



Your Excellency, Honourable Professor Marie Bashir, Church leaders, ladies & gentlemen;

The Rev Richard Johnson as Australia's first Chaplain spent 12 years in Australia from 1788 to 1800.

The first six years as Chaplain were by himself though the Rev James Bain a Military Chaplain to the NSW Corp arrived three & a half years later in September 1791.

Johnson had to fulfill several roles as military chaplain, prison chaplain, parish priest & as a missionary particularly to the aboriginals as well as being a husband , father & provider especially during the early years of food deprivation.

He & his wife lived on the ship Golden Grove for some months before a cabbage palm walled building was built with a thatched roof which leaked continually flooding the dwelling during heavy rainfalls. (See lot 30 in the centre of [James Mehans 1807 map](#) of Sydney)

Several years later a permanent building was erected a block away from here where the Lands building now stands with the many statues of pioneering explorers on its walls and opposite is a drinking fountain in Macquarie Place at the corner of Bridge & Loftus Streets with the words from John 4:13 & 14

“whoever drinketh of this water shall thirst again; But whoever drinketh of the water that I shall give shall never thirst”.

William Wilberforce & John Newton, the former slave trader of Amazing Grace fame were the chief sponsors of the Botany Bay chaplaincy, Newton becoming Johnson's important mentor, confidant & advisor, calling him the "first Apostle to the South Seas". He was encouraged not to yield to the secular battle at the time raging against the Age of Faith being challenged by the Age of Reason & Relativism – a battle that continues to this present day!

After Arthur Philip left in December 1792, Major Francis Grose took over administration of the colony & was uncooperative viewing Anglican Evangelicals & Methodists as trouble makers though he gave significant support to Rev. Bain the regimental chaplain, who was not an evangelical. Grose's son was later to become a Church of England Clergyman.

Evangelical Anglicans back in England were criticised both externally and within their own church. Newton & three friends founded the Eclectic Society & William Wilberforce was also involved. These men saw Johnson as "the means of sending the gospel to the other side of the Globe".

One of the interesting connections was the Anglican evangelical influence of the Grammar school he attended at Hull where Wilberforce & Marsden also attended. It was William Wilberforce who suggested to William Pitt who led the 1786 government to have a Chaplain.

Another great influence was the same evangelical persuasion at Magdalene College, Cambridge University where he graduated with a BA.

The First Christian Service in Australia 226 years ago was held on a grassy hill under a tree somewhere near here!

As you are aware the first service conducted by the chaplain on Australian soil was an impressive occasion and has often been described. Careful preparations were made, the convicts being ordered to 'appear as clean as circumstances will admit...' and 'No Man to be Absent On Any Account Whatever', the guard was to be changed earlier than usual, so as to give those who had been relieved 'time to cleanse themselves before Church', and the 'Church Drum' was to beat at 10 O'clock.

This service took place on 3rd February 1788. The Fleet had been in Sydney Cove the previous Sunday, 27th January, but no service was held until some semblance of order had been created on shore.

Johnson would no doubt have been impressed by the special nature of this occasion and would have chosen his text and prepared his sermon with some care.

The content of the sermon has not survived but we do know the text was Psalm 116 verse 12:

'What shall I render unto the Lord for all his benefits toward me?'

This verse is set in a context which was particularly appropriate for the occasion as it reflects the experience of someone who has undergone severe and repeated sufferings but has survived to give thanks to God for his safe deliverance.

Johnson would very likely have drawn his congregation's attention to the way in which the experience of those who had arrived in the First Fleet was parallel to the experience of the psalmist, and then gone on to urge them to respond to God's benefits in the way suggested by verse 13; 'I will take the cup of salvation and call upon the name of the Lord.'

The sense of relief and gratitude at having finally landed in an area that at least looked comparatively promising would thus have given the Chaplain the opportunity to speak to the situation of both convicts and soldiers in a meaningful way and this would account for the manner in which the congregation responded.

The service was well received.

Watkin Tench reported that the behaviour of both the troops and convicts was 'equally regular and attentive'.

Two weeks later on February 17, Rev. Johnson celebrated the first Communion in the colony. The service was held in Lieutenant Ralph Clark's tent, borrowed for the occasion. The event was recorded by Clark in his journal. 'I will keep this Table also as long as I live for it is the first Table that ever the Lords Supper was eaten from in this country'

Among Rev Richard Johnson's qualities were the following :

He had a kind disposition.

He was generous.

He was humble & devout.

He was humane shown by fostering aboriginal children including a 15 yr old girl *Abaroo* whose parents had died. He visited on numerous occasions the huts of many convicts and visited before his departure the prison hulks, considerably distressing him.

He was dedicated & hardworking, receiving very little help from the authorities especially building the first Australian church (on this site) with little help. He paid for it himself.

He use to get up sometimes at 4 AM to travel to Parramatta to preach & performed numerous funerals, marriages & baptisms, as well as consoling those about to be executed. To be precise by Oct 1792 he had performed 226 baptisms, 220 marriages & 854 burials.

God blessed his farming, producing Australia's first Citrus orchard.

He grew Australia's first wheat crop. His garden in Bridge St in 1790 produced nearly a thousand cucumbers as well as other fruit & vegetables.

On his 100 acre farm granted to him which he called Canterbury Vale, the suburb now named after it, by 1795 he had cropped 38 acres of wheat that yielded 16 to 18 bushels per acre probably becoming Australia's first wheat farmer, and by 1800 the year he left he had grown an acre of orange trees, nectarines, peaches & apricots as well as a two acre vineyard & stocked 150 sheep plus some cattle & horses.

Tench recorded that he was the best farmer in the Colony.

He suffered hardship.

In the early settlement they had little food & poor accommodation and he later developed health problems.

He had dysentery on the voyage out, was continually exhausted from his labours, on occasions had little sleep when guarding his home from looters, & lived in a rain drenched house.

The Johnsons suffered disappointment and grief. Their first child was stillborn. Milbah their next child died just after returning to England.

[Little is known about Mary Johnson his wife](#) as there is [only one letter](#) recorded of her corresponding with friends or relatives. She must have been a very pioneering, courageous, adaptable, patient, caring & thoughtful woman.

The Church he had built was burnt down in 1798 by convicts who resented the Christian commitment of Governor Hunter who reintroduced policy requiring compulsory church attendance.

Johnson was a man of prayer & hope looking beyond the immediate & mortal believing in God's sovereign purposes for this new nation. He had brought with him over 4,000 pieces of Christian literature including 100 Bibles & 400 New Testament's.

Johnson before accepting the position offered to him, wrote:

The feelings which I had upon receiving this letter and for some time after, are easier felt than described.

For several nights and days both my sleep and appetite were in a great measure taken away. I did little else than weep and sigh, with fervent prayer and fasting.

I implored divine direction what to do in an affair of so weighty moment...

On the one hand, the idea of leaving my parents, relations, friends, and the respectful connections which I had formed, the dangers of the sea, the descriptions of people I was going with, the place to which we were going, to the very ends of the earth, to a country wild and uncultivated, to be exposed to savages, and perhaps to various wild beasts of prey; these and such

like ideas so impressed my mind with fear and terror that I sometimes was greatly inclined, and almost resolved, to decline the offer...

But then on the other hand, when I considered the propriety, nay the necessity of some person going out in this capacity, how the offer of the appointment was made to me; my situation at that time; having no charge of my own; the hopes and prospects of being rendered useful in the reformation of those poor and abandoned people; the power and promises of God to protect me in any place or situation wherein, in the line of duty, I followed the leading of providence, and the prospects of a glorious reward hereafter, laid up in heaven for all God's faithful servants and people; these considerations overbalanced and removed all my scruples and fears, and induced me to give my free consent to enter upon this hazardous expedition.

He was Australia's pioneer educationalist establishing Australia's first schools, one being right here on this very site of the First church where we celebrated the Bicentenary in 1993. Though two independent small schools had been established by women, Johnson was employed by the Crown reporting to the Governor who made provision for school funds as early as 1789.

Writing to his friends in England in a letter about educating the children Johnson wrote:

"It is from a long and ardent wish that the minds of the rising generation of this Colony may be duly thus impressed with such moral and religious sentiment, that the following Plan has been adopted, & Rules & regulations have been made, which I hope every Parent as well as others concerned in bringing up children will see it to be their duty & interest to promote.

Within ten years in 1798, 150 children (before the fire) were enrolled at Sydney, 171 at Parramatta with another 137 at Hawkesbury.

Amongst the 18 Rules for the first school in Australia in 1798 were these three:

1. That this School is to be considered for the Benefit of Children of all Descriptions of Persons, whether Soldiers, Settlers or Convicts, provided they comply with the Rules here laid down.
2. The children to be catechized, & to sing one of Dr Watt's Hymns for Children every Sunday forenoon, & to be catechized at Church at such times as Mr Johnson or the clergyman officiating may find convenient. Such parents as neglect or refuse to send their children to be thus instructed, to be deprived of the Privilege of the School.
3. A Form of Prayer to be read by one of the School Masters, & one of Dr. Watt's Hymns to be sung morning & evening. And it is strongly recommended that Parents will send their Children early to School to pray, as they are able, for a Blessing to attend the Instruction given them. So a new generation developed known as the Currency Lads & Lasses, certainly different from their parents as expressed in the quote by Peter Cunningham, Senior Naval Surgeon who wrote in 1820 of the colony's native born ".....they are little tainted with the vices so prominent among their parents. Drunkenness is almost unknown with them and honesty proverbial; the few of them that have been convicted having acted under the bad auspices of their parents and relatives....." Sir William Burton Supreme Court Judge in Sydney reported in 1833 how he was impressed with the law-abiding nature of the native born. He wrote "There was not one of them ever tried before the writer for any of those atrocious crimes which are attributed to their country, but belong only

to the convict class; nor did he know of any person born in the colony, being tried or even charged with, either the offence of rape or any other licentious crime; nor has he ever found any offence committed by any of them, such as to call upon him to pronounce sentence of death; and no such sentence has ever been passed with his knowledge, or any crime committed with such a degree of violence to justify it”.

It is interesting how this education brought renewal & see how a godly education system can bring a righteous destiny to a nation!

Johnson also helped initiate the first orphan school in the Colony under Governor King raising money for the Female Orphan School at Parramatta before & after his departure from the colony. Last year bicentenary celebrations took place of the laying of the orphan school’s foundation stone by Governor Macquarie. This year, 200 years ago, 70 of the first female orphans entered the Institution.

Johnson was a fair man stating in 1792:

" My commission from God, extends equally & alike to all the inhabitants, without distinction. It is my duty to preach to all, to pray for all, & to admonish everyone" which led one group of convicts to say about him that “they did not believe there was so good a man (beside) in the whole world! In a letter to England in October 1791 Johnson shared this hope:

"I trust I have not laboured wholly in vain, and I trust in time, in spite of all opposition and obstacles, God will make bare his holy arm in the conversion and salvation of the souls of men. . . . Last Sunday I preached I suppose to not less than six or eight hundred, and I have since heard that one at least went away sorrowful and heavy-hearted, and some others rejoicing in the Son of God manifested towards them. "

Johnson was a man with a vision for Australia and beyond; he was a man with the heart of God. In his 74 page book edited & published in England by John Newton in 1792 titled [An Address to the Inhabitants of the Colonies established in NSW & Norfolk Island](#), Johnson concluded by saying he was:

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. Johnson was missionary minded.

In 1798 he hosted until his departure several missionary families who sought safety from the Tahitian tribal wars. Later these same missionaries were to evangelise the entire colony in the early 1800’s. Newton exulted Johnson when he said:

“The seed you sow in the settlement may be sown for future generations & be transplanted in time far & near. I please myself with the hope that Port Jackson may be the spot from whence light may hence spread in all directions.”

It is interesting his successor Samuel Marsden who brought the Gospel two hundred years ago this year to New Zealand wrote in 1796 about Australia:

It is my opinion that God will ere long visit New South Wales with His heavenly grace. Out of these stones He will raise up children unto Abraham. There has not been shaking yet among the dry bones, but the Son of Man is commanded to prophesy and I hope by and by, the Lord will command the wind to blow. Stir up Thy strength and come among us.

Marsden's vision for Australia included not only the evangelisation of the Aborigines and the colonists, but the nations of the south seas and beyond. He saw a divine plan in all human affairs. In 1814, in a sermon given after the first of seven voyages to New Zealand, Marsden reminded his listeners, that while the decision to found a penal settlement at Botany Bay was motivated by expediency, God, who governed the world, had another strategy in mind--the evangelisation of the heathen nations of the South Seas. Marsden believed that God's plan was to equip Australians for the job of missionary evangelism of the surrounding nations. This has resulted in all the nations of the Pacific now having Christianity as their major faith.

Today our challenge is to continue this mighty task of Johnson & Marsden.

In conclusion, my prayer is the following based on [Psalm 78](#).

We thank you Lord for the godly Christian heritage that has been passed down to us as Australians for us to entrust to our children and their children after them. For godly men & women in our past who pioneered this country trusting in your providence and guidance. For our Judeo Christian foundations which has given us just laws & our system of government which is the envy of many other nations & continues to draw people here to our shores.

We pray that we & our children after us will always put our trust in you & not forget what you have done for us to continue to obey your commandments.

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