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**Sunday Sermon and
6 daily devotionals.
w/b 24th May 2020**



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Registered Charity in Northern Ireland (NIC 105236)

Reading – Philippians 2:5-11 & Matthew 16:24-25

Sermon

In the book “Descending into greatness” we read, “down is a word reserved for losers, cowards and the bear market. It is a word that colours everything it touches: down and out, downfall, downscale, downhill, down-hearted and down under. A word, it seems only on the lips of the weak the poor or the dead.

The writer continues if all that weren't enough, there is this crowning blow against the word: it's antonym is up. And up in our high voltage society is a word cherished, almost worshipped. It is a word reserved for the winners and heroes. It is a word to be admired and pursued, the unspoken talk of the party, the way to influence whoever is present: upskill, up and coming, upwardly mobile upper class. The word of the chosen few and the strong.”

The difficulty we battle with is we live in a world, a culture, a society that preaches a constant rhetoric that up is the only direction to travel. Up is our default setting, it's the direction we naturally gravitate towards, it was one of the great football manager of the 70s and 80s, Brian Clough, who said, "**I wouldn't say I was the best manager in the business. But I was in the top one.**"

Everyone wants to be at the top, successful in the eyes of society and if we're frankly honest successful in the eyes of those around us – we like to impress.

And yes, such thinking has crept into church life. We want churches to meet and feed our needs in this trajectory of upward mobility. Churches have responded. We seek to find out what our customers want and then try to supply it. Our upward mindset convinces us it's all about us, we are at the centre and we want the Lord to massage our egos and make us feel good.

But this isn't just a 21st century problem, Paul writing in 2 Timothy 3:1-2 says in the last days people will be lovers of themselves.

And so in the light of this, Philippians 2 has to be one of the most radical chapters in the Bible in that it turns our idea of success on its head. If you really want to be great then the direction of your travel is not up but down. **YOU DESCEND INTO GREATNESS. THE MORE YOU LOSE THE MORE YOU GAIN.**

DO YOU REALLY BELIEVE THAT LOSING YOUR LIFE, SURRENDERING IT TO GOD, IS THE WAY TO GAIN IT?

YET IT IS THE ONLY WAY TO BECOME GREAT IN THE EYES.

Think for a moment about the **EXAMPLE** of Jesus. Philippians 2 tells us that Jesus stooped down to love us. His motivation for His arrival on earth was us – For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only son. **His love for us** drove this downward movement. **THE ONE WORTHY OF ALL WORSHIP AND THE SOURCE OF ALL POWER WAS BORN AS A HELPLESS BABE IN A CRUDE ANIMAL SHELTER.**

WHAT a contrast to the last 3 weeks when we looked at His presence everywhere, His complete knowledge of all things and of us. Then there was His power to create, sustain, rise from the dead and save. He was not only at the top HE WAS THE TOP. Phil 2:6 states that Christ was equal with God. He was the ultimate object of praise in the whole universe. And yet He chose to descend OUT OF LOVE FOR YOU AND ME. HE SURRENDERED IT ALL FOR THE CAUSE OF THE KINGDOM.

And once here on earth, Jesus never stopped descending and with His death His descent was complete. From the pinnacle of praise to the degradation of the cross. The Highest came to serve the lowest. The Creator and sustainer of all things came to pour Himself out. The One who possessed everything became nothing.

THE CREATOR AND SUSTAINER SURRENDERED GAVE UP EVERYTHING TO BE HUMILIATED BY THE ONES HE CAME TO SAVE, ENDURED THE PAIN OF OUR SINFUL BROKEN LIVES AS HE SWAPPED PLACES WITH YOU AND ME ON THE CROSS. TAKING THE HIT ON OUR BEHALF.

ALL OUT OF AND DRIVEN BY A LOVE FOR YOU AND ME – WITHOUT THE SURRENDER OF JESUS THERE WOULD BE NO SALVATION, NO HOPE OF EVERLASTING LIFE NO COMFORT OF A HOME RESERVED FOR US IN GLORY.

Foolish in the eyes of the world yet in God's eyes JESUS is the greatest, THROUGH HIS SURRENDER HE ACCOMPLISHED ALL THAT HE CAME TO ACHIEVE. BECAUSE OF HIS SURRENDER GOD EXALTED HIM AND GAVE HIM THE NAME THAT IS ABOVE EVERY NAME.

HE DESCENDED, SURRENDERED INTO GREATNESS

NOW WORD OF CAUTION, WHILE WE CELEBRATE AND RIGHTLY SO THE SURRENDER OF JESUS IN PHILIPPIANS 2. LETS NOT GET TOO COMFORTABLE BECAUSE VERSE 5 SAYS, **HAVE THE SAME MINDSET AS JESUS.**

WHAT DOES THAT MEAN?

The mindset of Jesus is your mindset, Jesus Himself said *“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”*
Matthew 16:24-25

I have deliberately kept using this word surrender, it KEEPS CROPPING UP. And that is what Jesus is saying here as **I surrendered to the will of the Father so must you** - A church member surrenders his/her life to the Lord's will.

Whoever loses his life will find it – All about surrendering our lives to the Lord. Not my agenda but His, not my will but His, not our agenda but His not our will but His. I love the story of Jonah in the OT. He, like all of us struggled with this idea of surrender.

John Blanchard writes this about Jonah, “It was while he was inside the great fish that Jonah made a dramatic spiritual U turn. Instead of running away from God he turned 180 degrees and began running towards him. God chastened him, frustrated

his plans, wore him out with sorrow, hurled him into the sea and into the belly of a great fish, but he never abandoned him. Jonah was taken along way out of his comfort zone, but never allowed out of God's grip”

Having experienced God in such a dramatic way Jonah **surrendered** his life to the Lord and through him the city of Nineveh was spared as the people repented. He LET GO OF HIS LIFE AND LET GOD USE IT – THAT’S SURRENDER.

And its what Jesus calls us to do – let me close with a few thoughts by way of application.

Firstly *Matthew 16:24-25* is an **INVITATION TO SURRENDER**. My prayer is that COVID-19 has given you an opportunity to consider the claims of Jesus. To assess the direction of your life, to consider what is priority and what is non-essential, are you or certainly when this lock-down started fixated with an upward trajectory in your life? Has this time made you think about the claims of Jesus who He is and what He has come to do.

What we take for granted seems to have BEEN TURNED ON ITS HEAD AND I AM MORE THAN CONVINCED THAN EVER THESE LAST NUMBER OF WEEKS HAVE BEEN ALLOWED BY GOD TO ENABLE US TO STOP AND TAKE STOCK OF OUR LIVES.

SO MANY OF US HAVE BEEN LIVING FOR THE LITTLE RED BOX WHICH IS LIFE HERE ON EARTH WITH NO THOUGHT OF WHAT LIES BEYOND AND PREPARING FOR THAT.

Note Christ’s subtle invitation to join him: “If anyone would come after me.” Here is an open invitation to surrender to, and walk through life with, the Creator of the universe and the Saviour.

As wonderful as that sounds, it is hard to do, for surrender goes against the grain of our stubborn, sinful hearts. For a non-believer, it takes admitting that you are a sinner in need of a Saviour and embracing Jesus Christ by faith, receiving his eternal, loving grace, which enables a person to surrender in the first place. HAVE YOU SURRENDERED YOUR LIFE TO JESUS.

For believers, your Christian walk reveals that you have the greatest friend and supporter you will ever have in Jesus. But he has plans that are for your benefit.

Secondly, *Matthew 16:24-25* is a **CALL TO MARCH TO A DIFFERENT DRUM BEAT**

To deny oneself means not living on your terms but on the Lord’s agenda. When you receive Jesus Christ as your Lord and Saviour, you said in essence, “I surrender all to you, Lord.” Can you honestly say that you have done this in *all* areas of your life?

If you are like me, the answer is *No—but I really want to*. Take a moment now and pray to the Lord to reveal those areas in your life that you have failed to surrender to him.

John Ortberg, writes, "Many times people think being a Christian is mostly about professing the right beliefs, but it is not. One of the great illusions even amongst church people is that information alone will produce transformation. Information is very important, but it's not sufficient. In the New Testament the Greek word for belief and the word for trust is the identical same word, so any time you see that word you could translate it as the people who trust. To trust Jesus means precisely to follow in his way."

*"If anyone would come after me, let him **deny himself** and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."*

Thirdly *Matthew 16:24-25* confirms **WE GAIN BY LOSING, BY CHOOSING A DOWNWARD PATH WE MOVE UP**

Losing means to yield our desires and passions to his guidance: to invite him to chip away the rough edges of our personalities; to use our gifts with site seeking the applause of men; unto allow him to conform our dreams to his will. Such losing is never easy, it requires constant focusing on Jesus under passion and love for God and the advancement of his Kingdom.

God asks us to lose in order that we might gain. He makes a tough request but then offers a wonderful promise

Lose your selfish ambition; I will honour you for loving others. Lose your addiction to things; I will provide for you if you seek me wholeheartedly. Lose your obsession to be in control; I will give you power as you follow me. Lose your life; I will give you eternity. LET GO OF HIS LIFE AND LET GOD USE IT – THAT'S SURRENDER.

An Invitation to surrender, a call to march to a different drum beat and we gain by losing, by choosing a downward path we move up. Amen

Devotional Monday 25th May

The Shawshank Redemption is one of the best modern films made and is frequently rated among many people's top ten favourite films of all time. Set in 1940's America it tells the story of Andy Dufresne, a gentle, quietly spoken banker who is falsely convicted of his wife's murder and sent to prison. The prison is governed by the harsh and uncompromising Warden Norton, and life inside is even harsher. Andy faces frequent beatings and the whole regime is designed to suck every last ounce of hope out of the prisoners.

Red, a life prisoner who befriends Andy, puts it like this: "The first night's the toughest, no doubt about it. They march you in naked as the day you were born.... And when they put you in that cell... and those bars slam home...that's when you know it's for real. A whole life blown away in the blink of an eye. Nothing left but all the time in the world to think about it."

But the one thing Andy will not do is give up hoping. While all around him are succumbing to feelings of despair, Andy never gives up. Unlike the other prisoners Andy retains a sense of hope, hope that life can be more than the suffering of prison

life, hope that he can one day be released and live again. And it's that hope that keeps him going right to the end, that keeps him from suicide and resignation to a life inside. And the tag line for the film, the theme that runs right the way through is this: "Fear can hold you prisoner. Hope can set you free."

It's been well said that without hope human beings perish. And time and again when people find themselves in great difficulty and possible death, it's hope that has kept them going. And that's why it's strange that those of us who are Christians don't consider our future hope more often. Because we Christians have the best hope of all. You see for many people in this world, hope revolves around uncertainty. People hope for a better future, a better job, better finances, a better holiday, better health, a better house- but there's no certainty to such hope. At best it's a vague wish for something better. But for the Christian, hope is something much more concrete. Christian hope is certain because it's based on the promise of God. And that hope is a glorious future with God in his perfect place.

Jesus said, "Don't let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, and trust also in me. There is more than enough room in my Father's home. If this were not so, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you? When everything is ready, I will come and get you, so that you will always be with me where I am...I am the way, the truth, and the life.

Devotional Tuesday 26th May

Almost a century ago, two famous essays were written about the life of Christ—"One Solitary Life" and "The Incomparable Life." Josh McDowell reprinted them in his book, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*. This devotion is a combination of both and paint a vivid picture of who Jesus really is.

Two thousand years ago, a man was born contrary to the laws of life. He lived in poverty and was reared in obscurity. He was the child of a peasant woman and worked in a carpenter's shop until he was 30. Then for three years he was an itinerant preacher. He never owned a home, never wrote a book, never held public office. He never went to college and never set foot in a big city. He never traveled 200 miles from the place where he was born.

He possessed none of the usual traits that accompany greatness. He had no credentials but himself. In his infancy he startled a king; in childhood he puzzled doctors; in manhood he ruled the course of nature, walked upon the billows as if on pavement, and hushed the sea to sleep. He healed the multitudes without medicine and made no charge for his service.

While still a young man, the tide of popular opinion turned against him. His friends ran away. One of them denied him. He was turned over to his enemies and went through the mockery of a trial. He was nailed on a cross between two thieves. While he was dying, his executioners gambled for the only piece of property he had on earth—his coat. When he was dead, he was taken down and laid in a borrowed tomb.

Twenty centuries have come and gone and today he is the centerpiece of the human race and the leader of the column of progress. He never wrote a book, yet no library could hold all the books written about him. He never wrote a song, and yet he has furnished the theme for more songs than all the songwriters combined. He never founded a college, but all the schools put together cannot boast of having as many students.

He never marshalled an army, nor drafted a soldier, nor fired a gun; and yet no leader ever had more volunteers who, under his orders, have made more rebels stack arms and surrender without a shot fired.

He never practiced psychiatry, yet he has healed more broken hearts than all the doctors far and near. How great is his influence? All history is divided by his coming—BC and AD. We call this year 1998 in honor of his birth.

The names of past leaders have long been forgotten. The great men of Greece and Rome are dusty names in the library of time. Scientists, philosophers, kings, generals and theologians have come and gone, but the name of this Man abounds more and more.

Though time has spread 2000 years between the people of this generation and the scene of his crucifixion, yet he still lives. Herod could not destroy him, and the grave could not hold him.

He stands alone on the highest pinnacle of heavenly glory, proclaimed of God, acknowledged by angels, adored by saints, and feared by devils, as the living personal Christ, King of Kings, Lord of Lords, the Saviour of the world

He and He alone is the Lord. Oh, that our hearts would sing his praise. God hasten the day until every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father. Amen.

Devotional Wednesday 27th May

On December 7, 1988, an earthquake devastated the north western section of Armenia, killing an estimated 25,000 people. In one small town, just after the earthquake, a father rushed to his son's school only to find that the school had been flattened. There was no sign of life.

But he had no thought of turning back. He had often told his son, "No matter what, I'll always be there for you when you need me!"

Though his prospects appeared hopeless, the father began feverishly removing rubble from where he believed his son's classroom had been. Other forlorn parents only wailed hopelessly... "My son!" or "My daughter!" Some told the father to go home, that there was no chance that any of the pupils could be alive. To which he always replied, "I made my son a promise that I'd be there for him anytime he needed me. I must continue to dig."

Courageously, he worked alone; no one volunteered to help him. He simply had to know for himself: "Is my boy alive or is he dead?" With strength and endurance beyond himself, the faithful, loving father continued to dig...for 8 hours...12...24...36

hours. Then in the 38th hour, as he heaved away a heavy piece of rubble, he heard voices. "Armand!" he screamed.

A child's voice responded: "Dad! It's me...Armand!" Then, "I told the other kids not to worry. I told them that if you were alive, you'd save me, and when you saved me, they'd be saved. You promised you would always be there for me! You did it, Dad!"

Moments later, the dad was helping his son Armand and 13 more frightened, hungry, thirsty boys and girls climb out of the debris. Free at last! When the building collapsed, these children had been spared in a tent-like pocket.

When the townspeople praised Armand's dad, his explanation was, "I promised my son, 'No matter what, I'll be there for you!'"

Do you realize that God, the Heavenly Father, is in the rescue business? He has made the greatest effort possible to rescue us from a terrible plight.

God has already reached out in love to rescue you. Much like the father who rescued his son after the earthquake, God went to the limit to make a way out of the lost situation we all were in—"while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). God's sinless Son died on the cross and took the punishment *our* sins deserved!

To be saved from the condemnation our sin has placed us all in, you must agree with God that you have sinned and that your only hope for rescue is through Jesus Christ's death...*in your place!* Miraculously, Jesus rose from the grave, forever proving his power over sin and death.

Now, because of a Father's love you can experience the ultimate salvation from an otherwise hopeless situation. Receiving Jesus by faith as your substitute places you into a loving, forgiven relationship with God as *your* Father with eternal life as your welcome gift into his family!

Devotional Thursday 28th May

In 1940, during World War Two, a large military presence as well as English citizens and diplomats retreated to the French coastal port of Dunkirk. With its back against the English Channel, the British army faced a German army that threatened to drive it into the sea and invade mainland UK. To save what he could of his army Winston Churchill called for all available sea vessels to evacuate the soldiers and civilians from the besieged French beaches and bring them back across the channel.

An incredible array of ships and boats raced to the rescue, fishing boats and cruise ships alike. As the flotilla made its way to the beach to pick up soldiers and then move out again, German aircraft set up on them like vultures while the German artillery pummelled them with shells from the land.

Three German planes attacked the defenceless Lancastria, a converted cruise liner whose decks and holds were packed with soldiers. One bomb dropped directly down the ship's funnel, tearing a huge gap in her lower hull. Nearly 200 men were trapped in the forward hold of the now severely listing ship. The liner was going down, chaos smoke oil fire and blood mixed with the terrified cries of the man trapped below

created pandemonium on deck as those hopeful of surviving searched for lifeboats or simply leapt into the water.

Moving through the middle of this living nightmare a young Navy chaplain quietly worked his way to the edge of the hold and peered into the darkness below. Knowing he could never get out, he dropped into the hole. Survivors later told how the only thing that gave them courage to survive until passing ships could rescue them was hearing the strong brave voices of the man in the hold singing hymns as the ship finally rolled over and went to the bottom.

This true story testifies to the courage and compassion of one faithful believer who gave his life to provide comfort, courage, and hope to the suffering. We are also called to demonstrate that kind of love in our lost and dying world. "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends." John 15:13

Devotional Friday 29th May

This true story begins with a young man called Bill. He has wild hair, wears a T-shirt with holes in it, jeans and no shoes. This was literally his wardrobe for his entire four years of university. He is a little odd, but he is brilliant, one of the brightest students in his year. And Bill became a Christian while attending college. Across the street from the campus is a well-dressed, very conservative church. They want to develop a ministry to the students, but are not sure how to go about it.

One day Bill decides to go there. He walks in with no shoes, jeans, his T-shirt, and wild hair. The service has already started and so Bill starts down the aisle looking for a seat. The church is completely packed and he can't find a seat. By now people are looking a bit uncomfortable, but no one says anything. Bill gets closer and closer and closer to the pulpit and when he realizes there are no seats, he just squats down right at the front on the carpet. Of course, to Bill this was normal, but it certainly had never had at this church. By now the people are really uptight, and the tension in the air is thick.

About this time, the minister realizes that from way at the back of the church, the elderly church warden is slowly making his way toward Bill. Now the church warden is in his eighties, has silver-grey hair, a three-piece suit, and a pocket watch. A godly man, very elegant, very dignified, very courtly. He walks with a cane and as he starts walking toward this boy, everyone is saying to themselves, "You can't blame him for what he's going to do. How can you expect a man of his age and of his background to understand some student on the floor?" It takes a long time for the man to reach the boy. The church is utterly silent except for the clicking of the man's cane. All eyes are focused on him. You can't even hear anyone breathing. But then, when the elderly man gets to the front, he drops his cane on the floor. With great difficulty he lowers himself and sits down next to Bill and worships alongside him so he won't be alone. Everyone chokes up with emotion. There seems not to be a dry eye in the entire congregation. When the minister finally gains control he says, "What I'm about to preach, you will never remember. What you have just seen, you will never forget."

The church needs people like that elderly church warden who understood the gospel and lives the gospel. He is faithful to the truth and yet has a burden for the spiritually needy.

Throughout Jesus ministry He set an example in seeking out the marginalised whether it was the much maligned tax collector Zacchaeus or the disreputable Samaritan woman at the well, Jesus drew close to both in compassion.

Devotional Saturday 30th May

I wonder if you have ever felt completely overwhelmed by a problem or utterly daunted by the size of a task you must fulfil. Well if so, then spare a thought for the footballers of Stockport Town FC, who play in an amateur Sunday pub league, but by a strange mistake found themselves playing one of the top teams in the Czech Republic. The problem arose when the Czech team, FK Meteor wanted to celebrate their 150th anniversary in style by playing one of England's better teams.

So they wrote off to the team they wanted. But due to a misunderstanding in communication, they didn't contact Stockport County, a club with a good reputation in the English Football league, but rather Stockport Town, a club filled with pie eating, rounded belly, unfit thirty somethings. The men from Stockport got suspicious when they arrived at FK Meteor's ground. The red carpet was out, programmes had been printed and there were lots of journalists covering the game.

FK Meteor had even flown in one of their stars who was on holiday in China. The poor lads from Stockport were hardly in a fit state to play the game, given that as soon as they had stepped off the plane the day before they had set about consuming enjoying the cultural attractions on offer. One of the Stockport players said that they were flagging after ten minutes, and another said: "We were able to match them right up until the kick off." The penny dropped halfway through their 14-1 defeat, but fortunately the Czechs saw the funny side.

Well I wonder if you have ever had those feelings of being totally overwhelmed by something. For some of us it might happen fairly frequently. Maybe you are worried by all you need to do this coming week. There just seems to be so much to get done. Maybe you are facing a serious problem in your life perhaps with the family or with your health. It just seems so big you don't know where to start. Maybe for some there are the pressures of raising children or dealing with massive issues at work. Whatever it is, each one of us goes through periods of stress and difficulty. And it's at times like that that we are tempted to feel overwhelmed, that there is no help, that we are on our own.

Let me remind you of the words of Isaiah 41, "Don't be afraid, for I am with you. Don't be discouraged, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you. I will hold you up with my victorious right hand...For I hold you by your right hand – I the Lord your God. And I say to you, 'Don't be afraid. I am here to help you. I am the Lord, your Redeemer.'"