

**March 9, 2008 – SHOCK WAVES**  
Guest Speaker: John Deacon  
**Resurrection and Vindication**

When I was 16 years old one of my closest friends was the caretaker at Rosedale United Church.

Bill Cranston was a gem of a guy, Scottish, a great sense of humour; one of the few adults in my life at the time that I could really talk to. He took me under his wing as his right hand guy and out of respect for our friendship and my ability to stack chairs after church functions; he gave me a key to the church.

Sometimes on Sunday afternoons, when the church would be empty, I would go, make my way into the pulpit and open the massive Bible at the lectern to Matthew Chapter 5. And to an empty sanctuary I would read aloud all three chapters of the Sermon on the Mount – to the point where I almost knew it all by heart.

***Blessed are the poor in spirit,  
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.***

***Blessed are those who mourn,  
for they will be comforted.***

***Blessed are the meek,  
for they will inherit the earth.***

***Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,  
for they will be filled.***

***Blessed are the merciful,  
for they will be shown mercy.***

***Blessed are the pure in heart,  
for they will see God.***

***Blessed are the peacemakers,  
for they will be called sons of God.***

***"You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men.***

***"You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.***

***"You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth'. But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.***

***"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' but I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven.***

**He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get?**

**"This, then, is how you should pray:**

**'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,  
your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.**

**Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.**

**Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?**

**"And why worry about your clothing? Look at the lilies of the field and how they grow. They don't work or make their clothing, yet Solomon in all his glory was not dressed as beautifully as they are. And if God cares so wonderfully for wildflowers that are here today and thrown into the fire tomorrow, he will certainly care for you. Why do you have so little faith?**

**So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.**

**Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself.**

**Each day has enough trouble of its own.**

*Portions of The Sermon on the Mount: Matthew 5 & 6 NIV*

The words captivated me. They were at complete odds with the world I lived in, but there were times they seemed like the only words that mattered. They represented the kind of world I wanted to live in.

And when I'd get to the part about God so caring for the birds of the air that he feeds them and so caring for the flowers of the field that he clothes them...that to read God loves us even more - such that we should never worry about where our next meal is coming from or what we're going to wear...it all seemed so idyllic, and yet so utterly possible.

It would be another 7 years before I became a Christian but even at 16 years of age; these words had a profound effect on me.

For anyone under 20: if the only reason you are sitting here in church this morning is because your parents made you, I encourage you to do something that I promise you will make this service something other than a waste of time.

Find a modern translation of the New Testament, turn to Matthew Chapter 5 and in a place where nobody else can hear you, nothing to distract you – computer, MP3 player whatever - read aloud Chapters 5, 6 and 7 of Matthew's gospel. Read it as if your first objective is not to understand the words, nor even to believe what you're reading – simply become accustomed

to the sound of the words, get some feel for how different they are and how incredible they are. Don't be shocked at their power – they have had a profound effect not only on Christians like Martin Luther King and Mother Theresa, but non-Christians like Mahatma Gandhi.

I am thoroughly convinced that before we can say yes to Jesus, we must experience him. Going to church is great, making Christian friends is great, helping the poor is great but to experience Jesus you must first experience the power of his words. They must resonate in you like an echo resonates in you when you are standing in a cave and yell 'is anyone in there?' For fundamental to becoming a Christian – not just for a day but for the rest of your life – is to hear Jesus for yourself. For there will come a day where to follow Jesus will mean you will have to be courageous when everyone else has chickened out; or standing with someone and calling that person 'your friend' when everyone else has deserted them. It will mean seeking justice for others and foregoing privilege for yourself.

But before you can go there, you must experience the reverberation of Christ's words. To read his words aloud is very much like standing in a cave and asking 'is anyone there' and hearing God answer 'YES'.

But as I mentioned earlier it would be another 7 years before I became a Christian. In between, I stopped reading the Sermon on the Mount. For one reason, because they changed the locks on Rosedale United Church!

But for other reasons, as well. I found the words too fantastic to believe. I was growing up, trying to act mature and sophisticated, like I knew how to get ahead. I had been to university, I had a job - I was seeing first hand how the world really operates: where the race is won by those who can afford the best running shoes, and bullies climb corporate ladders by intimidating their rivals. In the business world of clutch and grab - the words of Jesus seemed out of touch, naïve. I became increasingly skeptical. I saw the church as society's way of keeping us all in line, but good for little else.

But deep down inside, there was the echo of Jesus' words – faint, but still there. Deep down inside I still longed for the kind of world Jesus spoke of, where the poor would be blessed, and those who advocated for peace would succeed. But looking around, it seemed as though the opposite was true. The Kennedy assassinations, the war in Vietnam, the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X– it really seemed that violence had the upper hand. Peacemaking was spoken of as being tantamount to treason, and not blessed as Jesus said it was.

Some Christians I knew at the time told me – Don't worry about the mess the world is in. It's a sinking ship – it's enough to simply believe in Jesus. No use trying to make the world a better place – Jesus is coming again. Pray God takes you before the great tribulation... I found such talk to be abhorrent – I still do. The notion that the kind of world Jesus talked about in the Sermon on the Mount would have to wait until he came back again seemed escapist and fatalistic. It was an outright contradiction of the words Jesus had taught us to pray – *Your Kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*'

What good is God if his only answer to the world's problems is: 'don't worry – I'll get it right the next time!'

Now – just so you don't misunderstand me. I do believe Christ will return. I believe it because I believe in the resurrection. As Paul wrote to the Corinthian Church:

*Christ has been raised from the dead. He is the first of a great harvest of all who have died. So you see, just as death came into the world through a man, now the resurrection from the dead has begun through another man. Just as everyone dies because we all belong to Adam, everyone who belongs to Christ will be given new life. But there is an order to this resurrection, Christ was raised as the first of the harvest; then all who belong to Christ will be raised when he comes back.*

*After that the end will come, when he will turn over the Kingdom over to God the Father, having destroyed every ruler and authority and power. For Christ must reign until he humbles all his enemies under his feet. And the last enemy to be destroyed is death. For the scriptures say,*

***‘God has put all things under his authority. (I Corinthians 15:20-27a)***

The text says: when Christ returns, he will turn the Kingdom over to God the Father. What kingdom is Christ turning over to his Father? Why the Kingdom of God – the Kingdom Jesus talks about in the Sermon on the Mount. The Kingdom where the poor are blessed and those in mourning are comforted and the meek inherit the earth...all as the direct consequence of his resurrection from the dead!

The resurrection of Jesus is not simply some after this life consolation prize; it is the vindication of everything Jesus stood for.

The resurrection is the vindication of everything he ever preached

The resurrection is the vindication of who he said he was,

The resurrection is the vindication of who he said God was...the proof that God is loving and merciful and true and ever present in this world.

The resurrection is the vindication that God’s kingdom reigns and has been reigning ever since that glorious Easter morning when God raised Jesus from the dead. No wonder among the last words Jesus said to his disciples before he ascended to heaven were:

***‘I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth’ (Matthew 28:18)***

I looked up the word vindication and learned – surprise, surprise - that it comes from the verb ‘to vindicate’. To vindicate means:

*to justify by evidence or argument, to clear of suspicion, to establish the existence or merits or justice of one’s veracity, courage, conduct, character and assertion’.*

Here’s an example of what vindication looks like.

As of this morning’s paper, the Toronto Maple Leafs are 8 points out of a playoff position, in 12<sup>th</sup> position in a division of 15 teams. They have 12 games left in the regular season to catapult over 4 teams to gain the 8<sup>th</sup> and final playoff position. A tall order to say the least, but not impossible.

Now if you listen to the Sports Station like I do, or read the Sports pages, practically everyone is saying the Leafs are in dire need of a major overhaul of players, coaches, the scouting system, management – the whole organization is messed up. Other than the fact they are all making a boatload of money, sports commentators for the most part insist the organization is steeped in mediocrity; the players are a bunch of has beens with no trade clauses more concerned about lining their wallets than winning the Stanley Cup.

But let's imagine that 3 months from now – you open your Toronto Star newspaper and read this headline – 'The Maple Leafs Win the Stanley Cup'!

Who is vindicated then? The sports columnists or the Hockey Team?

For the Maple Leaf Hockey team and all those who believed in them – that would be VINDICATION!

Vindication is a big theme throughout the Bible.

Noah is mocked by his neighbours for taking 100 years to build a boat which is flood proof. And he is vindicated when the flood waters cover the earth.

A teenager named Joseph tells his family about some dreams he's been having which predict that one day, they will all bow down to him. His brothers hate him for this, sell him into slavery. At his first job he does really well until the boss's wife falsely accuses him of rape and he ends up in prison. But Joseph is vindicated when Pharaoh king of Egypt promotes him to Prime Minister, after Joseph interprets his dreams.

Moses is accused of misleading his people into the wilderness, but he is vindicated when he holds his staff over the waters and God parts the Red Sea.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, three Jewish exiles, employed by the great Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar, are accused of insurrection when they refuse to worship the golden idol the king had made. Their defiance so angered the king that he had them thrown into a fiery furnace, so hot it killed those who escorted them there. But they are vindicated when God rescues them from the flames and they climb out of the furnace unscathed.

Jesus is accused by the religious of blasphemy and heresy for telling a man who is paralyzed that his sins were forgiven. But his authority to forgive is vindicated when he says to the man, 'stand up, pick up your mat and go home' and the paralyzed man stands up, picks up his mat and goes home.

In the same way his resurrection vindicates everything Jesus stood for – the poor, the hurting, the hungry, the stranger, and the outsider. The resurrection vindicates everything he taught about the Kingdom of God.

The resurrection vindicates everything he taught about forgiveness, about loving one's enemies, about selling one's possessions to provide for others, about turning the other cheek, about seeking peace and not war.

The resurrection vindicates everything he claimed about himself – about his being the Son of God as well as his being every bit the flesh and blood that we are, yet without sin. It vindicates his being the friend of you and me sinners; the Great Physician to those in need.

But the resurrection is also the vindication of those willing to believe in God enough to rely on him for their daily needs – for employment, for food and shelter, for his direction in their lives. The resurrection is the vindication of all those who seek God's honour regardless of what it costs them. The resurrection vindicates those of child-like faith who resist the temptation to be skeptical of God's love; regardless of what hardships they experience – hunger, false accusation or abuse.

The resurrection is the vindication of those who instead of hitting back turn the other cheek; the vindication of those who pass up on the 'good life' to make sure the hungry are fed. The

resurrection is the vindication of those who seek peace with terrorists even at the expense of their own lives.

At the expense of sounding overtly political I was to raise an issue all of us struggle with. What does a Christian do when either his own or his country's policies are contrary to the teaching of Christ?

In an address called 'Christianity was never designed as a tool for war' the American Religious history professor Richard T Hughes observed:

*At the outset of the war in Iraq, Charles Stanley, pastor of the First Church in Atlanta affirmed: 'we should serve the war effort in any way possible...God battles with those who oppose him and fights against him and his followers'. Others including Franklin Graham, son of Billy Graham and Marvin Olasky, editor of World Magazine suggested the war would open a whole new field for converting Muslims to the Christian faith. Tim LaHaye, co-author of the Left Behind series of end-time books suggested that by virtue of the war, 'Iraq would become the focal point of end-time events'. With preaching like that, it is hardly surprising to learn that one month after the United States launched its pre-emptive strike against Iraq, the decision to invade drew support from an astounding 87 percent of all white evangelical Christians.'*

Now the issue here is not whether you think the war in Iraq is justified or not – but what to do with the teachings of Jesus.

For Jesus taught that to live by the sword is to die by the sword... that we are to love our enemies and not bomb them. Paul insisted that we not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good.

Ephesians 6:12 teaches us that our enemies are not flesh and blood but evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world against which cruise missiles and shock and awe tactics are of no use.

And so I ask you as I ask myself:

Do we really believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ?

Do we really believe that what he taught and the way he lived is the way we are meant to live?

Are we committed to adhering to his core values especially when they run contrary to our own?

Or are we living lives which confess belief in the resurrection but which deep down inside believe Christ's teaching as totally impractical for our time, too naïve to be worth imitating?

There is a scene from the movie Gandhi where Gandhi and a white Anglican priest are on a street in South Africa. It was during the time when apartheid made it illegal for a white person to walk with a person of colour. As they are walking together they realize that in their path is a gang of white thugs, from whom they can expect a beating.

As they approach, the priest suggests to Gandhi that they turn around and go another way. But Gandhi says – 'But doesn't Christ teach us when are confronted by our enemies, we are to turn the other cheek?'

The Anglican priest affirms that indeed Jesus did say those words, but he was pretty sure that Jesus meant the words to be understood as metaphorical, subject to interpretation. Gandhi, a Hindu, disagrees – insists that he believed Jesus meant what he said to be lived out literally – recognizing that the most effective way of combating violence is to turn the other cheek.

So the two of them proceed to walk right into the middle of their antagonists, but are rescued when one of youth's moms intervened and told the young men to not hang around, otherwise they'd be late for work.

I wonder how many of us have become like the Anglican priest – we treat Jesus words as though they are metaphorical, subject to interpretation – rather than to be simply lived out as he instructed?

Soren Kierkegaard once wrote:

*The matter is quite simple. The Bible is very easy to understand. But we Christians are a bunch of scheming swindlers. We pretend to be unable to understand it because we know very well that the moment we understand it, we are obliged to act accordingly. Take any words in the New Testament and forget everything except pledging yourself to act accordingly. 'My God', you will say, 'if I do that, my whole life will be ruined. How would I ever get on in the world?'*

Regrettably there is more than a grain of truth in what he says...it explains why many people outside the church, especially people under 30, can't see much of a difference between the world and the church.

What we really believe about the resurrection isn't what we can recite from the Bible. It's reflected in the way we live....

It was GK Chesterton who wrote:

*The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried.*

If we truly believe in the resurrection, then we must be willing to try. With God all things are possible.

### **But how?**

We must see the world around us differently.

When I take off my glasses to look at you, to see you with my own eyes, everything is a blur. But when I put my glasses on, I can see each and every one of you clearly...

When we look at the world through our own eyes, we see violence in the Middle East, the ruthless pursuit of power in Washington, the glittering extravagance of Dubai and Rodeo Drive; and vengeance in Darfur and Kenya. And we can justify it...it's what people do to protect themselves or get ahead.

But when we look through the lens of the resurrection and see that ultimately only kingdom values will prevail i.e. mercy, justice, peace, righteousness and love - we see the world differently. We see the desperate need for peacemakers in the Middle East as even as we work to be peacemakers here.

We see the need for leaders who in the corridors of political power will advocate for those on the margins - the elderly, the homeless, the immigrant and aboriginal populations - even as we advocate for those on the margins here.

We see the need for Dubai and Rodeo Drive to share its wealth with its poor neighbours even as we share our wealth with our poor neighbours here.

We see the need for truth and reconciliation in Rwanda even as we pursue truth and reconciliation in the places we live, work and pray here.

Through the lens of the resurrection we see the world Jesus saw when he said 'blessed are the poor'. We see the exaltation of humility and the need to seek justice for the powerless. We see the imperative for simple living, unburdened by the weight of material possessions. We see death swallowed up by life, despair overcome by hope and hatred succumbing to the love of God.

I am going to leave you with a 'to do this week' similar to the one I gave the under 20's earlier. Find a quiet spot without the distraction of phones, computers, TVs and all – even if it is only in 5 minute snippets. Read aloud the Sermon on the Mount. Listen for the phrases that resonate in your heart and mind. As you encounter these phrases – live in them for a while. Let them reverberate and reshape you...affect your thinking, your politics and the way you live. These words are the Mission Statement of the Kingdom. They are the values the Holy Spirit works into the very core of who we are, so they are reflected in the way we live. Remember these values have been vindicated by the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. We are to know these words better than any computer manual, better than any self-help book, better than even our national anthem. These words are our constitution.

As you make your way through Matthew Chapters 5, 6 & 7, ask yourself this question – 'would the people who live with me – either in my home or in my work - say that my life reflects these values?'

As a church, let us ask one another this question: would those who come here as strangers say that we reflect these values?

And if the answer to either question is 'no' – don't despair, keep at it, persevere, for in the words themselves reside the power to do them, for God is in His word.