

**MASS FOR THE 40TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE FOUNDATION
OF THE CHURCH OF THE SACRED HEART, WATERFORD**

HOMILY GIVEN BY
CARDINAL SEÁN BRADY

Saturday 5th December 2009

My friends in Christ,

I am delighted to be here in the Parish of the Sacred Heart, the Folly, in the Diocese of Waterford and Lismore. I am honoured to celebrate this Mass for the 40th Anniversary of the foundation of your parish. I want to thank Fr Sean Melody for his kind invitation to be here. Fr Sean and I go back a long way. So I know you are blessed with a very energetic and creative Parish Priest. I will always be very grateful to Fr Sean for his kindness to me when I first became Archbishop of Armagh and President of the Bishops' Conference. At that time he was working in Veritas in Dublin. He was always very generous with his time and with his practical help. So thank you Fr Sean for all your help to me and for your kind invitation to be part of this important event.

I also want to thank my good friend and colleague Bishop Willie Lee for his warm welcome to the Diocese of Waterford and Lismore. Bishop Willie is Secretary to the Bishops' Conference and I am President. So we work very closely together. And I want to say that there are few men I know who are so hard working, so dependable and so generous with their time and talents as Bishop Willie Lee. I am very privileged to work with him and I thank you Bishop Willie for making me so at home in this beautiful and historic Diocese of Waterford and Lismore.

I also want to express my gratitude and respect to all the civic leaders and elected representatives who have welcomed me here to Waterford. This is a vibrant and bustling port city with a proud history and a strong sporting and cultural life. I thank you Deputy Lord Mayor and members of the City Council for your recognition of the vital part Catholic Parishes and other faith groups play in the life of this city and throughout our nation.

The Parish of the Sacred Heart is a shining example of what a Catholic Parish should be – a vibrant community of faith which contributes to the good of society as a whole. In the early Church the people used to say that the ‘Eucharist makes the Church’. In this Parish we see how, even from its first beginnings, the Eucharist built community and the community made the Church.

In the short history of the Parish sent to me by Fr Sean I was struck by a phrase used by the first Parish Priest of Sacred Heart, Fr Michael Russell, when he set out his plans for tackling the huge Parish debt. He set about fashioning the people into a united community and, in his own words, ‘to get all shoulders to the wheel’. From that moment the reputation of Sacred Heart Parish as a community that pulls together for the good of all was established and has remained firmly in place. Whether it was the ‘Car a month’ draw, or the Sacred Heart Youth/ SHY project, whether it was the Pastoral Council or the large number of pastoral groups helping people of every age and need, Sacred Heart Parish was marked by a spirit of collaboration and community. It drew its strength from the unifying power of the Word of God and the living presence of Jesus our Lord and Saviour in the Eucharist.

It has often been said that during the height of our Celtic Tiger years we were in danger of losing sight of the importance of community. I am not sure that was always true. What is true however, is that if we want to address the many challenges which face our country at this time we will once again have to, in the words of Fr Russell, ‘get all shoulders to the wheel’.

Whether it is the recession, the scandals in the Church or the threat to our planet because of climate change, we will never be able to respond to the most urgent problems of our time as individuals acting in isolation from one another. We can only address these problems as a community working together for the common good.

Only yesterday I came across a wonderful example of this. I was visiting St. Mary's College in Dundalk with the Church of Ireland Archbishop of Armagh, Dr Alan Harper. We met the young people there and talked to them about Advent and how they were preparing for the celebration of Christmas. I was surprised that so many told us they hadn't given any thought to what they wanted for Christmas. In fact, they had conducted a poll among themselves. They asked the question: what is the most valuable gift you can give to someone at Christmas? The result was extraordinary. They all agreed that the most valuable thing they could give to others this Christmas is the gift of *their time* – time for themselves to reflect on what is really important in life; time for family and friends and making them feel appreciated; and time for the world – for tackling the different problems in the world, especially the needs of those who will not receive a gift of love from anyone this Christmas. So yesterday these young people were giving their time to preparing shoe box parcels and food hampers for those who will have little or nothing this Christmas. The young people told us how, compared to last year, the number of people needing their help through these parcels was going up all the time. It was a poignant reminder of the quiet trauma so many people are going through because of the dramatic downturn in the global economy.

At this time of the year, many of you will be buying Christmas cards to send to relatives and friends. The image on Christmas cards is often that of the Holy Family of Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus sheltering with the animals in a stable. Recent weeks have seen distressing images of families seeking shelter around the country as floods and storms brought destruction to homes and farms and businesses. I am sure like me you were inspired by the way people pulled together to help each other when the recent floods took hold. It is this pulling together which will help to us to address a critical issue which may well lie behind the unusual floods we have experienced - the challenge of global climate change.

God gave us the gift of this beautiful planet to till it and care for it. We have a duty to hand it on to future generations in good condition. To do that, we have to pull together. We have to change our attitude. We need to use less and recycle more. We need to improve the energy efficiency of our homes and Churches. We need to change our attitudes and our lifestyles. We need to become part of a community that cares.

Communities that care and pull together can help us to face the future with hope. Advent and Christmas are about giving hope through communities that care. As we face the daunting prospect of the budget in the week ahead, it is about building communities that come together to pull us out of our current economic difficulties with solidarity and hope. It is about challenging all hatred and envy of others so that together we can enjoy the gift of peace which the child in the manger came to bring. It is about building communities that care enough to make sure that every child is protected and every elderly person can sleep safely in their homes at night. It is about acknowledging the pain of those among us who were robbed of the innocence and joy of their childhood by people who betrayed their sacred trust. I am ashamed that leaders of the Church failed in their duty to protect them. I pray that the child in the manger will forever remind us of our duty to keep the safety, welfare and dignity of every child as our first priority.

When this Church was built forty years ago, I have no doubt that the ground had to be prepared. The site would have had to be levelled and secure foundations put in place. Otherwise, whatever was built would have quickly collapsed.

In the Gospel, Saint Luke reminds us that Advent is about clearing the site of our hearts and minds for the celebration of Christmas. If we do not make straight the winding ways in our double standards and immoral attitudes then it will be difficult for Christ to find us. The Church in Ireland has become very painfully aware of this in recent weeks and months. If we do not lay low the mountains of our arrogance and pride, as individuals or institutions, including the Church itself, then we will not be able to see the salvation which God is offering to us in the birth of his only Son.

John proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Perhaps this is why he was a voice that ‘cried in the wilderness’. Repentance and the forgiveness of sin are not easy. Yet, if we are to build our lives and our communities on the solid foundations of integrity, justice and peace, then turning away from sin – which harms us our community – is essential. In our first reading, the Prophet Baruch calls on the people of Jerusalem to ‘wrap the cloak of the integrity of God around you.’ This is exactly what happened when each of us was baptised. We were wrapped in the integrity and justice of Jesus Christ himself, symbolised by our white baptismal robe.

Yet the ‘road-works’ imagery of our Advent Gospel reminds us that the robe of integrity can so easily slide off our back. It offers imagery for examining our conscience. Pathways to straighten suggests addressing the chinks in our truthfulness, openness and honesty. Valleys being filled in suggests addressing low periods in our effort, enthusiasm and devotion. Levelling mountains and hills suggests addressing mounting worries, seemingly insurmountable problems and anxiety. In the words of our opening prayer, it suggests removing ‘the things that hinder us from receiving Christ with joy’.

I have no doubt that as this Church was being built forty years ago, the people who were gathering for Mass in the Hall, affectionately known as the Tin Hut, were looking on in joyful hope of the arrival of their new Church. That hope was not just about a new building. It was also about a way of being community – of being a believing, celebrating, praying and witnessing community rooted in the Word of God and in the Eucharist.

As we gather on this second Sunday of Advent we share that sense of waiting in joyful hope for the Saviour of the world to come among us at the end of time. As we await his coming again we also acknowledge the living signs of his presence among us in the Word and in the Eucharist. We acknowledge the signs of his living presence among us in the work and prayer of all of those who make this a vibrant, collaborative and missionary parish community. In congratulating all those who have been part of the success of building this wonderful community of living faith I echo the words of St. Paul in our Second Reading: 'My prayer is that is that your love for each other may increase more and more and never stop improving your knowledge... so that you can always recognise what is best. I am quite certain that the One who began this good work in you will see that it is finished when the Day of Christ Jesus comes'.

Thank you. And as we wait in joyful hope for Christmas Day, may God bless you all.