

21 March

Fr ANTHONY de WIT 28 December 1823 - 21 March 1882



Anthony de Wit was the leader of the five first Dutch Jesuits who came up as the second group in the Zambezi Mission. Born in Hilversum, Holland, he had entered the Society in 1842 and was superior in Amsterdam for 16 years before reaching South Africa in 1877 where he served for a time on the small Catholic parish at Graaf Reinet in the Cape. He told Fr Weld the place was known as

the ‘gem of the desert’ as it was like an oasis in dry land. There were only 120 Catholics, many of them Irish and poor, and there was a good deal of prejudice against them from the local Dutch Reformed.

In October 1879 he was sent by Fr General as ‘Visitor’ to the Jesuits in the interior to investigate complaints against Fr Depelchin, who had been accused by at least two of the party of failing to provide enough food and not taking adequate care of the sick. ‘There seems to have been no real reason for the scare and his appearance only served to upset Depelchin who was not sure of his own position and authority for some months’ (Gelfand). De Wit vindicated him and in fact Depelchin was most caring of the sick though Gelfand, writing in the 1960s, was astonished the Jesuits did not use more quinine as a cure for malaria, particularly as they had ‘discovered’ it in South America two centuries earlier.

De Wit spent some time in Bulawayo and Old Tati and it was in the latter place that he met his death. As soon as Depelchin was reinstated, De Wit ‘placed himself in my hands with the simplicity of a child.’ Depelchin considered he would serve best in Tati as he was already comparatively old for the hard trekking further north. During the ‘fever season’, one of the miners recalled with gratitude how de Wit visited the sufferers daily. ‘One who recovered took a walk to the mission to see de Wit and the kind old man (he was 59) would not hear of him walking back and sent for the horses. They rode to our place and on the return ride, the second horse, which he was leading, became restive as it approached its familiar place and de Wit was thrown violently to the ground. Brs Proest and Nigg ran to him but found he was already dead. He was buried next to Fr Carl Fuchs who had died two years earlier and the graves were forgotten until Rob Burrett, an archaeologist with a great interest in the early history of the country including the Jesuits, found the graves in 1997 after ‘a long and detailed investigation’ and was delighted that the Jesuits paid for a black granite stone to mark the graves more permanently (pictured). The then Bishop of Francistown, Frank Nabusah, in whose diocese the graves are, decided to make the site a pilgrimage place for the diocese and it has been steadily improved ever since.