Sermon preached on Easter Day 2009
by the Bishop of Cork, Cloyne and Ross, The Right Reverend Paul Colton
in Saint Fin Barre's Cathedral, Cork

'I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received...'' *1 Corinthians 15.3*

Our house is weighed down with boxes of old photographs – photos of several lifetimes, all stored carefully. Last Christmas we started the mammoth task of going through them and scanning into the computer the ones we most value.

The other day I came across a photo of two boys building sandcastles on a beach. It was a family holiday in France about seven years ago. The sun is splitting the heavens. Clichéd blue sky. Clean level sands. Lots of other children and families around. A kite flying. A yacht passing by on the horizon. Two little boys – our sons – intent on their sand-castling task – clutching the buckets and spades of childhood. Pure joy.

That's the memory now – but not quite. I also remember feeling profoundly uncomfortable that afternoon. Here were my children playing on a beach: but this was Omaha Beach in Normandy - a beach of crucifixion.

This had been one of the main landing points on 6th June 1944 of the Allied invasion of German-occupied France. This was the historical event brought to populist life in the 1998 film *Saving Private Ryan.* This beach had been a place of war – fierce battle, human being against human being, ideology against ideology – death, maiming and the scarring of minds. This was also a place of beginning – a start honed out of human tragedy and a journey towards a new future: the future we now live.

These are stories that children need to hear. We deliberately brought our sons to that place and to the other beaches on that Normandy coast to tell them the story of what happened in those places and to reflect, with them, on the reality of war and importance of reconciliation. Important lessons for young boys, but then they need time to play. Their playground bathed in 21st Century sunlight and joy – resurrection – had been a place of crucifixion in 1944.

This, friends, is what the annual journey of Holy Week and celebration of Easter is about. Each year we bring ourselves, and we bring our children, to a place of remembrance, encounter and re-enactment liturgically, with the story of crucifixion and of resurrection. This is what this time of year is for. So often I look in dismay at contorted preaching schemes devised for Holy Week, which pay scant attention to the story of this week; a time when, in fact, all that the Church asks is that we hear again and enter into, once more, the story of stories. This is the week when we have journeyed with Jesus on his last days to the upper room for the last supper, to the cross, to the waiting with the disciples and we come today, to the Easter garden of the resurrection.

Encountering again this story, as of first importance, is what these days are all about.

This was Saint Paul's priority in his letter to the Church at Corinth that we heard a few moments ago. Here we have one of the earliest examples of people being reminded of the story. Remember! These words were written only about 25 years after the crucifixion – yes, as close as that to the days of Jesus himself. And what does St Paul tell the Church at Corinth? 'I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received...''

'I heard it. I told you. You received it.' This is the tradition and 'traditioning' of the Church. We pass on what we have received. What do we pass on? The story. The good news.

Here, is the message that Paul had been given, that he, like others had faithfully treasured and memorised, and which he had passed 'as of first importance' – it is a classic formula – creedal even:

- That Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures
- That he was buried
- That he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures
- And that he appeared to Cephas, then to twelve
- Then he appeared to more that five hundred brothers and sisters at one time most of whom are still alive
- He appeared to James and then to all the apostles
- Last of all, he appeared to me.

This is the voice of a witness. People today would grasp at this as a primary source: someone at a few years remove, who had himself been told the story. In our first reading we heard the same story from another witness: Peter. He was in the house of Cornelius. He said to those there. 'You know the message he sent to the people... That message spread throughout Judea beginning in Galilee ... how

- God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit
- He went about doing good and healing
- God was with him...
- We are witnesses to what he did ...
- They put him to death by hanging him on a tree...
- But God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear to us who were chosen as witnesses
- We ate and drank with him...
- He commanded us to preach...

In both of these we have the summary of the story – the way the Apostles first told it and passed it on. Here is the tradition of the whole Church.

This core of the Christian story is what has been passed to us; and we pass it to our children, who we pray will pass it to theirs. This is our common ground. This is what holds us together. This is the source and sustenance of our life. This, as St Paul said, is '...where we stand...' *1 Corinthians 15.1*

We draw comfort and strength from the passing on – the 'traditioning' – of this good news. This is comfort and hope in difficult times. Inevitably it raises questions for us too.

Many are going through their own time of crucifixion arising from the far from 'soft-landing' that most experts promised. Who of us who saw Questions and Answers some months ago will forget Nell McCafferty turning tenaciously on the experts on the panel and repeating the mantra 'Admit it! Yez know nothing!'

Our celebration of Easter this year comes during the days after a budget in Ireland. One TD labelled it 'The Budget from Hell' and I've no doubt that's the sound bite for the history books. We're all still trying to take it in. There's an irony in the fact that such a demanding budget comes in the week when we are journeying with Christ through his suffering to the cross. We're asking ourselves what this budget will mean for each one of us and for our families. The bigger question in our minds is 'will it work?' Will it achieve for Ireland what needs to be done economically at this time? Even before this many lives have been shattered by job loss, commercial ruin and domestic financial collapse.

In all of this there are very human emotions of uncertainty, anxiety, fear and even desperation. These are the emotions of Holy Week, Good Friday and Easter too. The first disciples had put everything; their whole lives and faith in Jesus. Then he was executed. Their dreams and hopes seemed to have been shattered. Then came Easter – the resurrection – and to them that first Easter morning marked the beginning of hope and showed signs of a glimmer of light.

The Easter message speaks to us of God's hope restored to his people in the time of their desperation and uncertainty.

The question raised for each of us is this: how are we to make that hope real here and now? It can be too trite to turn to those in suffering, as the Church often does, and to say 'resurrection follows inexorably from crucifixion' or 'the suffering Christ is with you in your suffering.' These are truths and they do help people; but something more is expected of us who are witnesses to these truths in times like this.

Easter cannot stop at the proclamation 'Christ is risen!' Yes we need to give this message of hope and salvation to the victims of the earthquake devastation in Italy, to those ill and suffering; to those desolate and depressed, to those who feel excluded by society, to those who depend on our overseas aid, to those isolated and alone, to those suffering the fallout of the economic chaos in which we all find ourselves, to those who, in our society, still find themselves at the raw edge of inequality and so the list goes on.

The question for us, therefore, is 'how are we to translate that message of resurrection hope into solidarity and practical help today for such people?' How do we make the crucifixion/resurrection sequence tangible and meaningful here and now for them? For starters we need to set aside

the individualism that has more and more characterised so much of our life in the recent good years. And then, where it has been jeopardised, we need step by step to rediscover our communal determination, our sense of common purpose, our social solidarity, our neighbourliness and that voluntary spirit which, I have no doubt, will have to be at the heart of our reconstruction - our resurrection.

'I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received...'' As we celebrate today what we have received – as we proclaim that 'Christ is risen!' I remind you of that family photo I have shared with you: my children on Omaha Beach. The place of crucifixion can become a resurrection place. Ours is the responsibility, here and now, in our time, this time, to participate with God and with his people in building a resurrection-shaped future.

Christ is risen!