

20 January 2024

## **What Shall I Return to the Lord? (Psalm 116)**

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The psalm we just read is the first biblical passage heard, the first passage preached, on Aboriginal land. The date was Sunday 3 February 1788, and the Reverend Richard Johnson, chaplain to the First Fleet, led a service of worship under a ‘great tree’ near the edge of the water. A junior officer in attendance recorded: ‘We had a very good sermon ... the behaviour of the convicts was regular and attentive’.<sup>1</sup>

We read the whole of psalm 116, but the particular text chosen by the Reverend Johnson was verse 12: ‘What shall I return to the Lord for all his bounty to me?’ or – in the language of the King James Version – ‘What shall I render unto the Lord for all his benefits toward me?’ And I wonder, what did Richard Johnson do with this text? What benefits did he have in mind? How and to whom did he think it spoke?

We’re reading this text today, because we’ve been invited to by Pastor Ray Minniecon. Uncle Ray is a Senior Aboriginal Christian leader and one of Australia’s key indigenous theological voices. He is a descendant of the Kabi Kabi and Gurang Gurang nations of South-East Queensland, and the South Sea Islander people, and he leads the Scarred Tree Indigenous Ministries at St John’s Glebe, in Sydney. His suggestion for this Aboriginal Sunday is that Australian churches reflect on this reading, opening our ears and hearts as we listen deeply and are challenged to respond.

Next Friday, January 26, Australia marks the anniversary of the arrival of that First Fleet. Pastor Ray reflects: ‘the whole nation pauses to celebrate, reflect, and remember that in 1788 Captain Arthur Phillip, sailed into what is now known as Sydney Cove with eleven shiploads of convicts, to establish a penal colony, hoist the

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<sup>1</sup> K.J. Cable, ‘Richard Johnson (1753-1827)’, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*  
<https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/johnson-richard-2275>

British flag at Sydney Cove, and claim possession over these lands on behalf of the British Empire. For Australia's First Peoples', he goes on, 'there is a completely different narrative. This day and date signify a "Day of Mourning." "Survival Day." "Sovereignty Day." It represents the disruption and dispossession of First Nations history and cultural connections to their lands, language and heritage. This day and date confront and remind First Nations Peoples about their loss and ongoing suffering and trauma and struggle for justice, dignity and basic human rights'. And Pastor Ray asks: 'How can these two powerful competing national narratives embark on a meaningful Biblical and theological dialogue about their future together on these lands we call Australia? And with the Creator's blessings?'<sup>2</sup>

I am struck by this notion of 'two narratives', and how difficult it is to learn to see the world from another's perspective. Think of the Reverend Richard Johnson and those to whom he preached that day. Who knows what was in his mind as he chose this text to speak of God to a ragtag group of people profoundly displaced, many of them facing life sentences and penal servitude. How did the question: 'What shall I return to the Lord for all his bounty to me?' land for them? What 'benefits from the Lord?' did they have to celebrate – except perhaps, after a perilous sea voyage, the fact of arriving finally on dry land. And did Johnson have any awareness of the First Peoples who may have been witnessing this strange gathering, any sense of what his arrival would mean for them? In the circumstances, and at face value, it seems an obtuse text to have chosen.

Yet – and I think this is a profound insight – Pastor Ray suggests that this text continues to pose a question to settler Australia. A sandstone monument stands on Gadigal land, at the intersection of Hunter, Bligh and Castlereagh Streets, in Sydney in remembrance of this sermon. Pastor Ray asks: 'When you see the monument - what nation around the world has got a monument to a biblical passage that asks this incredible question? "What shall I render unto the Lord for all of his benefits towards me?" That's such a powerful question. It's not something for us Aboriginal

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<sup>2</sup> Common Grace, Aboriginal Sunday Church Resource Toolkit, 21 January 2024, p.8.

people specifically to respond to, because it was addressed to the convicts, and now it's addressed to this country in this nation, and these are the beneficiaries of that convict era', beneficiaries of the suffering, dispossession and death of Australia's first peoples. Minniecon says: 'That first sermon, or that first text actually, 'What shall I render unto the Lord?' It's the language of exchange. What shall I give in return?' And there's an unmistakable echo of the prophet Micah: 'What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love mercy and walk humbly with your God'. And it seems to me it's as if there is from the beginning, a kind of unsettlement, an awareness of benefits unearned, undeserved; a putting in question of the spirit of entitlement and a call to expanded awareness and responsivity.

As we've heard, in 1939 William Cooper invited the Australian churches to spend this Sunday before January 26 in prayer and solidarity with Aboriginal people. As we respond to this call today, we acknowledge the unresolvedness of this history of colonisation, the continuing reality of racism, dispossession, the refusal of radical truth-telling and hearing; and we acknowledge the yearning of our hearts and the hearts of many that we may forge a different way of being together, sharing country, learning from and loving each other. We acknowledge the work, lament and prayer poured out by all who seek to lead us into a better place.

Christianity in Australia is deeply implicated, of course, in our ambiguous and complex history. In many cases, it functioned as an instrument of colonial power and profound cultural loss, justifying the violence of the oppressor. But not always. And, for many of us, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, we can also find in this Christian tradition a resource to help us stay with and in the painful, unresolved place we continue to inhabit as a nation. In a powerful article called "'To live with respect in a world worth living in": What I've learned from my friend, Stan Grant', Jack Jacobs writes movingly of this resource.

'Aboriginal Christianity has little to do with the church, with its kingdoms and cathedrals, and more to do with the strange figure of Jesus Christ himself, the "man

of sorrows”. Christ on the cross is a natural ancestor for Aboriginal people: a “tribal man”, as I once heard him described by a Wiradjuri Elder. His is the brown, battered, body hanging on his final tree, who calls us all, by way of his own brokenness, to love each other in our shared lament. In an age obsessed with politics and its power to define every aspect of our lives, this body, a symbol for the lament of Aboriginal people, calls us to embrace a deeper, more rooted humanity: to do away with the spells that hold us captive to our own poor imaginings and sit silently with sadness’. And Jacobs concludes: ‘To witness our shared sorrow may be the only truly human response we can have to a broken situation like the one our nation finds itself in’.<sup>3</sup>

Today let us bring our sorrow, our struggle to ‘return to the Lord’ what we have received, our struggle truly to do justice and love mercy in this land. And let us pray this Prayer for Reconciliation, written by Joshua Lane, Kanolu and Lardil Man.

Our Father, Our Creator,

We humbly come before you today acknowledging the weight of our shared history in Australia. We acknowledge that we are all made in your image and called to live in harmony with one another. Yet, as a nation, we have fallen short of this calling, and ask for your guidance and wisdom to enable us to become agents of change in the pursuit of reconciliation with one another.

We pray for the courage to speak up for the marginalised and oppressed, and to be a voice for the generations that have suffered under the weight of racism and discrimination. May your love and grace inspire us to take action towards healing and reconciliation, and to work towards a future where all are treated with dignity and respect.

Help us to listen to the voices of those who have been silenced for too long, and to work together to see restoration and healing.

May we be guided by your love and grace, and may our actions be a

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/yindyamarra-a-world-worth-living-in-tribute-to-stan-grant/103223106>

reflection of your goodness.

May your Holy Spirit guide us towards a future where love, mercy, and compassion reign. We pray for your hand to be upon us as we work towards reconciliation, and we entrust our efforts into your hands.

In Jesus' name we pray, **Amen.**<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Common Grace, Aboriginal Sunday Church Resource Toolkit, 21 January 2024.