

AUSTRALIA'S DESTINY IN THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD

Dr Barry Chant

What do we celebrate each Australia Day? The arrival of a bunch of convict rejects from the overcrowded jails of England? The attempt by a thousand ill-equipped Europeans to establish a small segment of civilisation on the under-side of the earth?

Perhaps. But Christians have special reasons for celebration. First of all, it is now well over 200 years since the gospel of Jesus Christ first came to our shores.

On 6 January 1788, at the age of around 31, Anglican clergyman Richard Johnson sat with his wife of a few months in the cold and cramped cabin of the *Sirius*, a small sailing vessel of just 600 tons somewhere off the coast of Tasmania—or as it was known then, Van Diemen's Land. It wasn't much of a ship. It had been burned out while still in the shipyards, sold cheaply to the government and refitted even more cheaply!

- The *Sirius* was the flag ship of a convoy of 11 ships—
- the *Supply*—another convoy ship
- Six convict ships
- Three supply ships

On board were 729 convicts—565 males, 153 females, and eleven children. Plus—253 officers, crewmen and their families. There were about 1000 in all. (There is some uncertainty about the exact numbers.)

Johnson was almost boyish in looks, with full fleshy lips and soft hair. He was obviously a man of delicate sensibilities who was in some ways unfitted for the rigours and harshness of his role. He would not go down into the convict holds, for instance, as their condition distressed him too much.

On one ship, convicts were tortured by the use of the thumbscrew, by iron fetters and by shaving the heads of women prisoners—although flogging them naked had been given up 'for reasons not of humanity but of decorum' (Barnard, 39).

On occasions, food supplies were very low indeed—only three pints of water being allowed for all purposes each day for each person, soldier and convict alike.

For weeks, a cold wind had been blowing from the south—'it being so cold,' wrote another ship's officer, 'that I have been obliged to put on a flannel waistcoat and ... two pair (of stockings) and obliged to keep my great coat on constantly all day' (Barnard, 48). The weather continued very cold and bleak and the ships were often

awash. On one ship, convict women were literally swept out of their bunks by the water (Barnard, 43)

On New Year's Day there was a severe gale which lasted 24 hours. 'Never did I see such an awfully grand night before in my whole life,' Johnson wrote later (Letter to Henry Fricker, 10 February 1788). However, the Johnsons still managed to enjoy a meal of roast pig (taken on board in Capetown) and plum pudding to mark the occasion in spite of having difficulty even in keeping their seats.

Each Sunday, Johnson conducted services on board, and in Rio de Janeiro and Capetown, he moved to other ships to do so. He was gratified to note the decline in the degree of swearing after he preached against it one Sunday.

On 7 January, they caught their first glimpse of Australia. It was the coast of Van Diemen's Land.

Two weeks later they were anchored off Botany Bay in New South Wales.

THE SOVEREIGN PURPOSE OF GOD

It is interesting to imagine what might have been going through Richard Johnson's mind as he contemplated what he would do when he stepped on that Eastern Australian shore. He had a conviction of the sovereignty of God—did he feel himself part of destiny? Or was he just pleased to have arrived? Judging by his early letters, he doesn't seem to have had any great pretensions. He was apparently more taken up with the unusual flora and fauna than anything else.

In fact, he probably never saw any potential greatness in what he did—he was not that kind of man.

If he was familiar with the writings of the scholarly Augustine, as he probably was, he might have thought with some amusement about the fact that he was now treading in a place that the great theologian had claimed could not possibly exist! In the *City of God* Augustine wrote that 'as to the fable that there are antipodes, that is to say, men on the other side of the earth, where the sun rises when it sets to us, men who walk with their feet opposite ours, that is on no ground believable!' (XVI, 9)

But he was there in the purposes of God. There is little question that it was providential that Johnson was the first religious figure to come to this land.

Professor Manning Clark's definitive *A History of Australia* begins by describing the various nations and peoples who for centuries headed in the direction of what was to them an unknown southern continent—but who never found it (Vol I, 1985, 5).

The Hindus and Buddhists came only to the spice islands of the East Indies; the Chinese also stopped short; the followers of Islam reached Indonesia, but not Australia. The Portugese, the Spanish, the Dutch and the French all came looking for it or sailed around it or touched it at places but never settled it. De Quiros (1605), Torres (1607), Janz (1605), Hartog (1616), Pelsart (1629), Tasman (1642) and La Perouse (1788) are names well-known today—but all as navigators or explorers—not as pioneer settlers.

Pedro Ferdandez de Quiros, a Portugese navigator who actually did most of his sailing for Spain, 'was one of the flowers of the Catholic Reformation, part of that movement of religious idealism and of missionary fervour which strengthened the church after the disasters of Luther and Calvin... He began to believe that he had been singled out by God as the vessel through whom the inhabitants of "terra australis" would be received into the true church, and that "terra australis" would be Austrialia del Espiritu Santo—a land dedicated to the Holy Spirit.' (Clark, I, 1985, 14-15)

Nowadays, we like to talk about the 'great' South Land of the Holy Spirit. The word 'great' was never part of the original title. It must also be remembered that De Quiros saw this name as an expression of his dream of bringing the south land under the sway of Rome.

De Quiros made a pilgrimage to Rome, received from Pope Clement VIII a 'genuine piece of the true cross' together with indulgences for those who sailed with him. In 1605, he set out with a statue of Peter standing on the world on the prow of each of his ships. He was particularly anxious to win the race against the Protestants to confound the powers of false doctrine. On the eve of his journey, he visited the shrine of the Virgin at Loreto.

He was a gentle man, however, and apparently lacked the will to follow the enterprise through. He reached the New Hebrides, named one of the islands Austrialia del Espiritu Santo and sailed for Mexico. It has been claimed that De Quiros actually reached Australia, but it is clear that he didn't—and that he himself knew that he didn't (Clark, I, 1985, 16).

To look at the map of explorers prior to Cook, it is almost uncanny to see how they all seemed to head straight for the great south land but then sailed right around it! There are some natural explanations—prevailing winds and currents and the like. But there seems to be more to it than this—as if an unseen hand redirected those little vessels to other waters and other lands. It cannot be coincidence. God had a sovereign purpose for Australia and even through a convict settlement it was the simple evangelical gospel that he intended to be proclaimed in this land.

I say this with no disrespect to any other nation or people. But the truth is that the message young Richard Johnson brought to Port Jackson was the nearest to the New Testament that anyone of his day is likely to have proclaimed.

THE CHAPLAIN'S ROLE

Johnson was a chaplain and therefore subject to whatever the authorities told him to do. Officially Governor Arthur Philip was to enforce an appropriate observance of religion and good order among the inhabitants and to take such steps for the due celebration of public worship as circumstances would permit. He was to take care that the Book of Common Prayer was read every Sunday and Holy Day. He was to execute laws against Sabbath breaking, swearing, stealing and profanity (Clark, I, 80).

Obviously, Johnson was expected to be the agent for all this. Philip himself, while a good man, seemed much more interested in acceptable manners than in

salvation—a point which Johnson himself recorded—"Those in authority want me to preach goodness and not salvation, obedience and not submission ..." (*Time*, 108).

As chaplain, Johnson had to officiate at hangings (*Time*, 91) and was at times expected to act as magistrate—a task he loathed and one which seemed to line him up with the authorities and hence with the establishment. Clearly, this also put him off-side with the convicts.

He had other tasks as well. Within two weeks of the first settlement, he had officiated at 14 weddings. In the first five years he conducted 226 baptisms, 220 marriages and, depressingly, 851 burials (1792: vi)

THE FIRST SERVICE

On 3 February 1788, Johnson conducted the first Christian service ever to be held in this land somewhere on the beach at what we now call Circular Quay.

He took as his text Psalm 116:12: '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.'

At first glance this seems a rather inappropriate passage. Here were a group of rejected and deprived men and women in a strange land where 'the biggest rats they had ever seen (were) bounding about on their hind legs (and) giant birds with long scrawny necks and bald heads crashed through the scrub and yet another bird ... looked down at them and seemed to kill itself laughing at their predicament. It was as if they had landed on another planet!' (Garvin, 1987, 20f)

Then there was the unaccustomed heat and the flies of which William Dampier had said years earlier 'they being so troublesome here that no fanning will keep them from coming to one's face; and without the assistance of both hands to keep them off, they will creep into ones nostrils; and mouth too, if the lips are not shut very close' (Clark, I, 39). To this day, Aussies are noted for not opening their mouths very far when they speak!

Furthermore most of them were suffering from hunger and ill-health from the journey; there was uncertainty about their survival; a deep sense of homesickness and isolation weighed on them all; the imbalance of men and women was obvious to everyone; and there was a gross sense of injustice among the convicts.

But when we look at the Psalm, it *is* appropriate -

*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!'* (3, 4)

When we read these words through convicts' eyes they are relevant indeed. They had suffered but the ships had not gone down. Now they were out of the stuffy filth of the convict holds and at least on dry land and breathing fresh air.

For you, O Lord, have delivered my soul from death,

*my eyes from tears,
my feet from stumbling,
that I may walk before the Lord
in the land of the living (8,9)*

At least those who gathered to hear Johnson's message were alive! They had been delivered from death—which many who took to sea in those days were not. Indeed, all the ships had arrived safely, which in itself was something to be grateful for in those uncertain times.

*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
I will fulfil my vows to the Lord
in the presence of his people (12-14)*

So there was something to give thanks for—and even here in this strange land they could do it.

In this year of 1988, many people are reading that Psalm again. And for contemporary Australia, it is still relevant and pertinent—what can we render to the Lord for all His benefits to us? We live in a 'lucky country'—perhaps a blessed one?

*I will sacrifice a thank offering to you
and call on the name of the Lord.
I will fulfil my vows to the Lord
in the presence of all his people (17, 18)*

So the Psalm concludes with a vow of dedication to the Lord. Not many of those who heard Richard Johnson made such a vow—but there were, no doubt, some who did. And so the gospel was planted in the south land of the Holy Spirit.

1. HE WAS A MAN OF COURAGE IN THE FACE OF HARDSHIP

What kind of a man was Richard Johnson? He showed many qualities which provide a model for Australian Christianity. Of course, he had his weaknesses. But he also displayed many strengths. For instance, he showed dogged courage in the face of hardship.

He was consistently frustrated by the lack of support he received from the authorities. They expected him to serve their interests, but did little for him.

In 1798, he wrote a letter to the new Governor Hunter bitterly complaining of Philip's failure to help him. On one occasion, he had been instructed to hold services only at 6 a.m., but the soldiers all walked out at 6.45. He had observed men gambling within sight of the meeting place; soldiers actually prevented people from attending church; and so on.

Moreover, although he waited patiently for four years, no chapel was built for him. Eventually, with convict help, at a cost of sixty seven pounds, twelve shillings and eleven pence halfpenny, he personally built a structure of wattle and daub with a

thatched roof. Five years later, it was demolished by convicts. A memorial monument now stands near the site of this building in Richard Johnson Square in the city of Sydney.

His first child was stillborn (letter to Fricker, 9 April 1790).

There was regular shortage of food (which affected all, of course). He had to supplement his family's diet from his own garden (Fricker, 4 October 1791).

He was not treated with the respect his position deserved. In his journal, he lamented, 'I am yet in the most miserable hut, and at times find it difficult where to read, pray or write; cannot but think of myself as exceedingly injured and slighted. While the governor has one grand mansion in Sydney and another at Rose Hill, I am forced to live in a miserable hut, and that built at my own cost; and as for any place of worship, that is the last thing thought of. Oh for more Christian patience and fortitude' (2 October 1790).

He had to rise regularly at four or five in the morning to go to preach at Rose Hill and Parramatta—and usually found it necessary to stay in rough accommodation overnight.

His biggest sorrow was the failure of his ministry to touch many convicts. In his letter to Hunter he wrote, 'Gross immoralities, depredations, drunkenness, riots, and even murders, (are) daily committed; ...becoming more open and flagrant...' (Hunter, 1798).

Of course, with such a disproportion between men and women, drunkenness and fornication were rife. For example, on 7 February, 1788, Governor Philip inaugurated the State of New South Wales with a special ceremony. The convicts were all told to be washed and tidily dressed. But the night before, the women now having been landed, there were 'scenes of debauchery and riot' and most were dishevelled and degraded (Barnard, 1986:58, 59). Bigamy, too, was a problem, as convicts with spouses in England married a second time having given up hope of ever seeing their partners again.

Johnson preached against sexual immorality—'You may frame excuses and plead necessity... but the word of God... admits of no plea or excuse'—but with little hope of success (1792: 57).

Finally, the chaplain was beset by ill-health. We would probably say today that he was at the brink of a nervous breakdown. Of his magistrate's duty he wrote; 'It is almost too much for my health and spirits...' (Letter to Fricker).

And again, 'My health is not so good nor my constitution so strong as formerly and therefore I feel it impracticable and impossible for me either to preach or to converse with you so freely as my inclination and affection would prompt me to do' (1792: iv).

On another occasion, he recorded, 'My feelings almost overwhelmed to think of the hardships I meet with; at other times I rejoice in the reflection that what I was doing, I was doing for the honour of God and for the good of my fellow creatures. Hold out faith and patience!'

Johnson's persistence and dedication are a challenge to all contemporary Australian Christians. There is still much to discourage us today, but, Johnson's fortitude reminds us to be faithful to the Word of God and to continue to proclaim it wherever and whenever we can.

2. HE WAS AN EVANGELIST

Johnson was clearly an evangelical of strong biblical conviction. Some secular histories seem to present him more as a religious moralist—as a melancholy, vendor of God's laws—than as a joyful purveyor of good news. This is an unfortunate image.

Johnson was suggested for his task by the renowned social reformer William Wilberforce and was numbered among the Anglican evangelicals of his day. This was the era of John Wesley (who died just four years after the First Fleet reached our shores). As a result, Johnson was nicknamed 'Methody Dick' (*Time*, 108). He was not a Methodist, but he certainly was an evangelical.

In 1792, he wrote *An Address to all the inhabitants and especially to the unhappy prisoners and convicts in the colonies established at Port Jackson and Norfolk Island*.

The following extract from this small book, Johnson's only published work, very clearly presents the gospel message:

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 blessings; he bore the cross, that 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, or faith. 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 who justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted to him for righteousness... This believing is sometimes called a coming to Christ, al looking unto Christ, a trusting in him, a casting our burden upon 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 inheritance in what the gospel unfolds and offers...

All who have thus, through grace, believed, and are daily living a life of faith in the Son of God, shall be saved: but such as carelessly neglect, or wilfully reject this gospel, must be damned. Think, I beseech you, of this!

Now is the time to obtain the blessings revealed in the gospel... My brethren, it is your duty, your wisdom, and will finally prove to be your greatest happiness, to seek an interest in this salvation for yourselves (1792:12-15)

What a clear exposition of the gospel! There can be no doubt of Johnson's commitment to the message of salvation through the Lord Jesus Christ.

As noted earlier, it seems clear that this was the message that God, in his sovereignty, wanted proclaimed in this land from the very beginning. In his unassuming way, Richard Johnson laid a solid foundation for all who would follow him. The pity is that so often we have deviated from the simplicity of that unaffected proclamation of the Word of God.

3. HE WAS A LOVER OF THE BIBLE

The ship's manifesto for the First Fleet included the following—700 spades, 700 gimlets, 8000 fish hooks, one Bible! (Dare, 30). It is tempting to draw a contrast between our first irreligious settlers and those Pilgrim Fathers who settled the United States. But in fact, hundreds of copies of Scripture were landed here in 1788—thanks to Richard Johnson. Through the good offices of the newly-formed Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, he brought 100 Bibles, 400 Testaments and 500 Psalters. He also had with him—

- 100 Osterwald's Necessity for reading the Scriptures
- 25 Plain Exhortations to Prisoners
- 200 Sermons on the Mount
- 200 Exercises against Lying
- 50 Woodward's Caution to Swearers
- 200 Christian Soldiers
- 100 Exhortations to Chastity
- 100 Dixon's Spelling Books
- 1 Set of SPG tracts

Furthermore, in his *Address*, the first of his rules for Christian living is—'Read and Study the Scriptures' (1792: 36). He tried to teach the illiterate to read and he organised classes to this end. Unfortunately, some people sold the Bibles and others used the paper for kindling or smoking. But the Word did go out.

4. HE WAS A MAN OF PRAYER

Again, in his *Address*, he urges his hearers to pray. First of all, they should pray alone, spending special time in solitude with God. Then they should gather as families. And finally, they should worship together with the congregation of believers. 'Be constant and diligent in prayer to God,' he declares (1792: 52).

He himself spent time in communion with the Lord. One of his major difficulties was the inadequacy of his quarters and the lack of a place where he could be alone for prayer. In one of his letters, he wrote, 'I have need of wisdom and I hope my good friends will not cease daily to pray for me' (Fricker, 4 October 1791).

If any concept is fundamental to a healthy faith it is that of vital and authentic prayer. Johnson understood that well.

5. HE WAS A MAN OF COMPASSION

In the preface to his *Address*, he wrote, 'This affectionate address is dedicated and presented by their very sincere and sympathising friend and faithful servant in the gospel of Christ'. These were not just words. He really did try sincerely to be a friend to all the members of the new colony.

He went on, in exhorting them to leave off stealing, swearing and the like, to say, 'I do not mean, my friends, to reflect hardly upon you for what is past and cannot be recalled. I pity your past misconduct; I sympathise with you under your present sufferings' (1792: 61).

He loved to visit the convict labourers in their own huts, even more than preaching (Fricker, 4 October 91).

This compassion was nowhere better displayed than in his attitude to those of different denominations or different nationalities.

6. HE WAS AN UNPREJUDICED MAN

Johnson had friends in various denominations, including Henry Fricker, a Baptist to whom he wrote regularly. In one of his letters to Fricker, he makes a light-hearted reference to the fact that had his young wife Mary stayed longer in England, she would have been converted to Fricker's ideas. As it is, he went on, 'she is about half a Baptist and half a Methodist'. He wrote—

Brethren, I do not ask you, what religious persuasion or denomination you have espoused... I do not address you as Churchmen or Dissenters, Roman Catholics or Protestants, as Jews or Gentiles; I suppose, yea, I know that there are persons of every denomination among you. But I speak to you as men and women, as intelligent creatures, possessed of understanding and reason... And my sole aim and desire is, to be instrumental in turning you from darkness to light, from sin to holiness, from the power of Satan to the service and favour of God. (1792: 24).

Clearly membership of the Kingdom was far more vital to him than religious affiliation.

His attitude to the aborigines was beautifully expressed—not only in words, but also in actions. He took into his own home a fifteen year old aborigine girl named Abaroo who had been dreadfully afflicted with smallpox. He taught her to read and was hopeful of her coming to faith in Christ. She lived there for months.

One of his greatest frustrations was that the aborigines would never be attracted to the gospel the way the Europeans were living—

I would rather plead with you for the sake of the poor, unenlightened savages who daily visit us or who reside among us... Oh beware of laying stumbling-blocks in the way of these blind people... But consider what may be the happy effects were the natives to see, hear and observe in you... a conduct answerable to the doctrine and precepts of the gospel... This might, by the blessing of God, be one of the most effectual means... to engage them to seek an interest in the blessing of the gospel for themselves.' (1792: 69).

In this way, Johnson showed a pattern which could have been emulated by those who followed, rather than the cheating, cruelty and slaughter which often occurred. Even other clergy later wrote off the aborigines as being incapable of faith for salvation and even of being debarred from the gospel.

Johnson, however, put his faith into action and tried to demonstrate the love of Christ to those unhappy people. If only more white Australians had acted similarly over the years, there would not be the anger and sense of injustice that is so rife among aborigines today.

On the other hand, many Christians have acted as Johnson did and as a result there is a vigorous, ongoing demonstration of vital Christianity among thousands of aborigines today, especially in the remote parts of the country. If no other benefit has touched them, they are recipients of the greatest benefit of all—the blessing of inclusion in Christ.

7. HE WAS A MAN OF HOPE

In spite of all the discouragements, Johnson never gave up hope.

Two years after his arrival here, he wrote to Henry Fricker, 'I wish to see the poor heathen brought to the knowledge of Christianity and hope in time to see or hear of the dawns of that time when these shall be given for our Lord's heritage and the uttermost parts of the earth for his possession (Fricker, 9 April 1790).

And two years later again, in spite of all the frustrations mentioned above, he concluded his *Address* like this—

Longing, hoping and 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 of the earth for his possession and when all the ends of the earth shall see, believe and rejoice in the salvation of God—Psalm 2:9; 98:3. (1792:73).

In spite of all, Richard Johnson had a firm belief that the gospel would triumph in the earth and that all the heathen would turn to the Lord!

We cannot but help draw a parallel with Australia now. At times, the task of reaching the nation for Christ may seem hopeless. But like Johnson, we can see beyond the disappointment and believe in the sovereign purpose of God. Jesus shall reign in Australia.

From the very beginning, God's sovereign purpose has been clear. There is a destiny for this nation. We are still young. Our history has hardly begun yet. The church in this land is still finding its own identity.

What will this century hold? There is great reason for hope. There are many signs of revival stirring everywhere.

By the grace of God, the spirit of Richard Johnson will live on and the people of this south land will in spirit and truth become the people of God.

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