



## From Our Vicar

Rev. Wayne Walters

### What is National Christian Heritage Sunday?

National Christian Heritage Sunday celebrates the Gospel of Jesus Christ arriving on Australia's shores.

As featured two weeks ago in our Aboriginal Sunday service, the scripture passage first read in this land was brought by Australia's first Christian Minister, Rev. Richard Johnson. He arrived with the first fleet on the 20 January 1788. Then, on 3rd February 1788, Rev. Johnson held the first Christian service in Australia.

As Australia's first Chaplain, Rev Johnson spent 12 years in Australia from 1788 to 1800 with several roles as military and prison chaplain, parish priest and as a missionary to the indigenous community.

William Wilberforce and 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, confidante and advisor, calling him the "first Apostle to the South Seas". Newton with friends such as William Wilberforce founded the Eclectic Society seeing Johnson as "the means of sending the gospel to the other side of the Globe". It was William Wilberforce in 1786 who suggested to the then Prime Minister William Pitt to have a Chaplain.

The Fleet had been in Sydney Cove the previous Sunday, 27 January, but no service was held until some semblance of order had been created on shore, the service taking place the following Sunday the 3 February 1788 on a nearby grassy hill, the text being Psalm 116:12; 'What shall I render unto the Lord for all his benefits toward me?'

As indigenous elder and Christian leader, Uncle Dr Ps Ray Minniecon challenged us two weeks ago, this question is most pressing for non-indigenous Australians to respond to. It is 'we' who share disproportionately in these benefits, undeniably in great part at the expense of the original inhabitants of this land. Yet paradoxically, and in the gracious providence of God, it is our indigenous people who have most readily embraced the greatest benefit, which is the very gospel that was brought in such contradictory and culturally enmeshed circumstances.

Johnson himself was a man of prayer and hope looking beyond the immediate and mortal, believing in God's sovereign purposes for this new nation.

He was Australia's pioneer educationalist establishing Australia's first schools.

May his legacy and the challenge of the scripture he chose inspire us to live courageously and humbly for the reconciliation to God and each other of all peoples on this land, for the shared justice and welfare of all.

*Adapted from an article by Dr Graham McLennan.*