

EDUCATION a TEACHER and the Christian Connection

Another in the series of "and the Christian Connection."

Thomas Shadrach James

A most unlikely man was engaged in education in the early days of Australian schooling. Even more unlikely is the fact that he said he went into teaching because 'God spoke' to him.

Thomas Shadrach James was born into a Tamil speaking Indian family on the island of Mauritius in 1859. He immigrated to Australia as a young man, after his mother died and his father remarried. His dream was to be a surgeon so he started studying Medicine at Melbourne University but became very ill with typhoid and had to stop his studies. He recovered, but the typhoid left him with shaky hands and he realised they would never be steady enough for him to operate. What was he going to do? His dream was crushed. He was a sad and disappointed young man, a stranger in a strange country.

Thomas found himself at a Christian meeting attended by both white and Aboriginal people. It was held in a marquee in a paddock near the beach. "God spoke to me at that meeting," he told people and his life changed direction.

It was at that meeting that he met Janet and Daniel Matthews who ran an Aboriginal mission at Maloga on the Murray River. Thomas believed that God told him to go and teach the Aboriginal children at the Maloga mission. The Matthews were delighted to hear that Thomas wanted to join the mission, but they couldn't afford to pay a teacher. That didn't deter Thomas! Knowing that it was what God wanted for his life, Thomas said he'd teach without being paid.

And he turned out to be a very successful teacher! He established an education program attended by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children. The school flourished with Thomas leading it, and after two years, in 1883, the NSW Education Department officially appointed James as the salaried head teacher of the Maloga school.

The children and the community looked up to Thomas and he was very popular. When he married a Yorta Yorta woman from the mission he became accepted ever after by the Aboriginal people as one of themselves. As an outstanding educator, Thomas was concerned for the community and for all aspects of his pupils' lives, including their spiritual and moral education. Thomas advocated strongly for equality for all people and he petitioned the government for full education standards for all children at a time when Aboriginal children were second class citizens in their own country.

As a teacher he inspired his students. Many of them caught his passion for fairness and he taught and guided them to achieve justice and equality for Aboriginal people. William Cooper the instigator of what is now called NAIDOC WEEK was a pupil of his, so was Sir Douglas Nicholls, the Aboriginal activist who later became governor of South Australia. His own son, Shadrach James trained as a teacher and became his father's assistant.

He was known and loved as 'Grandfather James', a strong role model and an outstanding educator who taught people far more than the school curriculum.

How prepared are you to listen to the voice of God and obey? Do you want to live an inspirational life? Are you willing to obey the word of God? You just never know what God could do through you when you obey God's calling on your life.

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