
“ By the Grace of God



I am what I am ”

The Funeral of Albert Namatjira

Address by Pastor F. W. Albrecht

Never before in the history of this country has an Australian Aborigine been borne to his last resting place under conditions as we witness today. His passing, within hours, was flashed as news from one corner of our vast continent to the other; we came to realise this when telephone enquires with expressions of sympathy came in from Sydney, Darwin, Adelaide and many other places. Albert, as we called him, was not only a member of the Aranda tribe and of the Lutheran Church—I venture to say he was not looked upon as belonging to Australia only, he was a world figure.

Through his art, he had interpreted the beauty of this country to a vast multitude of people. He had made them see our ranges, trees, and landscapes in that glorious sunshine and under those changing colours, as perhaps no other corner of our globe knows of, and today we are here to commit his remains to the earth of God. But, praise God, we are not laying all of this great son of Central Australia to rest here; there is much that will remain with us. In countless homes of this country his pictures will continue to delight the hearts of people. Above all, however, Christian people will see the grace of God, which has been so conspicuous in the life of Albert, continue to shine.

When, back in 1932, Rex Battarbee and John Gardner had their exhibition of paintings in the school room at Hermannsburg, Albert, after having seen most of the paintings, came to me and said, “What price do they charge for these paintings?” When told what some of the pictures were worth, his remark was, “I can do that, too”. The question was: could he? Although the Aborigines had excelled themselves in stock riding and in the art of tracking, there was no record whatsoever that anyone had managed to become an artist. We, naturally, expressed surprise and doubts. Albert, however, after having inspected some more pictures, came back and reiterated: “I still think I can do it”. Since encouraging anyone in his ambition was very much our accepted policy, he was promised, and a little later given, his first watercolour box of paints and some brushes.

Through the grace of God, this man eventually was to show Australia and the world, what our Aborigines are capable of, and what wonderful natural gifts God has given them. It may be well if we remind ourselves here of the fact that what God achieved through the Apostle, Paul, He could not have done through any of the other Apostles. Likewise, in our case, what God

achieved through Albert, He could not have done through anyone else; the grace of God clearly had not been in vain in him. To deny this would be like submitting to the thought of blind fate. However, even to one who observes incidents in life soberly and coherently, quite apart from any spiritual aspects, it must occur that there is more than blind fate that moulds and directs a person's life. As Christians, therefore, we cannot but confess that it was the grace of God that gave him his natural gifts in the first place and then the opportunity to develop them to that wonderful height that brought him the admiration of fellow Australians and the people of the world.

On many occasions it has been shown how Albert was, and remained, a member of the Aranda tribe in Central Australia. This is true and from our side he had received every encouragement in this direction. One cattle man who knew him well once remarked: “He is the only native I know who is proud to be one.” Although he had been taught English at school and could read and write in English, he retained a deep love for his mother tongue, Aranda. In this way he remained deeply rooted in his own soil, as it were, a fact which was very helpful to him when he began to concentrate on his real life's work as an artist.

There have been, and still are, many Aborigines about with gifts equal to what Albert had, yet their life passes insignificantly, partly because of lack of opportunity and then because of lack of concentration. Through their way of life they have little occasion to concentrate, as they have to move about continuously in order to make a living. Albert, too, loved to move about; at the same time he had the power for concentration to a wonderful degree. This was very essential, especially during the first period in his career as an artist: without this power of concentration he would have given up half way and remained a nomad and food gatherer as