

**July 23, 2006**  
**Guest Speaker: John Deacon**  
**Time for Truth**  
**Orphans**

**Orphans – (song)**

In wrath O Lord, remember mercy  
In wrath O lord, remember mercy.

A boy looks up into a war torn sky  
His mother and father are gone  
His home destroyed, he is all alone  
Where can he turn for help?

O God, he cries  
Don't leave me here alone  
O God, he cries  
Where can I go?

A man looks up into a blackened sky  
He is innocent but he's condemned to die  
Proclaimed as the One who would bring us peace  
He's forsaken, despised and scorned

O God he cries  
Why leave me here alone?  
O God he cries  
Into your hands I give myself.

In wrath O Lord, remember mercy  
In wrath O Lord, remember mercy

**July '06**

This past week has been a week of alarming Headlines:

Middle East on the verge of War  
More than 200 killed by a Tsunami in Indonesia  
Attack kills dozens in Iraqi Market  
Police Identify Explosives Used in Mumbai Attack  
Seven Days, Seven People Killed in Toronto with no Arrests  
AIDS orphans in sub-Saharan Africa: a looming threat to future generations

Admittedly, many of us come to church to escape the news. It's just too depressing; too overwhelming...we long to be rid of the tragedy that surrounds us. We long for heaven right here on earth.

This is quite natural – indeed commendable, that we should long for a world where 'God himself will wipe away every tear from our eyes – where there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain' where 'the old order of things has passed away'.

(see Revelation 21:4)

But that is not the world we live in and until it is, every morning we wake up to the news.

In the Gospels, we only have one account of how Jesus dealt with Headline News, which can be found in the first 5 verses of Luke's 13<sup>th</sup> chapter. Jesus is in the midst of preaching to crowds of people, when someone interrupts him to ask him if he has heard the latest:

**Luke 13:1-5**

***About this time Jesus was informed that Pilate had murdered some people as they were offering sacrifices at the Temple.***

***'Do you think those Galileans were worse sinners than all the other people from Galilee?' Jesus asked. 'Is that why they suffered? Not at all? And you will perish, too unless you repent of your sins and turn to God.***

***And what about the eighteen people who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them? Were they the worst sinners in Jerusalem? No, and I tell you again that unless you repent, you will perish too.'***

I want you to think for a moment of how you would have responded were you in Jesus shoes and someone had just given you the news that some of your countrymen had been murdered. If you have an ounce of social activist blood in you, you'd probably be organizing a march to protest the ruthless dealings of a foreign tyrant, responsible for the deaths of innocent people you knew and grew up with, whose only crime was to express openly their devotion to God.

On the other hand, if you were a pious moralist, you probably would have deduced that somehow these worshipers had it coming – that in some way, they had provoked God's righteous anger and for reasons known only to God, God used Pilate to wipe them out. Maybe they had come to the temple bringing their electric guitars...

If you were a Union foreman, witness to the collapse of a building which killed 18 of your fellow workers, you'd be organizing a strike to protest the Contractor's blatant disregard for building codes. Or again, if you're a moralist – as all of us indeed are, you'd be doing what we all do when we hear of such disasters – we'd be looking for someone to blame, some explanation why it was they who died and not us.

To both the pious moralist and the social activist, the response of Jesus is mystifying if not outright offensive. To both disasters his answer is the same – 'unless you repent and turn to God, you will perish too'.

Let's put that in contemporary context. A man smuggles a bomb into a church and blows up the church killing the janitor and six members of a single moms group, who were meeting together to support one another in their struggle.

Anderson Cooper and his camera crew from CNN interrupt Jesus as he is speaking to a crowd about 10 miles from where this tragedy takes place.

Jesus is telling the crowd '*When you see clouds beginning to form in the west you say, here comes a shower.*' And you are right. *When the south wind blows, you say 'Today will be a scorcher.'* And it is. *You fools! You know how to interpret the weather signs of the earth and sky but you don't know how to interpret the present times.'* (Luke 12: 54-56)

Anderson interrupts Jesus to inform him about the bombing and having heard Jesus' remark about the importance of rightly interpreting the present time asks Jesus how he'd interpret the tragedy that's just occurred.

No doubt, Anderson is expecting some word of comfort to the bereaved families, or a vehement denunciation of the cowardly act committed by the terrorist. Anderson is expecting as we all would – that Jesus would condemn the evildoer and decry the wrong committed against the innocent.

But instead Jesus says: ‘unless you repent, you will perish too.’

What is going on here? At the very moment we expect Jesus to judge one party right and the other wrong – one good and the other evil - he is calling us to repent...as if the wrong committed is our fault, as if the evil committed is our own. It’s as though he means we interpret all news of tragedy as cause for us to repent.

But why?

Because in Jesus’ eyes, the one role we can’t assume in watching the daily news is that of bystander or judge...as though what’s happening is in a world other than our own.

The apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans put it this way:

***<sup>1</sup>You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things. <sup>2</sup>Now we know that God's judgment against those who do such things is based on truth. <sup>3</sup>So when you, a mere man, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God's judgment? <sup>4</sup>Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness leads you toward repentance?***

#### **Romans 2:1-5**

Whether the news is about a tsunami in South-East Asia, or an AIDS pandemic through the sub-Saharan countries in Africa, or the genocide of 400,000 people in Darfur; in Jesus’ eyes, we are not meant to see ourselves anywhere but right in the thick of it.

Boy – doesn’t that change our relationship to the news! Instead of sitting back in our easy chairs, watching the CTV news and weighing disasters as though they’re contestants on American Idol – Jesus would have us watching the news from our knees.

That would make Enron just another story about what happens when our greed runs wild.

That would make cruise missiles just another story about how we try to get rid of people we don’t like without getting personally involved.

That would make the Orphan crisis in Africa just another story about the millions of children we are prepared to sacrifice just to retain the wealth we have.

There is a story involving Mahatma Gandhi that helps us understand why Jesus would insist that our first response to a tragic event is to repent.

Early in his adult life, Gandhi was a part-time high school teacher. He noticed that one boy was being picked on and bullied by his classmates, so Gandhi befriended the boy, and did his best to encourage him as well as protect him from his classmates.

One day when Gandhi wasn’t at the school, a gang made up of the boy’s classmates brutally beat up the boy, leaving the boy badly injured.

Gandhi when he learned of the news was devastated. But rather than punish or judge the students, he repented as though he had committed the crime. He fasted, he prayed and as he did, he began to see in the guilt of the students, his own guilt, his own lack of love, patience and truthfulness. In his humiliation, he discovered a truth that would mark him for life...that repentance is the first step before any crisis can be resolved. It’s the old adage – that before you can solve a problem, you have to realize that some part of the problem is you.

This is what the Lord meant when he said: **You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.’ (Matthew 7:5)**

By now you must be asking yourselves: ‘But what does this have to do with orphans?’ Orphans are headline news. Especially AIDS orphans. The World Health Organization estimates there are 15 million AIDS orphans in the world, a number they are projecting will

increase to 25 million within 4 years. That's 5 million more than the entire population of Australia.

In the face of this overwhelming crisis, the reason we are inclined to identify ourselves as bystanders, or as informed observers, or as discriminating benefactors or as too compassion fatigued to get involved – is to keep ourselves from feeling guilty. We are adamant to insist that the way we live has nothing to do with this crisis. The orphans are too far away from us, on the other side of the globe, and what can we do about the situation? How can we be held responsible? No wonder we get offended with Jesus when he tells us we are the ones who must repent.

But to repent is not the same as feeling guilty. Feeling guilty would be a good thing if all it did were make us feel bad every time we did something wrong. But guilt when it settles in is immobilizing. If it stays around too long, it denies us the courage it takes to ask for God's mercy. It's disabling. Guilt can never turn us around.

But repentance can. It has the power to turn our whole lives around. Repentance is both a decision we make to change direction as well as the evidence of God's kindness working in our lives. When we respond to the Holy Spirit's revealing both our wrong actions and our defective thinking, God empowers us to make things right.

The Apostle Paul in his first letter to the church in Corinth had to correct them for some highly inappropriate behaviour: complacency, sexual impropriety, lack of love – the kind of things preachers still speak to their congregations about.

Fortunately, the church took Paul's words to heart and repented. In his follow-up letter Paul commends them for their response. He writes:

***And now, isn't it wonderful all the ways in which this distress has goaded you closer to God? You're more alive, more concerned, more sensitive, more reverent, more human, more passionate, more responsible.***

***2 Corinthians 7:11 (The Message)***

And so when we consider the world's orphans – orphans because of war, or disease, or poverty, or abuse, or famine - we repent of our indifference, we repent of our greed, we repent of trying to save ourselves at the expense of helping others, we repent for devising exit strategies from the sufferings of others, we repent, we turn around, we want to do what we can to make things right. And in so doing, we become in Paul's words '*more alive, more concerned, more sensitive, more reverent, more human, more passionate, more responsible*'.

For truly the issue of orphans is distressing and mandates our involvement in whatever way we can.

Can you imagine for just one moment – what you as a parent would be feeling, if you were on your deathbed, with your spouse having already predeceased you – looking into the faces of your 3 children ages 11, 8 and 4 - and realizing within the next day or so, your 3 children are going to be completely on their own?

Can you imagine the look of fear in their eyes?

Stephen Lewis, the UN Secretary General's Special Envoy for HIV/AIDS in Africa tells of this experience:

*In Zambia, we were taken to a village where the orphan population was described as out of control. As a vivid example of that we entered a home and encountered the following: to the immediate left of the door sat the 84 year old patriarch, entirely blind. Inside the hut sat his two wives, visibly frail, one 76, the other 78. Between them they had given birth to nine children; eight were now dead and the ninth, alas, was clearly dying. On the floor of the hut, jammed together with barely room to move or breathe, were 32 orphaned children ranging in age from two to sixteen...it is now commonplace that grandmothers are the caregivers for orphans.*

*The grandmothers are impoverished, their days are numbered, and the decimation of families is so complete that there's often no one left in the generation coming up behind. We're all struggling to find a viable response, and there are of course, some superb projects and initiatives in all countries, but we can't seem to take them to scale.*

In the letter of James to the churches, he defines true religion that God considers pure and blameless is to 'look after orphans and widows in their distress.' (James 1:27) Another way of saying that might be – the purest, most genuine expression of our faith in God is when we take care of widows and orphans.

Psalms 68:5 says that God is the father of the fatherless. Which means those of us who likewise think of God as our Father are to see orphans as family, our brothers and sisters.

In one real sense, we are all orphans. We all know the experience of being in a room with hundreds of people in it and feeling entirely on our own. As Daelle Stacey puts it: 'we all struggle with orphan hearts', this sense of not belonging, of being disengaged from what's really meaningful in life.

Indeed that's the reason Christ came – to adopt us into God's own family where God becomes our Father, and we His dearly loved children!

That probably explains why the church has cared for orphans throughout its history.

To give you some historical perspective on how the church has taken the lead role in the care and protection of orphans:

In the Roman Empire of Jesus' day, there was no provision made for widows and orphans.

But as the church began to infiltrate Roman life, this changed. The Roman Emperor Antonius Pius in the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century established relief agencies for children in response to what Christians were doing.

It was the church that required its ministers in the 5<sup>th</sup> Century to 'protect orphans that they may not be oppressed by strangers after the death of their parents'.

It was the church in the early 6<sup>th</sup> Century that inspired, the Roman Emperor Justinian, to enact legislation, which relieved those who were willing to care for orphans from all other civic duties.

It was the church under the leadership of the French Monk Guy de Montpellier in 1100 AD which established the Order of the Holy Spirit to look after orphans.

It was the church in the early 1600's through the work of St. Vincent de Paul which developed an infrastructure of care for literally thousands of orphans in Paris and surrounding cities, mostly orphans under the age of 7 years old. He was also the founder of 'The Sisters of Charity', who by the time of the French Revolution had over 400 houses dedicated to the care of orphans.

George Mueller of Bristol England, renown for his prayer life and his love for orphans, by 1874 had built a network of orphanages, which cared for over 2000 orphans.

When a cholera epidemic broke out in London, England in 1866, Dr. Thomas John Bernardo, a committed Christian, was overwhelmed by the number of homeless and destitute children. Soliciting funds from everyone he knew, the first of what were later called the Bernardo homes was built in 1870. By the time of his death in 1905, there were 112 district 'homes'. These institutions searched for and received orphans – 'to cloth, educate and where possible, to give an industrial training suitable to each child.' Today Bernardo homes help about 100,000 children annually.

In 1950 Dr. Bob Pierce began World Vision to help children orphaned in the Korean War. The organization has grown well beyond its child-assistance roots to facilitating the transformation of entire communities with water programs, health care education, agricultural

and economic development, and strategic Christian leadership activities in 103 countries around the world.

In 1992 Rev. Angelo D'Agostino, a Jesuit priest from the United States, found himself face to face with one of the many ugly consequences of AIDS in Africa. When parents die of AIDS, they leave behind children, many of whom also carry the virus that causes AIDS. With the stigma toward the disease so great, the orphans are often left to live and die on the street.

At the time, 'Father DAG' as he is now called, was on the board of a large orphanage in Nairobi Kenya, which would not allow HIV positive children into their programs. So he resigned from the Board in protest and rented an apartment where he looked after 3 children who had HIV.

This expanded into an orphanage named NYUMBANI, which means 'home' in Swahili. The orphanage currently looks after 85 orphans, a small dint in the estimated 1.5 million AIDS orphans in Kenya alone.

Funerals are a fact of life as the small cemetery behind the orphanage's playground attests to. But there are fewer deaths now than in the early days. With some children on anti-AIDS drugs and with an adjoining health clinic in operation, the children are living longer.

When Bishop John Rucyahana assumed responsibility for a diocese of northeast Rwanda in 1997, he returned home to a devastated country. Addressing Rwanda's estimated 400,000 orphans and decimated education system, Bishop John founded the Sunrise School to be a 'light on a hill' to demonstrate to everyone in Rwanda what is possible. Started initially through the Anglican Church and now supported by various Christian denominations, it has a population 450 students, and is a visible example of how with love and education, the country's neediest children are redeemable and can be developed into leaders. The majority of the students are either genocide or AIDS orphans.

In Malawi, one of Africa's poorer countries, the number of children orphaned by AIDS is nearly half of the country's total orphan population of 1.1 million. The life expectancy in Malawi is 36 years and with orphans representing nearly 10% of the population and the average per capita income less than \$2 per day, the resources simply aren't there to handle this crisis.

The government has responded with the promotion and support of community based programs to cope with the escalating crisis. In many villages orphan committees have been established to monitor the local situation and take collective action to assist those in need. But as important as these initiatives are, they are crippled by the fact that the country neither has the monetary resource nor the people resource to deal with the problem. In a country where the mortality rate for women between the ages of 19 and 26 is nearly 40% - it's not just mothers who are dying. These women are also Malawi's teachers and nurses and social workers and civil servants. AIDS is decimating the entire infrastructure of care, which wasn't that strong to begin with.

As one UN observer noted about the conditions in Malawi: 'Orphans have little food, few clothes, no bedding and no soap...and as a whole, community care because of HIV/AIDS is overwhelmed and breaking down'.

Tim Dunham, who attends this church, spent 4 weeks this past spring in Malawi and I have asked him to share something from his experience there...

Tim is one of several people I know of from the church who has or who are presently working with orphans. Rachel Seilern (pronounced sigh-learn) and her cousin Natasha Szauter (pronoun. sow-ter) are with an organization called SOS International and are working with orphans in northern Italy.

Ruth Anne Valkenburg is currently in Camden New Jersey with an agency Called Urban Promise – working with children in one the US's most impoverished inner cities.

What inspired me to speak about orphans in the first place was a visit I had with a life-long friend Chuck Stephens.

For most of his life Chuck has been in relief work – helping set up water irrigation systems in Angola and distributing food aid in Mozambique – that kind of thing.

7 years ago he and his wife Heather took the lead in setting up a campus in White River South Africa – dedicated to the training of African leaders involved in church and humanitarian work.

More recently because of the AIDS crisis, Chuck and Heather have been connecting with local schools and are seeing first hand the impact the epidemic is having on students. In some schools as many as 50% of the students are ‘single’ orphans and 15% ‘double orphans’.

In response to this crisis, Chuck and Heather have run a support camp during school holidays devoted to teaching AIDS orphans leadership skills, who because both their parents have died, are now responsible to provide for and raise their younger siblings.

The theme of the camp is “I have a future”.

There are two stigmas for an AIDS orphan to overcome – the first is the stigma attached to the disease itself – for which ostracism, rejection, discrimination and avoidance are common. Part of this discrimination regrettably is attributable to those of us who were Christians in the 1980’s – who saw AIDS as a gay disease. Rather than care for the early victims of this illness, we judged them, insisting that this illness was God’s judgment on their lifestyle. And by doing so, we forfeited the place Christians have historically assumed in crises like these. We were no longer on the caring edge. We became judges instead. As a result, and quite understandably, there is a lot of animosity gays still have for Evangelicals.

Given our Lord’s longstanding compassion for tax collectors, prostitutes, lepers and others who would not be welcome in most homes, it would be accurate to say that we couldn’t have behaved less like Jesus in our response to the first AIDS victims.

One reason to repent – if you’re still looking for one.

But for orphans there is a 2<sup>nd</sup> stigma to overcome...that of being an orphan in the first place. Orphans are typically seen as ‘non-persons’. If taken in by other families – they are typically treated like slaves, as something less than their own children by families who adopt them. Many orphans choose to be ‘home alone’ rather than be adopted by relatives – it’s one way they can retain whatever possessions their parents leave them.

At the **facility the Stephens run, Orchard Camp**, the orphans are provided with 3 different types of program to build inner ‘resilience’ and confidence.

Incorporating worship, prayer and play into all 3 program streams the kids are given obstacle courses as a means of helping to problem solve, to teach them how to work through the life mazes they find themselves in. **The highlight is a climbing wall.**

They are also provided with grief counseling. Most orphans because of their immediate crisis they face with their parents’ death don’t have opportunity to mourn the loss of their parents. The camp gives them room to mourn and to be comforted by those who care.

Finally the camp gives orphans skills training – ranging from **labour un-intensive gardening to nutrition**; from making pottery to developing strategic thinking to help them beyond their current predicament.

I mention these programs because they parallel the kind of assistance we all need whenever our world collapses...assistance the church is uniquely equipped to provide.

We all need to be told we have a future. We need a caring community who give us room to mourn our losses, but who are also there to laugh and worship with us, among whom we can grow up to face head on the hard challenges life brings us. And the church is also the place to develop skills, especially caring skills. We are to be the hotbed of innovative, impactful, caring ventures. We are to be the pioneers of mercy.

The prophet Jeremiah, in a letter to the exiles who had been taken into Babylon, many of whom 'orphaned' not only from the land they knew but also the families they had grown up in, wrote:

***For I know the plans I have for you, declared the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future'. Jeremiah 29:11.***

It is the church's place to take the lead in giving orphans a 'hope and a future'. Indeed, they are our future.

Some concluding remarks that I hope you will take home, talk about and do something about:

- Dedicate a specific day some portion of which you will pray, even fast for orphans. As to which day of the week, I have a suggestion which requires some explanation- a suggestion that originates with my friend Chuck. Do you remember from the Christmas story – how the wise men before they visited Jesus, went first to Jerusalem to ask King Herod 'where is who has been born King of the Jews?' Herod after consulting with the priests, who told him that according to Old Testament prophecy, the promised king was to be born in Bethlehem. Herod then asked the wise men that on their return visit they tell him where they had found him so that he too might come worship him. But the wise men ended up going home another way; while Joseph, Mary and Jesus secretly stole off to Egypt, both being warned in dreams that King Herod's real intentions were to murder the new born king. (see Matthew 2:13-18) Herod was furious when the wise men didn't return and ordered the killing of all male children under the age of 2 in Bethlehem and the surrounding region. In remembrance of those innocent children killed, the early church would celebrate a kind of Remembrance Day on the 3<sup>rd</sup> day after Christmas every year to remember all the innocents killed by war, by famine, by disease. They called the Day – the 28<sup>th</sup> of December – Childermas. This year the 28<sup>th</sup> day of December falls on a Thursday, so consider devoting whatever time you can – every Thursday – to praying for orphans. If you are up to fasting for say a meal or two, do so. Of the nearly 26 million people who have died of AIDS in the 25 years since it was first diagnosed, over 5 million have been children. To remember those along with other children who have died because of civil war, famine or genocide – not only will soften our hearts to do what we must do – but also heighten our responsibility and care for the children we live with.
- Remember that children are our future – even those children we are not the parents of. As you assume responsibility for orphans, remember that we too are orphans having been adopted into God's family by Jesus Christ.
- Canada – as wealthy as we are – has never reached the 0.7% of GDP benchmark the G8 countries pledged to third world relief. We need to remind our leaders of our responsibility to share our wealth with the desperately poor.
- Only 5% of those children infected with AIDS in Africa have access to drug treatment. Again with lobbying, there must be some way to substantially improve this response.

- If nothing else – REPENT. We have all had a part in this problem. Repentance opens to us the promise of having a part in the solution.

- If I might close with some observations from the United Nations special envoy Stephen Lewis from his book 'Race Against Time'.

It begins with these eerie words:

*I have spent the last four years watching people die.*

Near the end of his book he writes:

*As I've moved from country to country over the last four years, it's been clear, inescapably clear, that as the pandemic evolves, children orphaned by AIDS are becoming the single most intractable and painful legacy. There are no equivalent precedents. Nothing in historical experience has prepared us for two generations of children rendered desperate, lonely, sad and bewildered by sheer circumstance...*

*I think that the pandemic of HIV/AIDS forces us; all of us, to speak out when we think transgressions are being committed.*

*If Colin Powell was right when he was secretary of state – and I believe he was – to say that AIDS was the most significant threat in the world, greater even than weapons of mass destruction, then I believe the assertion of principle must replace the reliance on niceties.*

Even after we have repented for our part, it is easy to be overwhelmed. That's why Jesus tells us to repent and TURN TO GOD. It is in God that we find courage and resource to do our part.

For it is God, as the psalmist writes, who is the Father of the fatherless, the One who settles the solitary in homes.

He is the stronghold of the oppressed, the One who is always there in times of trouble. He does not forget the cry of the afflicted...He hears them, he strengthens their hearts...he intervenes to do justice on their behalf.

Indeed it was to all orphans Jesus said:

**“All that the Father gives me will come to me and whoever comes to me I will never cast out...This is the will of Him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of that he's given me but raise them up on the last day”**

**John 6:37,39**

May God help us to do our part.

Closing Prayer