A New Story in an Old Land
The First Aboriginal Evangelists

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A NEW STORY IN AN OLD LAND: THE FIRST ABORIGINAL EVANGELISTS.

Introduction: A religious people.

The evangelising of Aboriginal Australia by Christian missionaries is a complex and controversial question. There is much to praise in their enthusiasm for the Gospel and much to criticise in their Christendom mindset, their Eurocentric view that Aboriginal people must become like them. Yet in all this analysis and discussion, one thing is often lost sight of - Aboriginal people were a deep-thinking religious people, very open to the Gospel and quick to accept it. And among those early Aboriginal Christians were those who, in turn, felt called to evangelise their own people.

The first Christian missionaries in Australia stepped off their sailing ships into colonial seaports where a generation of Aboriginal people had already suffered the loss of control over their land, the abuse and degradation of their women and the combined destructive forces of malnutrition, alcohol, venereal diseases and European pathogens. What little these well- intentioned but ignorant foreigners observed, they could only process through the lens of European Christendom. They misunderstood Aboriginal culture and world view as, at best, simple mindedness, and at worst, as spiritual darkness. This misguided negativity influenced early Christians in the Australian colonies to regard everything associated with Aboriginal religious beliefs as simply evil. George Augustus Robinson, for all his sympathy for Aboriginal people, labelled Aboriginal religion as ‘Satanic’ and called Aboriginal people ‘devotees of the devil’.

Early colonists, almost certainly convicts, used the word ‘devil’ to an Aboriginal person struggling to express complex ideas of the spirit world in broken English. In language contact situations like this, people learn the words they hear with the meanings they seem to have at the time. Aboriginal people took the word ‘devil’ to be the correct English word for the religious world and, in the early colonial Pidgin English, began to describe spiritual beings as ‘devils’ and religious activities as ‘devil business’, thus unwittingly reinforcing the practice among missionaries of ascribing what they did not comprehend to Satan.

Some missionaries persisted in the opinion that Aboriginal beliefs were Satanic or, if not, that there was nothing worthy in the Aboriginal view of the world, but these negative attitudes were by no means true of all nineteenth-century missionaries. Thankfully there were a few more thoughtful, less judgmental dissenting voices

In Victoria’s Lake Tyers, missionary John Bulmer saw clearly that Aboriginal people’s mythologies were the passing down of ancient traditions like those Greek and Roman mythologies regarded by educated Europeans as classics and never presumed to indicate intellectual inferiority or spiritual darkness. Bulmer was pleased to discover that Aboriginal people shared his belief in a creator of the world and in the immortality of the soul:

The question has been asked, 'Have the Aborigines of Australia any idea of a supreme being?…' They certainly have ideas of beings who existed long ago… and that to them all things as they now exist are due… Thus the Murray people had their Ngalambru or ancient of days… The Gippslanders had their Ngalambru, meaning the first… The Maura people had their Boganbe … meaning big or high… The people of the Wimmera had their Ngramba Natchea, meaning the oldest spirit.. The blacks did not think death was the end of existence. They recognised the fact that a man had a spirit, Gnowk.[1]

Further north, in NSW, Aboriginal people spoke to William Ridley of *Baiame*, described as the Great Master, whose very name was derived from the word 'to create'. The Wiradjuri people told James Gunther of *Baiame*'s distinctive attributes: immortality, power and goodness. Alone of all the nineteenth century missionaries, it was Ridley who recognised Aboriginal religious tradition and speculation for what it was — *'the thirst for religious mystery',* he called it, a reaching out to God.[2]

It was another sixty years before Bob Love, among the Worora people in the north-west, was to dare to acknowledge that in an Aboriginal ceremony of washing and sharing water to drink, he glimpsed the shadow of the sacraments. Ten years later still, Grace Yimambu, an Aboriginal woman, awed at helping my father translate of Genesis 1 into Wubuy, was to say, 'we are very interested in the beginnings of things.'

In this lies the deepest level at which Aboriginal people's spirituality has been misunderstood. Not only did they people this land before Jesus, they were before Abraham, they were before Moses, they were before the Patriarchs. Yet they retained a knowledge of God. Like all of us flawed human beings, they forgot some things and they distorted others. But through all those thousands of years they had never forgotten that there was a God who had created them and the world in which they lived. They knew this God as Lawgiver, the source of their Law. They knew that a person had a soul. And they knew that there was a dreamtime - that there was such a thing as eternal life. They did not need to be told that there was a God. They knew that already. But like all of us they needed Jesus, they needed Emanuel, God with us, the One to whom their Old Testament pointed.

I learned this deepest of lessons about how to understand the world's Indigenous people from my dear mother. Older folk here, like me, may remember singing Reginald Heber's great missionary hymn, *'From Greenland's Icy Mountains'.* I used to love it as a child, the image of the spread of the Gospel from pole to pole, through island and desert and jungle and ocean shore. But one day, standing next to my mother singing it in church, I felt her stiffen beside me. She would not sing the words in the second verse, '*the heathen in his blindness bows down to wood and stone.'* I looked up at my mother, startled, and she looked down at me. 'Not in their blindness, John', she whispered. 'Not in their blindness but in their hunger.'

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[1]Bulmer Papers, Box 11, Paper 4, p.1 and Paper 12, p. 12, State Museum of Victoria

[2] Ridley, William, 1875, *Kamilaroi and other Australian languages,* Thomas Richards, Sydney, p. 171

In the Northern Territory at St Matthew's Church, Ngukurr, the old Roper River Mission, a traditional painting depicts the coming of the first missionaries. In their hands they hold aloft a Bible. Spear-carrying Aboriginal people lay down their weapons. The painting makes two very important visual statements. The first is that the first Roper River missionaries could not be understood separately from their message, a story which was carried in a book. The second is that the Aboriginal people know how powerful the effect of that story was to the first hearers.

There are Aboriginal languages in which the word for book is the word *baibul* itself, the first book they had seen. History here has touched an ancient past where the Greek, βιβλια - the books - long ago came to mean the the Christian Bible, the default 'book' of the early Christian world.

But when it was brought to indigenous Australia the important thing about this book was that it contained a story and to the first hearers it was a convincing story, one many recognised as deeper and more powerful than their own story. Senior Pitjantjtatjara Bible translator, Graham Kulyuruy, was interviewed recently for *The Australian* newspaper.

He spoke of *Tjukurpa*, a deep Pitjantjatjara word which means the Law or the Dreaming but now also means the Bible, *Tjukurpa Palya,* The Good Dreaming.

> *The old men's* ***tjukurpa*** *was taught to us so we could live the sort of life we were supposed to live, a good life. But then when I heard the Bible, God's* ***tjukurpa****, I thought, 'No, this is above that.' I heard the stories from my ancestors and I heard the stories from the Bible, and as I was listening, I realised the Bible is the greater story – it overshadows the other one.*[3]

In the now somewhat distant past of the first Christian outreach to Aboriginal people, many hearers were instantly drawn to the Jesus of the Gospel stories. Among them were those in whose hearts the seed would fall on good ground, people who would faithfully go on devote their whole lives to Jesus.

It is rarely recorded that Aboriginal people rejected or questioned the truth of the Gospel on first hearing it. A far more frequent response was initially to see Jesus as the god of the white people and the white people's country and to doubt therefore that this god had any relevance or potency on this distant soil. In this they stood in good Old Testament tradition. Not only did Israel's enemies want to fight in what they considered the territory of their own gods[4] , but the notion of a Universal God did not come instantly to the people of Israel either. The People of God also had to learn that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was the God of all the peoples of the earth. [5]

It was not ignorance that led some Aboriginal people initially to see the white people's god as the god of another place, but the rational thinking of acute religious minds. Indeed it is insulting to Indigenous people to suggest, as many critics do, that

[3] *The Weekend Australian Magazine,* 7 September, 2013, p 16
[4] eg 1 Kings 20:23
[5] eg Amos 9:7

they were easily manipulated by the missionaries, as if they lacked intelligence and did not seriously weigh the new message that was brought to them, as if they did not possess the ability to make up their own minds. Very frequently, it was the translation of the Bible into Indigenous languages, the hearing of the Gospel in the language of their own country, which led thoughtful Aboriginal people to the realisation that they too could claim this Jesus for themselves.

In North Australia in 1942, my father, Len Harris, with two talented Aboriginal women, Bidigainj and Grace Yimambu, translated the Gospel of Mark into the Wubuy (Nunggubuyu) language. The first words of Mark, *Anambalaman Analawu,* of course meant Good Story. Each evening, Len would take his little bundle of Red Cross wartime issue paper to the riverbank to read the Good Story of Jesus to the people by the campfire. Always they would ask him to read it again. One night, the great Nunggubuyu leader, Madi Murungun, got up from the fire and quietly disappeared into the night.

Madi walk back to his own country, the Nunggubuyu heartland around Rose River, 300 kms north. In a fleet of dug-out canoes, Madi brought 60 people on a two-week journey back down the coast and up the Roper River. This is the rest of the story in my father's words:

> Glimpsing Madi in the firelight, I held up my handwritten sheets of paper.
>
> *"Anambalaman analawu,"* I said. The Good Story.
>
> *"Yuwai. Idjubulu,"* Madi replied. Yes. It is true.
>
> Sixty people emerged from the shadows to crowd around the fire. Madi had brought them to hear the Good News of Jesus Christ in their own language. Urged by the people I read it over and over again, long into the night. Eventually, Madi came forward and asked to hold in his hands the 'leaves' I had written on. I knew he could not read.
>
> *"Idjubulu."* He said again. It is true. He used to think Jesus was only a white man's God, he said, but now he understood that Jesus was also the God of black people. I asked him what had convinced him that the life of Jesus was true. He looked down at the sheets of paper and looked up at me again, his eyes bright in the firelight.
>
> "Now I know that Jesus speaks Wubuy," he said.

Even today among urban Aboriginal people whose languages are almost lost, there is great power when a few words of the Gospel are expressed in their own traditional tongue, rather than the speech of the colonial conqueror.

It was very significant to the first Aboriginal hearers that the Gospel came to them as stories. They were a people whose knowledge, perhaps beyond that of all cultures of the world, was couched in stories, in sagas that could be told and sung and danced. And in the telling was transmitted the wisdom of the ages: the genetic safeguards of whom you could and could not safely marry, the ancient paths by which you could navigate the trackless wilderness and find water, the seasonal rhythm of plants and animals that determined the annual pattern of life, the right and wrong behaviours which guaranteed the survival of your community, the physical and moral borders that you could not cross.

So when these strange but earnest white missionaries first came, they were encountered as storytellers. Yes, later many of their successors would become bosses and managers of institutions, but the first missionaries came with no mission stations, but as bearers of news, a narrative they were anxious to tell. And so often, those who believed the narrative, those who accepted the Jesus of the stories, wanted to share the stories with their own people. Thus was born the long tradition of Aboriginal evangelists and preachers.

The first Aboriginal evangelist

The eagerness of the first Aboriginal Christians to evangelise their own people was evident from the very outset of mission to Indigenous Australia. The first person specifically appointed as a missionary to Aboriginal people was the Wesleyan, William Walker. As a result of his work in colonial Sydney, the first Aboriginal person was converted to Christianity, the son of Sydney's famous Bennelong. Walker baptised him Thomas Coke Walker Bennelong in honour of himself and of Thomas Coke, Superintendent of the Wesleyan Missions, who had died en route to Sri Lanka in 1813. Thomas immediately set about evangelising his own people. Walker wrote of him,

> *He learned to read his Bible in about three months; his attention to class and prayer meetings was very great and encouraging…he collected the young natives of his tribe, to whom he gave an exhortation, which he concluded with prayer…*[6]

Sadly, Thomas died afterwards. While we can no longer reconstruct the precise style and content of Thomas Bennelong's exhortations or preaching, as we would now call it, there is little doubt that it would have resembled that of his mentor, William Walker who was said to be 'a preacher of extraordinary power'[7] A Wesleyan missionary and a strong evangelical, Walker had a direct Biblical approach, based on the Bible narrative and the claims of Jesus. Thomas was obviously inspired by the Bible, which he rapidly mastered in a foreign language and, following the lead of his mentor, we can be certain his sermons were based upon the Bible narrative.

Thomas Bennelong was the first of the long line of Aboriginal evangelists, those remarkable and gifted Aboriginal Christians throughout the continent who quickly accepted the Gospel and then rapidly and enthusiastically sought to evangelise their own people. The two influences on their preaching style were the Biblical narrative itself, particularly the Jesus stories, and the forthright presentation of the Gospel by evangelical missionary preachers.

The Protestant missions provided a model of the earnest Biblical preacher although those Aboriginal people called to the ministry of evangelism were often not

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[6] William Walker, cited in Colwell, J., 1904, *The Illustrated History of Methodism; Australia, 1812-1855, New South Wales and Polynesia, 1856-1902,* Sydney: William Brooks and Co. *p 176*

[7] Colwell p 76; Holdsworth, W.W. and Findlay, G.G., 1921, *The History of the Wesleyan Missionary Society,* London: Epworth Press, Vol III, p 149

given the recognition they deserved. Many of these people should have been ordained into the Christian ministry. One of the failures of mission was the long reluctance to formally recognise Aboriginal people's gifts and calling. Fortunately, there was a sufficient tradition in some Protestant circles of the lay evangelist, such that the Aboriginal evangelists were mostly encouraged or at least tolerated.

David Unaipon in South Australia

The first adult Christian at the Point MacLeay Mission, near the mouth of the Murray River in South Australia, was James Ngunaitponi, a Ngarrindjeri man whose name was Anglicised to Unaipon by white people who could not pronounce it. The mission, technically non-denominational, was conservatively evangelical and ruled by the stern George Taplin. James Unaipon, born about 1830, came to Christ in 1862 through the teaching of a far gentler itinerant missionary, James Reid of the Free Church of Scotland, whose name James took at baptism. He chose to accompany Reid, acting as a translator and taking his own first steps towards evangelism.

Reid was tragically drowned in 1863. In 1864 James settled at the Point Macleay Mission. Taplin was delighted and, to give him his due, he encouraged James to evangelise his own people. James was the first of those Aboriginal evangelists later known in South Australia as the 'Taplin men'. James learned of other Christian Aboriginal people at other missions and linked up with James Wanganeen of the Church of England Poonindie Mission. Taking with them a young Point Macleay man, William Kropinyeri, they undertook missionary journeys along the Coorong and to other places where the Gospel had not yet been preached.

Better known to Australians was James' son, David Unaipon, the face on our $50 bill. An inveterate reader as a child, he grew up to be a remarkably intelligent and learned man with wide academic interests. Entirely self educated, he was a natural scientist, who patented many scientific and technical inventions. He read the classics and could quote huge slabs of Bunyan and Milton. Newspapers dubbed him 'the black genius' and 'Australia's Leonardo'.[8]

He had an immense knowledge of the Bible, the King James Bible of course, and knew huge sections of it off by heart. He was obsessed with correct English, the English of the classics which he so ardently read and of course the language of the King James Bible. For his public speaking he developed a pedantic style of oratory which owed more to the classics than it did to current English usage, particularly in rural South Australia. He became quite famous, regularly sought as a speaker in the southern states. He was a political activist in his eccentric own way, a kind of unofficial spokesperson for what he termed 'Aboriginal advancement'. 'Look at me', he used to say, 'and you will see what the Bible can do'. David Unaipon defied the stereotypes of the lazy, ineducable Aborigine and thus made many people uncomfortable.

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[8] Harris, J., 1994, 'Unaipon, David', *Evangelical Dictionary of Biography,* Sydney: Evangelical History Association p 385

But with all his talents and eccentric interests, what he loved doing best was preaching the Gospel. A Christian all his life, David Unaipon was a vigorous, outgoing preacher who modelled himself on the forceful, Bible-based style of the missionary preachers who had influenced him. With Aboriginal people he preached in the Ngarrindjeri language but elsewhere he preached in his idiosyncratic brand of English, His sermons were full of Biblical allusions, from the King James Bible of course, and it was said that he even sounded like the King James Bible.

For all his learning, David Unaipon never lost touch with his Aboriginal roots. He collected and recorded Aboriginal stories. He researched Greek and Egyptian mythology at the South Australian Museum, and came to understand Aboriginal stories as having a similar weight and purpose. He published three books of Aboriginal legends.

In a Christian sense, David's greatest contribution was in his old age. By the time he was about 80, younger Aboriginal people were campaigning for Aboriginal rights and he was less courted by the influential and the newspapers. He dedicated his final years to evangelism, travelling widely on foot to Adelaide and country towns of South Australia, regularly refused accommodation because of his race and often being detained by the police. David died aged 94, convinced he was about to discover the secret of perpetual motion.

Blind Moses of Hermannsburg

Moses Uraiakuraia, an Arrernte (Aranda) man, was about 8 years old in 1877 when the Lutherans established Hemannsburg Mission in Central Australia.[9] Moses was one of the first school pupils. He immediately showed interest in Bible stories and through that interest was keen to learn to read. He was eager to share these stories with others, even as a child, but his people discouraged him from doing this because he was an uninitiated boy and his community did not think him old enough or wise enough to properly evaluate Christian belief and traditional Arrernte belief which he was not yet deemed mature enough to understand.

Although briefly withdrawn from the school, Moses was allowed to return. There he embraced the Christian faith. He was a young man of about 21 years when baptised in 1890. Shortly afterwards he was taken away by the tribal elders to pass through circumcision and initiation into Arrernte ritual and law. This deeper level of traditional understanding served to confirm Moses' belief in the God of the Bible, a belief which he firmly held for the whole of his life.

A few years later, Moses became blind and was ever afterwards called Blind Moses. He had people read the Bible to him constantly so that he could learn whole passages by heart. He became a teaching assistant, teaching the Bible. An excellent linguist, he was in continual demand for translating, working closely with the legendary Carl Strehlow on the Arrernte New Testament.

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[9] Harris, J., 1994, 'Uraiakuraia, Moses Tjalkabota,' *Evangelical Dictionary of Biography,* Sydney: Evangelical History Association p 386

Moses learned the craft of preaching as the interpreter of many a missionary's sermons, but his skill outdid theirs. He was known to markedly improve some of their sermons. He was a naturally gifted story-teller and became a compelling preacher. His style was direct and firmly based in the Gospel narrative. Missionary Freidrich Albrecht wrote of him:

> I often listened with rapt attention to some of his addresses. To him the New Testament just lives, and he knows how to make it live again before his hearers. To his natural gift he has added a lot of hard work.[10]

Moses' felt called to evangelise his people, urging the Hermannsburg Christians to go out and share the Gospel with people beyond the mission. He led the way himself, travelling hundreds of kilometres by foot on his wife's arm or by donkey, preaching in the cattle stations, railway camps and remote desert communities. In the years when there was no ordained missionary at Hermannsburg, Moses carried the responsibility of evangelism. Indeed, at times such as between 1923 and 1926, with no missionaries at Hermannsburg at all, there was major growth in community acceptance of the Christian Gospel.

This phenomenon has been repeated time and again throughout Australia, the impact of the Gospel presented to people by one of their own race and in their own language. Bringing alive the Gospel stories was a powerful thing to people for whom knowledge was passed on through story-telling.

The early Arnhem Land Evangelists

The first Church of England missionaries of the Church Missionary Association, later the Church Missionary Society, completed the last leg of their journey from Melbourne to Roper River by boat. They called in at the Yarrabah Mission in North Queensland. There, three Aboriginal Christians urged the missionaries to allow them to accompany them. One was the remarkable James Noble, born a traditional Aboriginal man in the eastern gulf country near Normanton. As he said on departure,

> We have the light. Shall we keep it to ourselves? We do not want to leave Yarrabah, yet we're glad to go, to tell our people of Jesus.[11]

James spent only two years of his devoted lifetime of missionary service at Roper River because of the illness of his wife, Angelina. He went on to be deaconed, the first Aboriginal to be ordained to the full ministry. Nicknamed 'the black parson', he became a well-known evangelist and preacher around Australia. He loved the Bible and his preaching was always direct and Biblical. His sincerity was persuasive. In his two years at Roper River, he had a profound effect on the Roper people. Time and time again I have listened to to Aboriginal Christians at

[10] Albrecht, F.W., 1950, 'The Gospel and the Nomadic Aranda in Central Australia', Unpublished paper (Roneo). But see also Abrecht, F.W., 1954, 'Old Blind Moses', *Lutheran Herald,* July pp 215-217.

[11] For details of James Noble's life, see Harris, J., 1994, *One Blood,* (2nd ed.) pp 517-520.

Ngukurr talking about the old Roper Mission. They longer recalled the names of the first white missionaries, but remembered the name James Noble. James was the spokesperson, the interpreter for the white missionaries and the foremost evangelist because of his fluency in Kriol, the Aboriginal *lingua franca* of the north. Even when interpreting, the dynamics of the situation meant that he seemed to the listeners to be the preacher and it was well known that his versions of the sermons were an improvement on the original! And he was black. His message was therefore not construed as foreign.

Among those who listened to James Noble and quietly accepted Jesus in their hearts through his preaching was a young man named Djipanyma, which the early missionaries transcribed as Japanma. The white missionaries were very concerned, far too concerned, to see very long evidence of Christian life in people before baptising them so it was not until five years after the missionaries first came that the first baptisms were held in May 1913. Among them was Japanma. The people were encouraged to take Bible names as their baptismal names and young Japanma took the name James, the name of James Noble, the man from whom he had first heard the Gospel.

James Japanma spent the next 50 years in selfless, dedicated and humble service to his people. He was one of those remarkable Aboriginal men who should have been ordained but never was because of the wrong-headed and short-sighted demands of the bishops that they spend many years attending high school then seminary or theological college, obtaining academic qualifications and proving themselves by serving qualifying periods in distant white parishes before ordination.

James was a talented but humble man who never thought he was good enough. But he was always there, faithfully doing his best. When there were no teachers, which was often, he taught the Roper children. When there were no clergy, which was also often, he led the church services. A few photographs of James Japanma remain. When he is preaching he is holding a Bible. He loved telling the stories of Jesus. He always had pictures of Jesus to illustrate his talk, those well-known sets of pictures which Sunday School teachers used to have. His most used picture was the one of Jesus blessing the children of different races, the same one my mother hung on the wall of my bedroom.

James was an avid reader and could recite huge slabs of the Bible by heart. He could lead both morning and evening prayer without a prayer book. His preaching is always remembered for its gentleness and sincerity and for the fact ignored far too often in academic studies of preaching, that what he said was consistent with the quality of his life. It is one thing to be a Billy Graham and preach to a stadium full of excited but anonymous fans. It is quite another to preach in the community where you grew up, to the people with whom you live and with whom you interact every day. Here the quality of life becomes a crucial factor in the effectiveness of the sermon.

My father, speaking of the time when he was translating Mark's Gospel into Wubuy (Nunggubuyu), said that the two Aboriginal women translators working with him came to understand the importance of translation, and the way in which the translation would be used, by watching James. They saw him teaching people about

Jesus in Kriol or Alawa or Mara and they understood from this that people needed to hear about Jesus in their own language.

When he was not needed at the mission, James travelled long distances evangelising his people. The older people in and around Ngukurr remember him with affection. Canon Michael Gumbuli, the revered patriarch of the Arnhem Land Christians, spoke to me of James Noble.

> *"We are walking in his footsteps. We will never forget Old James. He was the first evangelist, the first Aboriginal man to lead a church service. We learned from him. He was a good preacher. We learned from his life too. He set an example for us all to follow."*

When James Japanma died in 1962, another remarkable Aboriginal evangelist took his place, Gabarla Minimere, an Alawa man, always known as Barnabas Roberts. He became a tireless evangelist, walking to places hundreds of kilometres away with his strong but gentle message of faith in Jesus. His lifelong ministry was all the more remarkable in that his foot had been crushed against a stockyard fence by a wild horse when he was young. He walked with a very pronounced limp on a permanently bandaged foot. He preached the Gospel wherever Aboriginal people gathered, on riverbanks, outstations and cattle stations and to the long grass people of the the town camps. Barnabas's preaching style followed closely that of his predecessor and mentor, James Japanma, clear, peruasive but gentle, based on the Bible and always including the engaging retelling of a Jesus story.

Barnabas's gentle bearing and kindly manner endeared him to Aboriginal and European people alike. CMS missionary Percy Leske wrote of Barnabas,

> Many a visitor has asked about the gracious man with the shining face they met in the bush or on the road. So outstanding was his personality that we could always say without hesitation, '*That must have been Barnabas'.* [12]

Born about 1898, Barnabas told me he could recall the time before the mission and the shooting of his father in the massacres along the Roper valley early in the 1900s. He often said that if the missionaries had not come, his people would have been all shot down. He knew that the CMS missionaries had come to his land to rescue his people from violent death at the hands of the white hunting gangs. Barnabas had a truly deep spirit of forgiveness and in a unique and amazing way, this fuelled his vocation. The missionaries had given him their greatest gift, the Gospel to which he had devoted his life. He was prepared to believe that the awful deaths of his people were not totally in vain if their shed blood resulted in the coming of the Gospel. He came to see it as a kind of sacrifice. Barnabas felt that his special calling was to make this happen, to bring so great a good out of so great an evil.

In 1974, a few weeks before Barnabas died, CMS missionary Keith Hart received a phone call from Darwin Airport. They had an old Aboriginal man in a

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[12] Leske, P., 1975, *Checkpoint,* Oct p 5

wheelchair, mumbling Keith's name which was also pinned to his clothing. When Keith got to the airport, Barnabas seemed to be unconscious. Keith took him home where he woke up. Keith tried to find out what he had been doing. In Keith's words,

> He replied he had been going around from place to place to see all the Aboriginal people... Wherever he had gone before, he had gone again, to speak a last time to them of their need to give their lives to Jesus and to follow him in their way of living… Somewhere at the end of his journey, he had been placed in a wheelchair and sent on to us in Darwin. He then said something I have never forgotten… *'I am now free of the blood of my people. I can go home and die in peace'.*[13]

They managed to get Barnabas back to Roper, where he died in peace a few days later. He had obeyed Jesus command to preach the Gospel to every person. He had embraced the privilege of sharing in Jesus' suffering. And in with an almost unbelievable act of sheer grace, he had tried personally to make amends for the the terrible suffering of his people, to make the shedding of their blood an opportunity for good.

Esther Wilfred of Minyerri, one of the Kriol Bible translators, recalled his influence

> *"I loved those old people who always came from Roper River. They came here to teach us about God. They were wonderful those old men, travelling all that way on foot…They walked long distances to tell the good news."*

Michael Gumbuli also spoke to me of the old evangelists, his heroes and mentors:

> *"They were the example to us, Old James, missionary James Japanma that is, and Old Barnabas. They were the missionaries' helpers…no…they really were the missionaries themselves. So were Old Elizabeth and the other old Christian ladies. They showed us the way."*

They did indeed show the way and they showed it not only in word, but in deed, not only in the actual technique and content of their preaching, but in how they lived, which gave credibility to what they said.

This I stress again is something far too infrequently acknowledged in studies of preaching. In these Aboriginal preachers and evangelists, we see the power of a quality of life. These Aboriginal people were gifted communicators and they had enviable knowledge of the Bible. But what mattered most in the end was the unspoken sermon of their lives, of lives lived the service of Jesus, not for their own benefit, but for the benefit of others.

[13] Keith Hart, letter to Bible Society in Australia, 16 April, 1998