**THE ASCENSION *MM O/L***

**Have you heard of George Lucas? He’s the very successful film maker who devised *Star Wars* and he once said, “I’ve had much more down in my life than I’ve had up.” Perhaps you’ve talked about being “up-and-down” when someone’s asked how you are. Well, if anyone ever had an up-and-down life, it was Jesus, but the remarkable thing is – He never once complained about it! Let me explain what I mean.**

**No-one ever had a bigger DOWN than Jesus did. I’m talking about Christmas – or, to be precise, what we call the Incarnation. This is how Paul described it:**

**Php. 2:5b-8a**

***Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient….***

**Did you get that? Jesus was *in very nature God,* in other words, He is what is called *El Elyon - The Most High God (Gen. 14:18ff) –* there is no-one, there is nothing, higher than *The Most High*. And what did this *El Elyon, the Most High God* do? He *made himself nothing –* there is nothing smaller, lower, more insignificant than *nothing*! And *He* did it – *He made himself nothing.* Because He *is* the *Most High,* the omnipotent One, only He *could* do it – nobody else could detract from Him. Do you see what I mean when I say that no-one ever had a bigger DOWN than Jesus? Now, as far as my fish are concerned, I am a god – they cannot even begin to conceive what it is like to be a human being and live out of water. In fact, they cannot even conceive what it is to conceive! But if I became one of them in their tank and swam around with them, my DOWN would be tiny compared to Jesus’s! He became *nothing –* specifically He entered Mary’s womb as a speck, or, as Paul put it, He was *made in human likeness.* And when He was born (I told you I’d get to Christmas some time!), He was born, not as a king, but *taking the very nature of a servant*. And He spent the next thirty-three years in the humble service of God and man, the first thirty of them in obscurity.**

**He came DOWN. But He prophesied that He would be lifted UP. John records that He said, *I, when I am lifted up, will draw all men to myself* and John adds the chilling gloss, *He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die (Jn. 12:32-3).* Because He, who had come DOWN so far, was only lifted UP to die on a cross, or, as Paul put it, if we continue the passage in Philippians, He *became obedient to death – even death on a cross (Php. 2:8b).* Do you remember how He took *the very nature of a servant*? What is a servant’s duty? To obey, of course. Jesus fought a battle over obedience in Gethsemane, but do you remember what He concluded? *Father, if you are willing, take this cup [of judgment] from me; yet not my* *will, but yours be done (Lk. 22:42).* And He knew what that will was, because Isaiah had foretold it: *it was the LORD’s will to crush him and cause him to suffer and….make….his life a guilt offering (Is. 53:10).* And, so, as an obedient servant, He allowed Himself to be lifted up on a cross and He gave up all He had (because everything else had already taken from Him (Jn. 19:23-4)) - His very life.**

**DOWN, down He came from heaven to that stable and a life of servitude. And even when they lifted Him UP it was only to hang Him on a cross and take His life from Him - as they thought (Jn. 10:18). So DOWN He came again, this time from the cross to the ground. That’s called the Deposition and is the subject of some great art – if you’ve never seen it, have a look at Michelangelo’s *Pieta* in St. Peter’s. But great art or not, He was DOWN and He was dead – He had returned to *nothing.***

**And now DOWN He went again, even lower, as that wealthy man, Joseph of Arimathea, claimed His body and sealed it in his tomb (Mt. 27:57ff). Again as Isaiah prophesied, *He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence nor was any deceit in his mouth (Is. 53:9).* Did you detect the irony there? He – *El Elyon, The Most High –* Creator of heaven and earth, who *owns the cattle on a thousand hills (Ps. 50:10),* had to be grudgingly *assigned* a grave by Pilate (Jn. 19:38). He who was *rich beyond all splendour* as the hymn says *[Thou who wert rich]*, was buried with those rich corpses - but everyone is poor in the grave (1 Tim. 6:7) – *ashes to ashes, dust to dust* as we say in the funeral service! And - as Isaiah said - He who was without sin was also laid with the wicked: as He died *between* sinners, so He was buried *with* sinners, because He died *for* sinners.**

**DOWN from heaven; UP only to die; DOWN from the cross; DOWN into the grave. If George Lucas really thinks his life is more down than up, then he would do well to compare it with the Lord Jesus’s! And he – and we – would do well to repent of our sins, because what happened next?**

**UP from the grave He arose!And how did Paul put it in Romans 6:8? *If we died with him….we will also live with him*! Believe and repent and you are on the way UP!**

**Jesus rose UP to life but His journey UP wasn’t over yet.What did Paul go on to say in Philippians?**

**Php. 2:8b-9**

***He humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name….***

**What day is it tomorrow, 21st May? (Don’t say “Thursday”!) It’s Ascension Day. Forty days after Easter we are told that *He was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight (Ac. 1:9).* He went UP, up to where He began – *exalted to the highest place.* And, behind that cloud, visible only to some like Stephen (Ac. 7:56), He is at the right hand of God. And what is He doing there? According to Romans 8:34, there *he intercedes for us.***

**So DOWN He came, UP to the cross, then DOWN, DOWN and UP, back to His rightful place. But His journey isn’t over yet. First, as we’ll be thinking on Sunday week, He sent His Spirit DOWN at Pentecost (Acts 2) which is how we can confidently say that He is with us now. But how did Paul finish his hymn in Philippians 2?**

**Php. 2:9-11**

***Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus* *every knee shall bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.***

**It’s an Up and DOWN story: DOWN He came, UP to the cross, then DOWN, DOWN and UP to His rightful place, then DOWN came His Spirit and, one day, soon (Rev. 22:20), DOWN He will come again and we will all fall DOWN before Him. Some will do it as rebels brought low: but some of us will do it gladly because we are worshipping Him. And if we have cast ourselves DOWN before Him….? I’ll leave the final words with Paul in 1 Thessalonians 4:**

***the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words (vv. 16-18).***