Sudden Death at Church of Ireland Sports Club of Player and Coach Andrew Chambers

Funeral Sermon preached by Paul Colton, Bishop of Cork and Patron of ICICYMA, Garryduff Sports Club

Saint Luke's Church, Douglas, Wednesday, 17th November, 2010

I sat down to write these few words this morning, looked at my keyboard and computer screen and found it hard to pray – I just said: 'God, I really need you now man!' It's hard to pray at times like this, but we must try – or at the very least we must allow ourselves to be carried by other people's prayers and strength.

Twenty-six years ago, I first put on a shiny white, innocent clergyman's collar. Three days later my boss went on holidays. That same day, as a young mother was being discharged from hospital, she collapsed and died. I had had no training for that – just instinct and the desire to be with the family and community. A week later I buried a well-known motorcyclist - 19 years old; a year later I buried his younger brother who was also killed off his bike, during the Isle of Man TT.

Those deaths led me to a book written a few years before by a Rabbi – Harold Kushner - 'When bad things happen to good people." Where the book helped was to acknowledge that sometimes there seems to be no reason. Sometimes we don't have answers to our deepest questions. Who can answer them? No one here – unless theirs are easy answers that really don't help much. Bad things do happen to good people. A death like Andy's is something that shakes our living to its very foundations. It rocks our faith - shaky or strong. If you're feeling really shaken right now – you're not alone. We all are. When bad things happen to good people we are outside our zone: it's beyond us.

I first met Andy Chambers when he was 14. He and Richard Gash came to stay with Susan and me in Dublin for a cricket match. We went to McDonald's for something to eat. Andy wasn't impressed: it wasn't his mother's home-cooking. Six years later I was installed as Bishop of Cork on the very day he, and the others on the Church of Ireland team, had that great Irish Senior Cup victory in 1999. (I still don't know how that clash of dates was allowed to happen: I might even have preferred to have been at the match myself, but don't tell the Archdeacon!).

From that moment, never forgetting the kindness he was once shown, Andy has been a friend: always a word of friendship ('how's the form?' 'how are your lads?'), of match analysis and a drink in the clubhouse after a game. Everything Alastair Dunne has said about Chambers (as the younger lads call him), we all know to be true. We too have shared in the privilege of knowing these things. That's why we have been here in unsurpassed numbers both last night and again today: more people outside the church than inside. As I said last night – they simply don't build churches big enough for people like Andy. And one thing I would like to underline – Andy has been all these things, not just to one age group in the club, but to all ages: a model of what a club or community or church can be - an extension of our family.

Looking at him lying on the pitch on Saturday and again in recent days, I couldn't believe why, like he always did, he didn't spring back up as usual from a tumble - like a strong greyhound out of a trap – why he didn't give that Chambers look; the hands on the hips; that withering shake of his head and then start to give lip to the umpire. Frankly, I hope he's giving lip to God now, and speaking all our minds for us.

For the few people who are lucky enough to live in a cosy world, a tragedy like this jolts even your world on its axis. For most of us who live our lives in a more muddled world, this is one more piece of dastardly chaos in the mess, but it puts a lot of the other things in our own jumble into perspective. We are angry, confused and still in disbelief. 'Upset' isn't the word for it – 'distraught' and 'bewildered' come closer, but words are useless anyway.

There is no league table – or ranking – of tragedies, but every so often one like this comes along to send us all into shock. For those of us in middle age or later life it has happened to us before. For you younger people this may be the first. It leaves us with lots of questions about ourselves, about life and about death. It makes us think that it could have been any one of us and we are confronted with the limitations on our own life. To our younger friends and to all of us I say - those questions and fears are natural. We all have them and don't be alone trying to answer the questions or dealing with this.

This is as bad as it gets for a family, for a partner, a child, a parent, a brother, a sister – any loved one. By now, Katrin, and Matti, Gwen and Tommy, Philip. Mandy, Susan and Jennifer and all your families, you know by now, these few days after Andy's death, that we are here with you (friends, club members, neighbours, colleagues and parish) – our presence, our love, our prayers, our awkward words, the clumsy things we say or do. - we mean them and they show that our hearts are broken with yours. And, of course, we are not forgetting baby Daniel today either. As Bishop of the Diocese and as Club Patron I want to make a particular promise from us all to Katrin and Matti – your Irish family around you now – Andy's family – your friends and this club, this Church community are here for you - and that's not just a promise for today and tomorrow; it's a promise that we will hold each other to.

The painful reality is that things like this are sometimes part of life. That has always been the case. Centuries ago there was a very rich, well-heeled man with status in the community. He was very religious. He lost his business. His children died. His friends started to avoid him because they thought to themselves that he had done something dodgy to deserve it and that his bad luck would rub off on them. In a poem written about this man – his name was Job – in the poem, God asks him

'Have the gates of death been shown to you?
Have you seen the gates of deep darkness?' (Job 38.17)

Last Saturday afternoon on our hockey pitch in Garryduff the gates of death were shown to us. We surrounded our friend Andy with our love and prayers – some of us with him on the pitch, others in the dugout, many in the stand or clubhouse – we tried to keep him and everyone did their best. But it was not to be. In my life and work, I have never seen friendship, love and loyalty such as that which Andy's teammates showed him last Saturday. I salute you: all of us are proud to know you and in these days you have taught us some precious things. I pay tribute to the Ambulance

Service and our sporting foes on the day - friends from Kilkeel - were also amazing. Last night I got an email from Ken McGrath, the rector there. The Kilkeel coach is a member of his parish. They are all still deeply shocked too and they send their sympathy and prayers. We have indeed seen the gates of deep darkness.

Our natural gut feeling is that it's not meant to be like this. Sports clubs such as ours at ICICYMA – Garryduff are places of common ground, of friendship, falling out and reconciliation – they are families writ large, as Andy, in his life showed us. Our hockey pitch is meant to be a place of life, not death; of vigour, not frailty; of energy and fitness; of joy and celebration; and, as so often happens in sport, when there is defeat or disappointment those losses are not usually of the life-extinguishing variety.

Last Saturday our pitch became what we never imagined it would be: the gateway to death and to eternity for one of our most loved friends and teammates – for your partner and Daddy, your son, brother, and nephew. Has the gate of death been shown to us? Yes, tragically it has.

Last night when Andy was brought here – you will have forgotten by now, but I want to remind you – I said some words at the door of the Church:

'We receive the body of our brother Andy
with confidence in God, the giver of life…'

And then I prayed that:

'… through the grave and gate of death
we may come to our joyful resurrection…'

When we stand by our friend's coffin and grave like this we are as close as we are ever going to be to the mother and closest friends of Jesus Christ. They stood and watched their 33 year old son/friend dying, as we watched ours. Some of them lovingly took his body and carried it to be buried, as we will carry our friend to his grave. In time, even though they didn't fully understand these things, they came to speak of his resurrection from the dead, of meeting him, knowing him and being with him again. That is why when we stand outside, in a little while, at Andy's grave, even as we cry and hold one another, we will cling to our Christian faith and for us all I will pray:

> Almighty God, our heavenly Father,
> you have given us a sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life.
> In your keeping are all those who have departed in Christ.

What does it mean? Here and now we can't know everything fully. For me it means 'forever with God'. What does that mean? That's another day's conversation. And we mustn't feel bad saying that we don't fully understand here and now. A lot of life and living is grey rather than black and

white – there is more mist than visibility much of the time. But that grey, misty, tearful place is the very place where God is with us here and now, even though we think we have been abandoned.

Saint Paul made it clear that some of the greatest things – the most precious things in life – faith, hope and love - are mysteries. Speaking about them and about the here and now he said:

'Now we see through a glass (a mirror) darkly, but then face to face: n
ow I know in part, but then shall I know as even I am known.'
(I Corinthians 13. 12).

Or as one modern version (*The Message*) puts it:

'We don't see things clearly.
We're squinting in a fog, peering through a mist.
But it won't be long before the weather clears and the sun shines bright!
We'll see it all then, see it as clearly as God sees us, knowing him directly just as he knows us!'

In the stories that we keep telling one another in recent days we keep remembering the 'Andy-isms' the things he used to say. Ali Dunne mentioned one of them already, the same one I want to mention. Andy used to say: 'Man at night; man in the morning.' If you were able to stay up late the night before enjoying the fun, you still had to show up fresh and ready at training the next morning, 'Man at night; man in the morning.'

Night and morning - darkness and light! After the darkness, the light comes. No matter what happens the night before, the new day, the light calls for a fresh start – being there, up for it, renewed participation, energy and involvement.

That, in its own way summarises the good news of Jesus Christ – after the cross – a new beginning and a fresh start – resurrection. That's why at the graveside the final words of the prayer of burial are these: 'Thanks be to God who gives us the victory.' These last words of the burial prayer are a victory cheer – like those of a winning player at the end of an Irish Senior Cup match.

Andy knew defeat in sport. He also knew victory. Our final prayer as we leave him through the gate of death, with God, today is that this ultimate victory will be Andrew's – a sweet victory that brings him peace and joy with God forever. Amen.