

Third Sunday after Epiphany, 26/1/2014, Holy Trinity
Matthew 4: 12-25

To-day we celebrate Australia Day commemorating the landing of the first fleet in 1788.

When the personnel landed, the British flag was raised with appropriate military ceremonial at about noon.

It was a men only ceremony with no provision for the chaplain to offer any religious ceremony.

Basically the personnel consisted of convicts, both men and women, and their gaolers along with an Evangelical Church of England clergyman who was to act as chaplain to all in the new colony and a few free settlers.

The majority of the convicts were from the urban slums of London and other British cities where the population lived, bred and died without the ministrations of Christianity.

Consequently the majority of the convicts had not rejected Christianity: they did not know anything about it and they held the middle and upper class Church of England in contempt.

The chaplain, Richard Johnson, held the first Christian service eight days after the first landing.

It was a compulsory church parade for the male convicts and the troops.

The female convicts were brought ashore eleven days after the first landing and as I wrote in a thesis “the foundation of the new colony was celebrated with rum and fornication rather than with prayers.”

In view of this situation and the events that followed in subsequent years there was little enthusiasm for the expansion of middle-class English religion in Australia.

Now what of Australia and Australians to-day?

This is a land ruled by materialism, sport, leisure and work.

Only a minority of Australians attend church on Sunday mornings: for the rest, God isn't given a second thought.

Christmas is about families, presents and Santa – few really know anything about the Christ-child and what he means in the lives of people.

Easter has become a long weekend for camping and holidaying at the beach – few know what Easter is really about.

I am not being pessimistic about Australia on this Australia Day.

I am privileged to live here and I can't help looking at to-day's Gospel and thinking what an incredible opportunity God gives to Christians to-day to make a difference to the life of this country.

The first disciples of Jesus were told "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people."

In other words, "Follow me in helping people become God's disciples."

And it worked from four fishermen to twelve apostles.

The twelve became five hundred, the five hundred became thousands and thousands became millions right down to us.

How will this work for us?

First, work out with whom you want to share the love you have come to know in the Lord.

It may be a friend, a neighbour, a relative or a colleague at work.

Take into account the individual differences, perspectives, cultures, ages and generations.

Approach, respecting their dignity and particularities being conscious of where their needs are as you share with others the value you have found in following Jesus.

You are attempting to draw others into the Christian circle, not by coercion, but by loving attraction.

It is loving people into holiness, helping them to grow spiritually within the faith.

It is caring for them and teaching them to know God who loves us all.

In following Jesus, you are to serve them, to meet them where they are and to allow God to draw them into the life of Jesus and, of course, pray for them constantly.

Eventually, you can offer them the opportunity to serve God and others according to their abilities and gifts, so that they, in their turn, will love other people into holiness.

On this Australia Day as we look back on that day in January 1788 we look forward to taking our place within the mission of the Church to restore all people into union with God the Father, through Jesus Christ our Lord and in the power of the Holy Spirit.