

First Christian Service

3rd February 1788

Held on a grassy hill under a tree

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

From Neil K. Macintosh *Richard Johnson Chaplain to the Colony of New South Wales* p 49 Library of Australian History Published 1978

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 eat of in this country'

Link: http://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/discover_collections/history_nation/religion/early/index.html