

I AM A WITNESS....

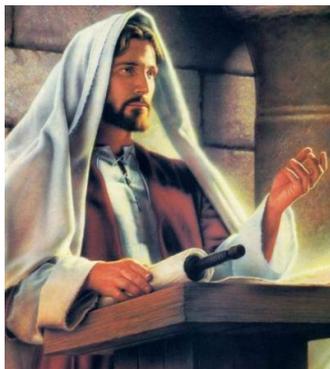
Mark 3:1-5; Luke 6: 6-10; 10:1, 2, 9

I was there, witnessed a miracle.
Even now I can scarce believe what my eyes saw,
What I now know.
But it was my best friend who was healed of what was incurable.
And it has changed both our lives for ever.
Please do listen, and share with me our joy..

We've been best friends since childhood.
He'd never fussed about his disability, -
His right hand, (why did it have to be his right hand?), severely withered,
Utterly useless.
But it didn't stop us playing games, running ragged and breathless up and down the hills, laughing and forgetful of any limitations.
Yet there were other times his natural compensation could not cope,
And I'd be there, or his parents, to help.
I loved him for his joy, his lack of self-pity.
I sometimes felt he was more of a man than me.
I'd often wondered why he had been so afflicted.
His life had been blameless, - indeed so much better than mine.
His parents as far as I'd known them had always been good.
Perhaps a distant ancestor had done wrong.
It seemed a harsh thing for him to suffer, - especially as there was no possible release.
There was no way out, no healing, no hope.
What sin must have caused that?
It seemed so unfair.
Why did so many people have to suffer with illness or misfortune?
Living lives of acceptance and managing.
Yet the paradoxical question:
How is it that the sick and disabled often seem so much better than we?

That Sabbath we'd met and entered the synagogue together as usual.
There was a lot more interest and buzz about the place that day.
Jesus of Nazareth had been invited to address us.
We'd both heard about him, - some talk or remark about him being the Messiah or Christ, - but so unlikely, -
Nazareth was only a village and that not many miles away, and by what little we'd heard he was no more than a carpenter's son. Still, there must be something about him to have created this interest.
The Pharisees and Scribes knew that we would be there, and that day when we arrived there were nudges and knowing looks.
One of them asked us to sit at the front.
We chatted for a bit. A fly tried to settle on my friend's face. He brushed at it with his withered hand.
I felt compassion for him, - his handsome looks marred by this senseless deformity.

The service began and went through its normal routines.
The time came for anyone to stand and speak.
From the back a man stepped forward.
He had an air of authority that commanded attention,
His seamless white robe somehow a symbol of his natural stature.
This had to be Jesus.
I suddenly realised it didn't matter what village he came from.



He came from God.

As he took his place his love seemed to shine and when he spoke that same love permeated everything he said. The scriptures became alive, meaningful.
I'd always thought that the kingdom of God was something to come,
Some far off event, powerful, as a result of mighty battles, with a great commander to the fore.
But this kingdom was altogether different, stronger, immediate, grounded in love.
I glanced at my friend.
He too was watching enthralled, - his eyes shining, accepting every word spoken.
They were fine words indeed, - but was that it?
Comforting, but without proof, fine words were all they were.
I suddenly thought what if he did prove them true? How would he? What evidence would I want? How would anyone prove the kingdom of God here and now?

"Rise up and stand forth in the midst."

In the sudden bewilderment of being brought back into the present I thought for a moment Jesus was talking to me. But no.

My friend levered himself up, and stood alone in front of Jesus.

There was a stillness, an expectancy borne of his undoubted authority.

Jesus turned to the Scribes and Pharisees.

I could see them shifting uncomfortably. It was as though he had read their thoughts and they knew that he knew what they were thinking, and in some way those thoughts would be exposed.

He spoke to them directly:

"I will ask of you one thing"

He paused a second, but that pause seemed to contain a lifetime of moment.

"Is it lawful on the sabbath days to do good, or to do evil? to save life, or to destroy it?"

He looked round each of them in turn, the silence and expectancy deafening.

We all knew what was going to happen.

I looked again at my friend.

"Stretch forth thine hand."

I said I was a witness.

But how can you own up to seeing the impossible.

Not "Stretch forth thine withered hand", but "Stretch for thine hand" - as God gave thee.

He obeyed Jesus' command.

His arm extended, fingers uncurling, filling out fully formed.

Everyone was looking at one another, knowing it was happening yet still disbelieving.

My friend's face shone as his hand was restored whole as the other.

He stood erect before Jesus, giving thanks amidst his awe and wonder, looking from one hand to the other, back again to Jesus. The love was palpable.

He glanced round, saw me, shouted my name!

Leapt forward, his hand outstretched to take mine,

Right hand to right hand.

What mixed emotions I had! Joy for my friend, but ashamedly in that milli-second of doubt half frightened to grasp what may have been only my illusion.

His handshake was firm, firmer than mine.

And then I responded truly.

Grip to grip, laughing and praising and dancing with him in the midst of the synagogue.

No dream but reality, but dear God how?!

I'd asked for proof, and here it was! The only proof possible!

No wonder the scribes were scowling! Here was true authority! No longer mere words, but the consciousness of God's kingdom revealed as here, seen in health and completeness, just as Jesus had been preaching. Faced with the presence and power of health, sickness became impossible! Health the reality and sickness the now dispellable illusion. Dear friend, - this happened, I am a witness. *The withered hand is no more.* As if it had never been!

Everyone there watched and saw! It scared the Pharisees! It confirmed their worst fears, they could not understand, nor did they want to! Jesus was challenging their way of life. He is challenging my way of life! But look, Jesus had *proved* his words! And I am a witness!

There have been so many healings since, - blind, deaf, others that were maimed, and yes, all have been healed!

Oh let me hold you by your hand in that same love that Jesus is living and sharing right now! Our lives have changed so much! This was not a one-off miracle, a magician's trick. It was and is the eternal presence of the Christ. The recognition of Love, God's love for you and me. The true "Our Father" of which Jesus is speaking and commanding us all to pray, lifting our thoughts above human heredity to our true and guiltless origin. We are all even now the sons of the one God, - that's what he is saying, that is what he is proving, what *we* are now proving.

Dear friend, our true Father is Love, and God made us all to witness His Love, to witness what we truly are.

Whatever challenge we may be holding on to, we can let go, for we are witnesses right now that the kingdom of God is come nigh unto us all.

I know it to be true.

