



GOVERNMENT HOUSE
SYDNEY

Speaking Points - FINAL

St James' Church Sydney
Bicentenary Commemoration Dinner

Friday, 15 November 2019

St James' Church

FULL SPEECH

Thank you for your welcome. I am delighted to join you to celebrate the Bicentenary of St James' Church. As we gather here 'on country' of the Gadigal, one of 29 Aboriginal groups of the Eora Nation, I pay my respects to Elders, past, present and emerging.

I also acknowledge last year's significant and special ceremony at St James', the unveiling of the Eora memorial plaque on 29th July 2018. This event paid respects to the First Peoples of this land and the Eora Nation, and signified the importance to this Church of both recognition and reconciliation.

There is a church in the heart of London also called St James, St James' Piccadilly. English poet William Blake, who of course we know, among other things, for his anthem *Jerusalem*, was baptised there in 1757. It is the church where Sir Joseph Banks, the botanist who voyaged with Cook, was baptised.

Both sit in the heart of international cities and play expansive roles in the religious, civic and musical life of their communities. Both are a place for active faith and quiet contemplation, a place for community groups to meet and come together, a place for all

comers to both seek and find sanctuary. They are Churches of and for the people. There is a nice synergy.

But it is *this* simply built, but beautiful Church, designed by the convict architect Francis Greenway, and all who have worshipped here, who have found quietude here, who have studied its elegance and listened to its music that we commemorate this evening.

231 years ago - and 31 years prior to the laying of the Foundation Stone for this Church - a youngish Reverend Richard Johnson stepped ashore from the *Golden Grove*, one of the ships of the First Fleet. Appointed 'Chaplain to the Settlement' by Royal warrant, Reverend Johnson conducted the first divine service in the Colony, which, at that time, might well have been described by those transported, to use those poetic words of William Blake, as '*Hell's despair*'.¹

According to the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, this service was conducted on 3rd February 1788 'under some trees' (or 'a great tree') where the Reverend Johnson preached from Psalm 116:12 '*What shall I render unto the Lord for all His benefits toward me*'.

On 17 February, he celebrated Holy Communion in the '*markee*' of Lieutenant Ralph Clark, who resolved '*to keep this table as long as I*

¹ William Blake, *Songs of Experience*

live, for it is the first Table that ever the Lord's Supper was eat of in this country'.²

From these inauspicious beginnings, Reverend Johnson preached - mostly '*en plein air*' or in a stores-shed - to the First Fleet's collection of despairing convicts, surly soldiers and malcontent marines. One can only imagine that this may have been unsatisfactory for a man of the cloth who studied at Magdalene College, Cambridge.

Johnson despaired of ever getting a church built. His solution was to put one up, at his own expense, on the corner of what is now Hunter and Bligh Streets,³ at a cost of £67 12s. 11½d. In 1797, Governor Hunter recompensed him for his church. In October, his temporary church was burned to the ground and a new storehouse had to be found and prepared for service. This new ministry developed into what later became St Philips' Church on York Street.⁴

The trials and tribulations of life and faith in the new colony were many. Life was to improve with the arrival of Governor Macquarie in 1810 whom, in modern day parlance, would be described as the 'Infrastructure Governor'.

² <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/johnson-richard-2275>

³ Provided information Reverend Andrew Sempell, Rector of St James

⁴ Provided information

Notwithstanding the discouragement of Earl Bathurst, Secretary of State for the Colonies, who communicated that a penal colony had no need of 'fancy buildings'⁵, Macquarie's grand infrastructure plans – including for a courthouse, school and church – were set in motion.

On 7 October 1819, Governor Macquarie and Commissioner Bigge, who had been sent to undertake a Commission of Inquiry into the Colony, stood together here to lay a foundation stone, not for a church but for a courthouse. Governor Macquarie wrote in his diary:

*"At 2pm the Commissioner and the Lieutenant Governor and the Judges, with a great many other gentlemen, accompanied me to the site of the new Courthouse in Hyde Park, for the purpose of laying the foundation stone thereof. Which ceremony being performed, we then proceeded to the convict barracks to inspect it and see the men at dinner, with all of which the Commissioner expressed himself highly gratified."*⁶

Sadly, Commissioner Bigge's purse-strings had been tightened and he jettisoned Macquarie's idea of a grand cathedral on George Street⁷ in favour of Macquarie's courthouse project. Perhaps with

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https://web.archive.org/web/20140309030417/http://www.supremecourt.lawlink.nsw.gov.au/supremecourt/sco2_history/sco2_oldsupremecourt_building.html

⁶ Provided history

⁷ Provided history

some divine inspiration, within the space of a few months of placing the foundation stone for the courthouse, Commissioner Bigge had changed his mind. The courthouse was to become a church!

It is interesting to know what provoked this unexpected turnaround.

As is recorded in the history of the Supreme Court's King Street court complex, it seems the appointment of Bigge's brother-in-law and secretary, Mr TH Scott, a wine merchant, had something to do with it. The elevation of Scott to the position of Archdeacon of Sydney – *an Archdeacon in search of a Church as it turns out!* – appeared to be all the persuasion that was needed to change the purpose of the structure on this site, for which the foundation stone had already been laid.⁸

With this resolved, in 1820, construction of St James' Church commenced using convict labour.

The first service was held for the convict workers on the Day of Epiphany, 6 January 1822 - well before this Church was completed.⁹

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https://web.archive.org/web/20140309030417/http://www.supremecourt.lawlink.nsw.gov.au/supremecourt/sco2_history/sco2_oldsupremecourt_building.html

⁹ Reverend Sempell's Historical Brief

With a steeple at its western end, the Church was formally consecrated on 11 February 1824 by the Senior Chaplain of the Colony, The Reverend Samuel Marsden.

Whether through the intervention of Divine Providence or skulduggery, the construction of this Church *as a Church*, under the direction of colonial architect, Francis Greenway, completed Macquarie's vision of a Church for Sydney Town.¹⁰

St James' became the Governors' church, and, over successive generations, hosted vice-regal weddings, baptisms, funerals and civic events. Indeed, Governor and Lady Davidson attended the nine-day celebration of its centenary in 1919.¹¹

St James' has created significant ministries in worship, mission, music, education, spirituality, ethics and welfare support to homeless and young people over the course of its 200-year history. It has become a place for advocacy for church and social reform, especially in the areas of women's ministry, and a place of inclusion, welcoming people of differing sexualities, people who are homeless and refugees and asylum seekers.

¹⁰ St Matthew's at Windsor had been consecrated on 8 December 1822

¹¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St_James%27_Church,_Sydney

It has maintained its close relationship with the Courts, through the service to commence each Law Term, and with Sydney Hospital. It is a church for people of faith and for people searching for faith – regardless of age, background, race, sexual orientation or religion.

In celebrating this beautiful Church’s Bicentenary and its spirit of true reconciliation, let me share with you the Aboriginal tradition, itself deeply spiritual, known in the north as “Dadirri”:

*Dadirri is deep listening.
It's listening to the land.
Listening to the spirit speaking through the land.
Listening to the stillness.*

*The stillness in the water flowing,
The wind blowing,
The birds singing,
The ground humming.¹²*

END

This Speech will be uploaded to the website

¹² Aboriginal writer and senior elder Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann,
<https://planetcorroboree.com.au/blogs/culture-country/dadirri-deep-listening>