convicts and 633 sailors, marines and other officials. The eight months voyage has been described as, "The biggest single overseas migration the world has ever seen." (1788 by David Hill, 2008) Surprisingly all the vessels in the fleet arrived in Botany Bay within a few days of each other.

The fastest vessel, the *Supply*, arrived on Thursday 18th January and the slowest vessels had arrived by the following Saturday. Captain Arthur Phillip, the leader of the expedition and first governor of NSW, decided that Botany Bay was not a suitable place for the proposed settlement. He ordered the fleet to sail to Port Jackson, the next harbour to the North. On Saturday 26th January, Arthur Phillip, arrived at Sydney Cove on the brig *Supply*. Before the rest of the fleet arrived he conducted a small flag raising ceremony at what is today Circular Quay, and claimed New South Wales for England. The rest of the fleet arrived and anchored in Sydney Cove later that evening. On Sunday 27 January began the task of unloading, the clearing of land and the pitching of tents.

A week later, at 10am on Sunday 3 February, Richard Johnson, the Chaplain, conducted the first Christian Service in the Colony of New South Wales. The service was held in the open air. Today there is a monument to mark the spot at the corner of Bligh and Hunter Streets. In 1792 it became the site of the first Christian Church.

Richard Johnson's text for his first sermon on Australian soil was based on Psalm 116 verses 12 and 13, which read,

*How can I repay the LORD for all his goodness to me?
I will lift up the cup of salvation
and call on the name of the LORD.*

The question arises, why ever did Richard Johnson, choose to base his sermon on this text? A script of the sermon has not survived, so we do not know what Richard Johnson said.



*Reverend Richard Johnson, 1787,
by G. Terry, Engraving, P1/J*

The theme of Psalm 116 is rescue.

It begins,

*I love the LORD, for he heard my voice;
he heard my cry for mercy.
Because he turned his ear to me,
I will call on him as long as I live.
The cords of death entangled me,
the anguish of the grave came upon me;
I was overcome by trouble and sorrow.
Then I called on the name of the LORD:
"O LORD, save me!"*

The writer goes on to say, ... *You, O LORD, delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling,*

The Psalm writer, from 5th Century before Christ, had recently faced a life threatening situation. He called on God to rescue him. And God graciously did rescue him. God had proven to be worthy of his trust to a person who was living in a right relationship with him. Through this most difficult experience the Psalmist believed God was in control over all people and things.

He learned God does not allow the premature death of those who are united to him and further that he quickly rushes to their aid.

God looks after his own even when they are feeling utterly helpless. All they need to do is depend on God. So indebted does the Psalmist feel that can respond adequately to God for his goodness.

The Psalmist realized he cannot repay God but at the same time he wants to respond appropriately to God. So he says, *"I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord. I will fulfil my vows to the Lord."*

In ancient times worshippers would make symbolic offerings to God. One such offering was a cup filled with vintage wine. The cup was held high and then the contents were poured over a special altar. The offering was meant to be a symbolic act of thanksgiving and the dedication of oneself to God.

Richard Johnson was a grateful minister and worshipper on that first Sunday in February. He would have felt that both he and all those in the First Fleet had so much for which to be thankful to God.

When the first fleet left England, one person's diary read, *"the land behind us was the abode of civilized people; that before us of savages... All communication with families and friends is now cut off, we are leaving the world behind us, to enter a state unknown. [When, if ever, might we enjoy our former life again?]"*

The eight month voyage to Australia was horrendous. Seafaring in the 18th Century was a hazardous and dangerous enterprise. Storms and high seas, poor diet, starvation, disease, pirates all took their toll on those who sailed the oceans. The vessels in the First Fleet were so small. The size of most of them was around 30 m long and 9m wide. The living, eating and sleeping conditions below on the crowded decks were unbearable. Extremely strong gales and heavy seas we encountered as the ships crossed the Great Southern Ocean above Antarctica and then again up along the NSW Coast. One diary description sounds very much like the conditions experienced by the sailing ships in the fateful Sydney to Hobart Race in 2001.

"... Had very strong gales of wind, with very heavy seas running, which keeps [our] vessel almost constantly under water and renders the situation of everyone on board her, truly uncomfortable."

Amazingly all the vessels arrived safely with the loss of only 69 lives. Loss of life was much greater with the second fleet which arrived two years later. During that voyage 288 of 1038 convicts died on the voyage, while another 144 died within a few days of arriving.

Richard Johnson on 3 February in quoting Psalm 116 was encouraged the 'First Fleeters' to be grateful to God for their safe arrival despite the many dangers they had encountered on their voyage. He was calling upon them to give thanks to God and make a lifelong commitment to Him. As a Christian Minister, concerned for the spiritual welfare, as well as their physical well being, Richard Johnson would have proclaimed the saving message of the Christian Gospel. He would have alluded to the message of the New Testament Scriptures. He would have declared how a person is rescued from Satan, sin and death because of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. He would have explained that the rescue that Jesus performed would result in the forgiveness of their sins, and a new and unbreakable relationship with the living God. God had been gracious and kind in bringing them safely to New South Wales and they needed to respond appropriately in order to continue to be the recipients of God's favour and goodness. Trust in God and a personal faith in Jesus Christ would ensure their safe arrival and eternal life in Heaven – the final home and destination of all God's people

He may have quoted the words of the Apostle Paul in 2 Timothy 4:18

The Lord will rescue us from every evil attack and will bring us safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

221 years after the arrival of the 'First Fleet', there is so much that we can learn from Psalm 116 today, for ourselves, churches and our nation.

The God and Saviour of Richard Johnson is the same yesterday, today and for all times. The one true God, the Father of our Jesus Christ, is the Creator, Sustainer and Controller of the universes and every one of us. He controls our personal destinies, the future of our churches and nation, and he directs them in line with his purposes.

We live in difficult and uncertain times. Worldwide is the economic down turn, environmental concerns, wars, conflicts and terrorism. Locally we are faced with problems in the areas of health, education, transport.

The quality of life for the whole community is being affected by the increase in things like crime, violence, theft, suicide, family breakdown, pornography, sexual deviancy, drug and alcohol abuse.

In addition we all grapple personal, relational, health and other issues. We need the sense of security, inner strength and the certain hope for the future that God in Christ alone can give.

The message of the whole Bible, and Psalm 116 in particular, is: God looks after those who are in faith trust relationship with him. We are encouraged to call upon in our hour of need for rescue. He will come to our rescue and by his presence in our lives by faith he will give us his inner peace and joy while renewing our energy for living.

Psalm 116, 221 years ago and here this afternoon, is a challenge to us to offer our thanks God, and to unconditionally commit ourselves to Him, through a faith in Jesus Christ and so enjoy all the favours and blessings he wishes to bestow on us in this life and the next.

The following is the Sermon presented by The Right Reverend Ray Smith on the 5th February 2006 on the 218th Anniversary of First Christian Service held in the Colony. based on the evangelistic tract to all the inhabitants of New South Wales and Norfolk Island Written in the year 1792 by Richard Johnson Chaplain to the Colonies

On the 25th January 1788 the first fleet sailed into Port Jackson.

At 10am on Sunday 3rd February, Richard Johnson, Naval Chaplain, conducted a Christian Service.

As far as we know this was the first Christian Service held on Australian soil.

Today we commemorate this service and the coming of the Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ to this land. For twelve years Richard Johnson worked and ministered in the colony. He engaged in regular ministrations in Sydney, Toongabbie and Parramatta as well as making a visit to Norfolk Island.

I noted in one record dated 1792, that to that date there had been 226 baptisms, 220 marriages and 854 burials.

Richard Johnson also took part in short exploring expeditions, was a successful market gardener and founded the first school in the nation. He was a compassionate and devout servant of Jesus Christ and to all sections of the colony. He was loved and respected by many of the convicts and aboriginals to whom he ministered.

At the first service we commemorate today he preached on the text from Psalm 116, *what shall I render unto to the Lord for all his benefits to me?*

Regrettably we do not have a record of what he said. In fact none of his spoken sermons have survived. Fortunately we do have an extended tract that he wrote in 1792.

The number of settlers and spread nature of the colonial community made it impossible for him to personally minister to everyone. Richard Johnson was concerned that those in the colony know how to become and live as Christians. So he wrote a message that could be read by all. The tract gives us an insight into the message and fervour with which he would have preached.

This afternoon I want to share a portion of the contents with you.

To all the Inhabitants, and especially the unhappy prisoners and convicts in the colonies established at Port Jackson and Norfolk, this affectionate address is dedicated and presented by their sincere and sympathizing friend, and faithful servant, in the Gospel of Christ, Richard Johnson.

I beseech you, brethren, suffer this word of exhortation. Your souls are precious. You are precious to the Lord Jesus Christ. You are precious in my esteem. O that you were equally sensible of their value.

We have now been here almost five years. Some of you, I trust, have been convinced of your folly, sin and danger; you have earnestly sought and happily found mercy with God through our Mediator, Jesus Christ. You can approach him as a God reconciled, merciful Father and Friend, you are evidencing the reality of your conversion, by an upright life and conversation. But I must express my fear, comparatively few of you are convinced of sin, converted to God, and reformed from your evil course. I entreat you, brethren, to consider, that ere long, either, endless inconceivable happiness will be our portion, or unutterable misery will be our doom.

Our glass of life is running away a pace. Death is making sure and speedy strides towards us daily, judgement is at hand and the Judge himself is at the door. I can with a sincere conscience say, That I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ.

The Gospel covers the whole revealed will of God recorded in the Bible. The Bible is our only sure and reliable guide. It was given by inspiration of God. Only the Bible contains all that is needful to make us wise unto salvation. All other books, however good and useful are but of human composition. The Bible describes the original state of man, as a state of perfect purity and innocence. He was made in the image of God. Free from defilement, guilt or guile was his understanding, will, his affections and conscience, his body and soul. And while he continued so, he was not liable to pain, misery or death. But man did not continue in this state. Our first parents disobeyed their Maker. By sinning against their Maker they lost their original righteousness, and became earthly, sensual, devilish. Such are we their posterity. Man is now the reverse of what he was first created. His understanding is darkened, his will is at enmity with God; his affections are

no longer fixed upon God his Creator and Benefactor, they are engrossed by the empty and perishable things in this world; By sin, his body is become mortal; subject to pain, disease and death; and his soul is exposed to the curse annexed to the transgressions of God's holy law – eternal death. But, blessed be God, a door of hope is opened by the Gospel! A gracious promise was given early, even to our first parents, immediately after the fall.

It is contained in God's statement to Adam, The seed of the woman shall break the serpents head.

The promised seed is the Lord Jesus Christ, who, in due time, was to appear in the world, to be born of a woman, that by his life, sufferings, and obedience unto death, he might recover man from the misery and ruin in which he was involved. This is the Gospel which we are commanded to preach to sinners, it proposes a free and gracious pardon to the guilty, cleansing to the sick, happiness to the miserable, light for those in darkness, strength for the weak, food for the hungry, and even life from the dead.

All these inestimable blessings are the fruit and effect of the death and mediation of Jesus Christ. His great design in coming into the world was to seek and save those who are lost; He came from heaven, that he might raise us to those holy and happy mansions; He endured the curse, that we might inherit the blessing; He bore the cross, so we might wear the crown; He died that we might live; He died the just for the unjust that he might bring us to God. These blessings become ours, only by believing.

Thus it is said, God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son – For what purpose? Why, That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life: – he that believeth in him is not condemned; – he that believeth in him, by faith is counted to God as righteousness.

My friends, search the Scriptures, and you will find that this is the tenor of the Bible: I may add of the Church of England also, in the Articles and Homilies. This believing is sometimes called coming to Christ, A trusting Him, A casting our burdens on him. And remember, that until we do thus come to Christ, trust in him, cast our cares and burdens upon him. We have no part or interest in what the gospel unfolds and offers. The faith whereby a sinner receives Christ, and becomes a partaker of all the blessings of the Gospel, is the sole gift of God. Wrought in the heart by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit produces an inward change in the soul, called in Scripture, the new birth, regeneration, or conversion, and thus enables a sinner convinced of his sin and misery to look to Jesus, and to believe on him. I do not ask you, what religious persuasion or denomination you have espoused. But I speak to you as men and women, as intelligent creatures, possessed of understanding and reason. Seek now then, above all things, and interest in the blessings of the gospel. Now is the time to obtain the blessings revealed in the gospel, and which are set before you when it is preached.

With this impassioned plea Richard Johnson finished the first part of the tract. He continues in a second part to provide his readers with guidance in living according to their Christian profession.

Such guidance he writes, *“will both afford you present peace and secure future happiness.”*

He concludes the tract -

“This will be my daily prayer to God for you. I shall pray for your eternal salvation, for your present welfare, for the preservation, peace and prosperity of the colony: and especially for the abundant and manifest success of the Redeemer’s cause and kingdom and for the effusion and outpouring of his Holy Spirit, not only here, but in every part of the habitable globe. Longing and hoping, waiting for the dawn of that happy day, when the heathen shall be given to the Lord Jesus for his inheritance, and the uttermost parts for his possession: when all the ends of the earth shall flee, believe, and rejoice in the salvation of God.

I am your affectionate Friend and Servant in the Gospel of Christ,

Richard Johnson.”

May it be true of us at St Philip’s and in all our churches that we carry on in the Australian Christian way that began with Richard Johnson 218 years ago.