

**Miracles**

*A Waiting Room. Two people are waiting.*

*One of these is Alice. She represents all those who might be termed the huddled masses, the oppressed, the desperate. She might come from Africa, Asia, South America, the eastern states of Europe or the slums of any "civilized" nation. She appears to be dozing as she waits but in fact she is so tired, so lacking in energy, that she is simply slumped waiting for the end any end.*

*The other is Brian. In contrast he is full of energy. He sits, then stands and paces, before sitting again. But he is never still. The more we watch him the more we can sense that he is a troubled, possibly tormented soul. He is desperate for some release.*

*After a pause these two are joined by Charles. He is dignified, reserved, never called Charlie. He is struggling with a disability perhaps only needing a stick to walk with to ease his pain. He takes the centre seat between Alice and Brian.*

*There is another short pause, broken only by Brian as he cannot keep still until:*

Brian: (Exasperated): What are we waiting for?

Charles: I'm sorry?

Brian: I said, what are we waiting for?

Charles: I hoped they'd be someone here that might be able to help me.

Brian: I've been here for hours. So's she.

Charles: That's unfortunate.

Brian: Why do we have to wait?

Charles: Even though I've just come I'm prepared to wait no matter how long it takes.

Brian: O.K. If that's what it takes I'll wait with you.

*Brian sits in his frustration but cannot settle. He leaps to his feet again.*

Brian: It's no good. Why do we have to wait?

Alice: (Barely stirring): Because that's what you do if you believe something better is going to come along.

Brian: Oh. You are alive then?

Alice: I'm still hanging on, yes.

Brian: And what was that you said?

Alice: You're waiting for something better.

Brian: What are you going on about?

Alice: You. You're just like the rest of us. You want something. You're here because you think that there's something, someone, that can make a difference in your life. You're waiting for that change to come. You're waiting for a promise to be fulfilled. At least, that's why I'm waiting. And I'll wait a lifetime to have my life transformed.

Charles: Like Simeon.

Brian: Who?

Charles: Simeon in the Bible. He did wait a lifetime.

Alice: Yes. Just like Simeon.

Brian: Simeon. (As Simeon): Waiting. It is all I seem to do nowadays. To come to this most holy of places and wait. But it was not always like this. I use to travel. My work took me from place to place - all over Judea, and even into Samaria. But there, being a Jew, the business was hard.

But now I am an old man. Far too old to travel about the place. Now it takes me all my time to struggle here to Solomon's great Temple. Here I sit in the precincts and wait. The warm sun heats an old man's body and eases the aches of the years. The priests and scribes know me and stop to share a word when their duties permit. And there are always people coming and going who need a little help to find their way through the complexity of this place.

In between I'll wait. My family they think I'm stupid. In these the autumn days of my life they want me to be with them, so that they can look after me. Look after me? Fuss over me they mean, make themselves useful so that I'll promise them something of what I have when I die. They don't listen. They don't understand when I tell them it's all about the promise.

You know of the promise, don't you? Every Jew knows about the promise. Even the great prophet Isaiah knew about the promise. He wrote about it: "The Lord will use His holy power. He will save His people and all the world will see it." And all the world will see it. That's the promise. That's what I'm waiting for.

Oh, I know what you're thinking. You're just like my youngest who thinks I've lost it. Just another old fool sitting in the sun waiting for a promise to be fulfilled that might not happen for a hundred years yet. But I know. It's not going to be a hundred years. It's coming. It's very close. That promise is going to be fulfilled soon - maybe even now.

That's why each day I come to this place and wait. Here I know the very presence of the Lord and I know that He is coming - the one to redeem His people - praise God. I've been touched with an inner peace. I suppose it's come from praying about it and trusting and hoping that my eyes will see Him.

And all the world will see it.

So that's why each day I come here to my place in the sun and wait. That's why I search the faces of everyone who passes me - old and young alike - expecting to greet him. That's why I pray to God for the strength to still be here when His great light will burst upon His world. That's what I'm waiting for.

It's the waiting that keeps me going.

What keeps you going? Are you waiting for something?

Is your life filled with expectation? An anticipation? Or do you simply act out of duty or habit? Perhaps you depend on others to fill your life and lead you from place to place.

So, I'll ask you again. Are you waiting for something? Each and every one of you - the expecting, anticipating, duty servicing, habitual and baggage. Are you waiting for something?

All I can say is if you're not waiting for anything you'll never know the joy of having that waiting fulfilled

So, I ask you again. Are you waiting for something? Are you waiting for something to happen in this place at this time? What's in your heart? Are you expecting something to happen?

Have you come with an anticipation that something wonderful and world shattering is about to happen in your life - exclusively to you - to fulfil the hopes and dreams of your lifetime? Do you feel a life changing event is about to thrust itself upon you? No? No matter. Even your lack of preparedness cannot shut out the power that surrounds us all in this place at this time. Can't you feel it? I can. I know my waiting is almost over So, if you're not waiting for something, maybe you should be - or maybe you are about to be surprised.

Maybe you're thinking that when my waiting is over it will be an ending. Maybe you feel that life will have lost all purpose when the promise is fulfilled. Maybe you'll even go as far as saying that all that will be left for me to do is to die when my waiting is over. But you'd be wrong. That ending will be a beginning, a new, fresh start. The start of a new life for me and everyone who is prepared to share my wait.

Charles: And his waiting was fulfilled.

Alice: After years of waiting he got what he was waiting for.

Charles: And he rejoiced in it.

Brian: I don't feel like rejoicing. I haven't got that sort of patience. I find it hard enough to sit still. Can't you see how desperate I am?

Alice: You're desperate? I wish I had your energy. I'm starving to death. That's real desperation!

Brian: And you think he's going to help you?

Alice: Of course.

Brian: Why?

Alice: He always meets people's needs. Do you remember the first thing he did?

Charles: At the wedding feast. He helped out there by turning that water into wine.

Alice: That's right. There was a shortage and he saw that it was overcome.

Charles: A wedding feast at Cana. (As Wine Steward): You wanted to see me? You know how busy I am with all these wedding arrangements to deal with? So you'll understand I can't stand around talking all afternoon - there's things to organise. So, what was it you ... excuse me a second ... Nathaniel! Put that down this instant. I told you to go and get some more clean towels to wipe the feet of the late comers, not to help yourself to the leftovers from the wedding board. ... Yes, I know, you've been on the go since cock crow, but I was up half the night and you don't see me flagging. Samuel was with me as well and he's still at it. What's that you say? He's lying down in the kitchen fast asleep? Well, I'll deal with him in a minute. You just stop feeding your face and get on with the job I gave you. There'll be plenty of time to rest on the Sabbath tomorrow.

You see what it's like? Turn your back for a minute and it all goes to pot. We really are going to have to make this brief. I've still got important things to do before this wedding is over. So, what was it you wanted to ask me about?

The wine? Nothing special about the wine. Jacob the wine merchant - you know the one, has his storeroom hard up against the hillside - he supplied it. A nice light, refreshing wine made from the season before last first pressing. Matured in oak barrels, if remember right, and racked off into the stone jars about a month ago so it had plenty of time to settle.

Ah. I know what you're on about. I'm sorry it's run out but there was that accident with the donkey cart. And I did what I could to make amends. I went round apologising for the shortfall. One of the ladies said it didn't matter. So I stopped worrying then.

This isn't just a complaint because you didn't get enough to drink is it? Because, if it is I've got no time for this. There's lot more important things I've got to do ...

Not that wine? What do you mean, not THAT wine? It's the only wine I've served. The other wine? Which wine would that be then?

The one in the stone jars by the wall? That's not wine - that's water. This bloke - I think he's one of the guests - he told me to get some stone jars and fill them with water. I thought he'd decided that as the wine had run out, everyone had had more than enough to drink and would be wanting water now to quench their thirst.

And you're telling me that the jars are full of wine now? Are you sure you haven't had too much to drink? See for myself? You're damn right I'm going to see for myself. I'm the Steward here and no-one else is going to muck about with my plans for this wedding.

Nathaniel! Stop what you're doing and come here. Yes, I know I told you to get towels to dry the guests feet but Rebecca can finish that job on her own. I want you to do something else for me. Go over to those water jars - you know the ones we brought in earlier when the wine had run out - and fetch me a beaker of whatever it is that is in them. Never mind if I'm thirsty or not - never mind that the water from the well will be cooler and more refreshing than that which has stood there for the last half hour or so. Just do as I say and leave the thinking to me.

You can't get the staff, you know. Everyone wants to be a shepherd these days. They all want to spend their days and nights out on the hillside far from the hustle and bustle of this place - not to mention far beyond the reach of our Roman friends! They soon change their minds when the wolves come sneaking up on the flocks in the autumn. Then working in domestic service doesn't seem half as bad.

No Nathaniel, I'm not calling you a wolf. You're my good and loyal servant - all be it a bit slow. So this is the water? Right. ...

... You're right. This IS wine. And a very fine wine at that. .... This is not anything that Jacob can produce. It's got a hint of blackberry and lingers on the palette like fragrant flowers picked with the dew drops of dawn still upon it. This wine must have come all the way from Jerusalem it's so fine. So, who's been messing with my water jars?

What's that you say Nathaniel? You saw that guest go over but all he did was wave his hands over them? That wouldn't change water into wine. It'd be a miracle if that were to happen!

Thank you for bringing this to my attention. I'll look into it. I might even get the authorities involved. Someone's got to pay for doing things like this - sooner or later.

Alice: He still wants to give people what they need.

Brian: So you think just because he made sure a wedding party didn't run out of wine, he's going to step in and stop you and your people starving to death? You can't live on wine alone.

Alice: Well, it wasn't just wine. There was food as well. He fed those thousands of people who'd come to hear him and used only 5 loaves and 2 small fish to achieve it!

Charles: That's just managing resources and not making food out of nothing.

Alice: How about the net full of fish he produced for Peter and Andrew on the sea of Galilee?

Brian: Luck. Pure Luck.

Charles: They said it happened twice.

Alice: It was a miracle.

Brian: Maybe he had some secret knowledge that meant he knew where the fish were.

Charles: Maybe but you have to wonder how those fishermen felt about that.

Alice: Yes, you have to wonder.

Charles: It must have blown the minds of those simple fishermen!

Brian: Mind blowing! (As Andrew): Who'd have thought it? I ask you. My brother! You know Simon, big chap, beard, loud mouth? Well, you'll never believe it but he's just gone and done the most remarkable thing. He's chucked it all in. Given it all up. Turned his back on his family and the business. And it's all my fault. If only I'd paid more attention to our boats and the nets none of this would have happened!

You see, being the younger brother, I left everything to do with running the business up to him.

After all he always wanted to be the one in charge. He was born for it. Father saw that in him too and I knew that he would take over one day. And that was fine by me as well because it left me time to do what I wanted to do to.

I used to like chatting to my friends, putting the world to rights and there's a lot to put right these days! That's how I got us all into this mess. Talking. Trying to sort out life's problems. Mixing with the wrong crowd some would say.

That's how I got mixed up with John. You remember him came out of the desert, all hairy and wearing skins, telling us that we had to change our ways. Bit scary he was at first but, when you got to know him, his heart was in the right place. And what he said made some sort of sense as well. O.K. You had to have some idea about what the Prophets said that God had promised us, his chosen people. It helped if you knew who the Messiah was that we were all meant to be waiting for to lead us out of oppression. And you had to be prepared to admit that you were in the wrong that you had sinned, if you like.

That's where the washing clean in the water came in baptism he called it. Washing ourselves clean in the eyes of God. I know us fishermen are in and out of the water every working day. Well, if you've heard the language on a fishing boat you'd understand why we have to wash our sins away regularly! But it wasn't just the washing. It was the other things he said that attracted me to him. I used to spend all my spare time listening and helping much to Simon's annoyance.

Then it was only the other day that John sent me and the rest away from him. He said we had to go after this other bloke who he pointed out to us. At first I didn't think I knew him. He looked just as John had looked when he first came out of the desert all dirty and unkept with a far away look on his tired face. But John was insistent this was the man who was going to take over teaching us from now on.

I'd heard that same tone in John's voice once before. It was when our uncle had finished teaching us everything he knew about nets and boats and fishes. He said it was time for us to learn from a better teacher and he sent us out onto the sea. He was right. We learnt more from the sea in the first 3 days than we had every learnt from him in the previous 3 years. The sea's a harsh teacher but we managed to survive the lesson. That's how I knew it was time for me to move on to this new teacher that John had shown was to take over from him.

So I went after this new bloke. I caught up with him and told him that John had sent me. He turned and looked at me and I went all weak at the knees. It took me a while to realise that I'd seen him before. He'd been around a few weeks ago when John was baptising people in the Jordan. John seemed to know him the moment he turned up as if he was a family friend or something. He'd baptised him himself and as the water flooded over him a strange thing happened. This dove came out of nowhere and settled on him.

Then it was gone and so was he. We all got on with the task in hand and thought no more about it. Until now when I was looking into his eyes. He seemed to be speaking to me, although he didn't say a word, and I knew I was going to have to go after him from that moment on. Whatever he wanted me to do, wherever he wanted me to go, whoever he wanted me to take him to meet, that was what I wanted to do now.

And I knew the first thing I had to do was to take him to meet Simon. So we set off for the lake and arrived just as Simon was returning from a fruitless trip. There was an exchange of words between my new teacher and Simon and suddenly the nets were bursting at their seams. I suppose that's how he got my brother's attention. He's always anxious to talk with anyone who knows anything useful about fishing.

Talk they did but not for very long. Because that's how this all happened. We gave up our fishing and our boats and started to follow Joshua wherever he's going to lead us. Simon's even got a new name out of it. We're calling him "Peter the rock" these days - because he is the strongest of us all. He's the natural leader of our group.

And we've all changed. We've all learnt something about ourselves, Joshua and the Kingdom of God. Perhaps Simon Peter has changed the most. He certainly seems to have the most confidence in the Rabbi. I wouldn't be surprised if he wasn't prepared to walk on water for him!

Alice: Yes, you have to wonder. I guess they must have felt that he was something really special.

Brian: I guess it must have seemed like that.

Charles: Yes. And he was.

Brian: What do you mean?

Charles: Just a comment.

Alice: No. Go on. Say what you think.

Charles: Well, it was more than just making food and drink appear from nowhere that set him apart.

Brian: Wasn't that enough?

Charles: No, not really. Take the feeding of all those people. Maybe that wasn't such a miracle.

Brian: Go on.

Charles: Everyone says what a great orator he was so maybe he just appealed to their better natures.

Alice: You mean he simply got them to share what they already had?

Charles: Yes. That's it.

Brian: But you said there was something more than that. Something that set him apart.

Charles: He seemed to have control over anything and everything. You remember he calmed the storm.

Alice: And he walked on the water.

Brian: He cursed a fig tree and it died.

Charles: And met a woman at a well and changed her life forever through a single conversation.

Alice: A woman at a well. ... (As the Women at the Well): You've got to come with me now. You can't miss this opportunity. You've got to meet him for yourself.

No. Let me slow down. You're only getting half the story - if that. Let me just take a few moments to catch my breath. Then it will make more sense. Then it will all fall into place for you. Then you'll understand what it is I'm trying to tell you.

It all started as a normal day when I got up this morning. I had the chores to do, the food to prepare, all the usual sort of thing. There was nothing out of the ordinary. Soon it was noon and I could go out to the well and draw water. There'd be no-one else there then. But there was. And that's where I met him. He asked me to give him a drink of water. He simply just came up to me in my ordinary, everyday, activity and spoke to me.

When I turned to look at him I couldn't believe my eyes. He was a Jew. Can you believe that? One of those ultra clean people asking me a 'filthy Samaritan' for a drink? I suppose I must have realised that my world was about to be turned upside down. No. All I could do was to stand there with the water jar in my hand and stare at him. And all he did was to stare right back at me.

I felt like his eyes were seeing right through me. I felt like he was looking deep into my soul, my very being. I felt that he was learning everything that there ever was to know about me. In that look he knew me totally and completely.

I didn't know what to say or do. I was rooted to the spot by that look. I guessed he must have sensed it because he spoke to me again. And what he said just didn't make any sense at first. He offered me a drink of water. And he told me that if I was to drink his cup of water I would never thirst again. No matter how hard I tried all I could still do was to look at him standing there with no water jar or even a skin to pour a cup of water out of, let alone no cup itself, and struggle to make sense of the situation.

I knew how sordid and squalid my life was. I knew what I had done and was still doing. I knew the totality of my sinful nature. There was no way I was worthy of taking anything from a man such as him. Not even a cup of water.

But that didn't stop him. He went on speaking to me. As he spoke he told me he knew about all the things that had ever happened to me in my life. He told me about the way I was living and what I was doing. All the time he was listing these sinful acts he went on offering to refresh me. In the end I knew that he knew everything. Suddenly, at the end of this in depth review of my life, it came to me. I knew what he meant about me drinking his water and never being thirsty again.

All my life I'd been searching for something. All my life there had been this big emptiness inside of me. All my life I'd tried to make myself feel that I belonged, was needed and fitted in. All my life I knew it was not working and I was still thirsting for something else. And it was that thirst that he was offering to quench for me - there, then, immediately and forever. That was what changed me, deep down in side. That was what turned my life upside down and my world inside out.

I looked into his eyes again and saw he was watching me closely. He was waiting as this half formed idea worked its way through my mind and came to completeness. He watched as I took his cup and drank deep of his special water. And then I knew too. By knowing him for myself all my searching was over. At that moment I knew what I had to do. Which is why I have come rushing here to tell you that you have got to come and meet this man.

I don't know how long he's going to be at the well but I get the impression that he is a patient man. I don't know if you feel like I did - that you are not worthy of being given such a gift - but I do know that doesn't matter to him. I don't know if you are thirsty like I was but I do know that his water will quench your thirst. All you have to do is come and meet this man.

He's waiting for you - all of you - each one of you - right now - right here in our ordinary, everyday, experiences. All you've got to do is to come and meet him. Let him look deep into your eyes and know everything that you've ever done. Then you'll feel it too. Then you'll be refreshed knowing that it makes no difference to him. He wants to give you his refreshment as a free gift. He wants to bless you with the life long thirst quenching water of his love. He wants to meet you - the real you.

All you have to do is to come. Come and meet this unique and extraordinary man for yourself.

Brian: Yes, he changed her life and mind. But can he help me? My mind is falling apart.

Charles: Time and time again he helped those with troubled minds.

Alice: He helped lunatics and those crippled by their own fears.

Charles: And he helped those who were physically crippled as well.

Alice: Yes, that's right. Remember the lame man he healed on the Sabbath?

Charles: The one by the pool?

Alice: Yes. By the sheep gate.

Brian: A man waiting to be healed. (As the Man at the Gate Called Sheep): I was just sitting there. Feeling really fed up. I couldn't do anything else. I hadn't been able to use my legs for ages. All I could do was to sit. Rejected and neglected. And I wasn't alone. There were lots of us sitting around that pool. All of us were handicapped or infirm in some way. All day long we'd sit there and watch the water as it was stirred by the breeze in the sunlight. I wasn't the only one feeling sorry for myself. We were all fed up. It was as if none of us knew any hope at all.

You see we knew that this was a special pool. Every now and then the surface of the water would be stirred more violently by something other than the breeze - an angel maybe. Then the first one into the water would be cured of whatever it was that afflicted him. For ages we sat waiting for this to happen. And when it did all these hours of inactivity was replaced by frantic, desperate, movement.

But it was no use to me. I was all on my own. Others had friends and relatives prepared to wait with them. It was always one of those who got into the water first. My helpers were long gone - fed up with the waiting. I had given up too. I was never going to get healed. I was going to just sit there until I died.

Little did I know what was going to happen.

One afternoon while I was just staring at the ground, these two feet came to a stop in front of me. I had no idea who they belonged to so I looked up at the face. He had the sun behind him so I couldn't even see that clearly. But I could see clearly enough to know it was no-one I knew.

That didn't stop him from talking to me though. He asked me what was the matter I began to tell him my story. You know, I'd waited so long for someone - anyone - to pay me attention that the words just poured out of me. He asked me that simple question and I was telling him my life story - a sorry tale at that. All he said was "What's the matter?" and he got the lot. I told him how I'd been here forever. I told him how all my friends and family had given up on me. I told him that I had lost all hope. I knew I was never going to be the first into the waters. All the pain, all the hurt, all the desperation just came out of me in a torrent of words.

Then, in the middle of all that, this stranger asked me another question that stopped me in my tracks. "Do you want to be healed?" That's all he said. That rocked me back. That stopped me dead, I can tell you. No-one had ever asked me that before. I had to think about that. But then my own desperation got in the way again. Needing to tell someone my situation became my priority once more. And the never ending flood of words began again.

There I sat on my mat in the dust at the feet of this perfect stranger telling him my whole life story. Justifying my every action. Sharing my every unfulfilled hope and dream. I'm surprised he listened at all, let alone waiting as long as he did before he did something. And that's where he really took me by surprise.

He didn't just walk away like many others had done. He didn't offer me a few coins to ease my pain or mutter meaningless words of comfort to show that he cared. He did something that no-one else had ever done. He did something remarkable. He gave me an order.

"Get up. Pick up that mat and walk away from here." That's what he said. That's the instructions he gave me. That's what I did. In an instant I was suddenly walking down the street away from the pool carrying the sleeping mat that I'd lain on for I don't know how long.

And that's when the trouble started.

I hadn't gone more than a few steps when these two Temple Guards jumped on me. They wanted to know what I was doing. I told them I was carrying my sleeping mat. The next thing I knew that had become a capital offence - because I was doing it on the Sabbath. I tried to explain that I'd been sick and lost all track of the days of the week - I wasn't even sure what month it was - but it was no use. They were going to drag me off and see I got a good stoning.

I found myself babbling again - saying anything I could think off to avoid the punishment. I guess I must have told them that someone had told me to do it because that stopped them in their tracks. Right there in the middle of the street they wanted to know who it was. They could smell the blood of a bigger prey here and they wanted me to point them at it. But I didn't know him. I'd never seen him before in my life. Try as I might, no matter how hard I looked around in the street, I couldn't see him anywhere now.

Nevertheless it was enough to get me off the hook. They took my vague description, dropped me in the dust and were off like a pair of jackals searching for their latest kill. I felt sorry for him. He'd done me no harm - quite the opposite in fact. He had changed my life forever. He had lifted me out of my suffering and given me a new life. And all I could do in return was to betray him.

But there was nothing else I could do, was there? I had to look after number one, didn't I?

Charles: He helped that man to walk again. Why won't he help me? Has he got limits to his powers?

Alice: No. His power is endless. He healed lots of people.

Brian: Lepers by the dozen. Blind people by the score, Dumb people wherever he went. No illness was too great for his healing touch.

Charles: He even brought people back to life.

Brian: He did?

Charles: Yes. Don't you remember Jairus's daughter?

Alice: The unexpected death of a little girl.

Charles: He brought her back to life.

Alice: Just imagine how her doctor felt! (As Physician Luke): My dear Theophilus,

I know that this letter may come as a surprise to you as it is now some years since we studied the healing arts together. I know that we swore we would keep in touch. I believe we both hoped that it would be more than the occasional note to report yet another change of location as the Lord led us to fresh challenges. But I have just witnessed the most remarkable series of events and something is driving me to tell you about them.

Let me start at the beginning.

As you know I have now settled in Capernaum where I make an adequate living looking to the needs of the good people of this town. They are a mixed crowd but many are faithful to the laws and the prophets teaching so I want for nothing. As the people have come to know me, they have come to accept the limitations of our craft. They rejoice in the triumphs of my successes and share in the grief of my failures.

So it was a few months ago when one prominent member of this community - one Jairus - brought his young daughter to me. She had not been well for some time and did not seem to be growing like the other children of her age. I examined her but could find no underlying cause for this. I prescribed some tonics and recommended rest, hoping the malady would pass in its own time. But it was not to be.

Jairus and his daughter regularly returned to see me. Each time the little girl was a little weaker. And still I could not discern the causing of this illness. Despite calling upon the whole range of remedies that we both know about, there seemed to be nothing I could do. I began to dread their visits.

They would arrive at my consulting rooms about once a week. The little girl always a little more drawn and tired but still smiling for all that. She looked at the world as if she was seeing it for the first time and always had a tale to tell of some new discovery she had made in the market place or garden. She embraced me as a friend and my heart was warmed by her affection. Jairus, however, presented a different picture. Outwardly he was still friendly and greeted me as the friend I had become. He, too, was ready to share in the talk of the town before the consultation began in earnest. But when I looked into those eyes of his, I could see that all was not well.

He was a desperate man. His daughter was obviously very important to him and he was terrified that he was going to lose her. He saw me as his only hope. While he never blamed me for not being able to help by reversing the progressive weakness, his eyes begged me to come up with a new course of treatment. I could tell that he was looking for a miracle.

Try as I might I could not bring that about. I sent messages to all the other healers in the area, seeking their advice. Rare and peculiar ingredients were obtained for the latest in a long line of potions and tonics to try on Jairus's daughter. But none of them worked. And we both knew - Jairus and I - that one day the time was going to come when I had to admit there was nothing else I could do.

That dark day came only a few days ago. I was in the middle of my morning consultations when word came from Jairus that I was needed immediately at his house. I dropped everything and rushed there. I found his daughter was barely awake. The end was very close and she was fading fast. Saddened at my failure to help my friend, I began to prepare him for the inevitable. But he was having none of it.

In his desperation he began to rant and rave. He was talking about some faith healer who has recently begun to work in the region. You know how these charlatans spring up from time to time and swindle the common people out of money in exchange for medicines that do no good at all. I told Jairus this and that he would be wasting his time - perhaps the only remaining time he had to be with his daughter.

But he would have none of it. He told me that he knew a man who had heard from another that a man blind from birth had been given the gift of sight by this healer. And another man had told of the healing of a whole group of lepers by the same man. I tried to explain how desperate people will cling to any rumour in their need. He responded that was exactly where he was at that moment before running from the house in a desperate search for this man.

There was nothing more I could do. I just stood there and watched as the little girl got weaker and weaker. Once, towards the end, she opened her eyes and weakly called for her father. But he was not there. It was only me who watched as she breathed her last and died. It broke my heart and for a few moments I just cried and cried as I looked at the still, lifeless, body before me. Then I remembered her father and his desperate quest. Healer or not, it was too late now. He had to know that his daughter was dead so I sent one of the servants to find him and give him the news.

Imagine my surprise when not ten minutes later he returned to the house with the faith healer. I thought that the servant had not found him, but Jairus and the other man assured me that they knew the young girl was dead. At this point I expected the faith healer - this Jesus - to make his excuses and leave. But no. He ordered everyone out of the bedroom where the dead body lay and began to perform some sort of ritual over it. The noise of the women weeping was distracting him and he demanded quiet as he worked.

From where I stood I couldn't see clearly what he did. But I did hear him tell the girl to get up. And that is just what she did. It was as if she had woken up from a deep sleep but I know she was dead. Jesus could see that we didn't believe what we were seeing and ordered food to be brought. While we watched she ate something. She was not only alive but more alive than I had seen her for years. And with that he was gone. No demand for money, or anything else. He simply walked away out into the street again. The only thing he asked was that we were not to tell anyone what had happened.

I tell you, my friend, as I write this down I'm beginning to disbelieve my own senses. It all sounds too far fetched - just another rumour of hope for desperate people. But I know what I saw. That little girl was dead and now she is alive again. And she is full of the vitality and the energy that was missing in her. The only explanation that I can find is that this Jesus did something to provide Jairus with the miracle that he needed.

But, of course, that is not a rational explanation. There must be something deeper behind all these events. I need to try and get to the bottom of this. The only way I can think of achieving this is to find out all I can about this Jesus and the things that it is alleged that he has done. So if you hear that I have shut up my practice and left town, you will know why.

I will write again as soon as I can with all the news that I can find out. When I discover what the secret is of the miracles that this Jesus seems to be working, I will let you know. Imagine finding a way to conquer even death! That would certainly be good news that we would have to share with others!

Yours in friendship, Luke.

Brian: So he was able to heal people who he met.

Charles: Not just those. There were those he healed that he never met.

Alice: Like the Centurion's servant.

Brian: Didn't he go and meet him?

Alice: No. The Centurion told him that he was used to acting under orders and took his word for it.

Brian: And the servant was healed through his master's faith. I bet there was trouble over the Roman soldier associating with a Jewish rabble rousing prophet!

Charles: The Roman army with all its rules and regulations. (As Centurion): Sir, As instructed I have investigated the matter of fraternisation as was reported to me and herewith provide my full and complete report.

Centurion Maximus freely admits that he did seek aid and comfort from a member of the local population which is contrary to the rules of occupation as laid down in general by the Senate and in particular by yourself with regard to this land. He cites in his defence that it often falls to an officer in the Imperial Army to take desperate measures to ensure the safety and well being of the men under his command.

I am sure that you will feel, as I did, that these bare facts warranted further and fuller investigation which explains the delay in the completion of this report. By your leave, I will here present those further facts.

The member of the indigenous population central to this matter is no ordinary man. At first sight he appears to be a tradesman from a small and insignificant collection of hovels that these people call their homes near to Tiberias. However, he has already shown an in depth knowledge of the religious teachings of these people and assembled quite a following. He is well respected by the rabble who sometimes flock to hear him in their thousands.

Sir, you will recall that a similar movement grew up around a man called John. His particular talent seemed to be the use of water to wash people - I believe they referred to it as "baptism". It was said by John and his followers that this process made "new" those who underwent it. I can assure you from personal observation that they looked, acted and even smelt the same. However, John did inspire many people and there is anecdotal evidence that this new leader of the rabble was at one time associated with John.

You will further recall that it did not take too much effort for us to make use of our puppet king in the region to see that this John was imprisoned. That reduced his effectiveness considerably and removed him from the public eye. While his subsequent execution - seemingly on a whim - was unfortunate and I feel unnecessary, it had little or no impact on the many who previously had followed him.

However the influence of this new "teacher" - as they call him - far exceeds that of John. I believe his given name is Joshua but those who are associated with him call him Jesus. It seems that his particular talent is to offer people healing. There are many accounts passing across my desk each week speaking of how blind men can now see, the lame can now walk and those who once were possessed by evil spirits no longer suffer under that curse. Each account speaks of Jesus's direct involvement in these healings. For myself I have no direct evidence to offer in support or denial of these accounts. However, this alleged ability to heal drew the Centurion into contact with the native.

It appears that Maximus still has in his service the same slave who was responsible for his childhood training at arms. Over the years Maximus has built up a relationship with that slave that borders on friendship. All of us who are heavily weighed with the task of leadership know how important it is to have a companion in whom we may confide our doubts. This is part of the process in weighing the options before us, making our most painful decisions. It seems that this slave, lowly as he is, has become Maximus's confidante.

At the time of the fraternisation Maximus has informed us that this slave lay sick - seemingly approaching death. Unusual as it was, Maximus had arranged for the best of medical care that we could offer to be visited upon this slave. It appeared to be having no effect. Each day the slave grew weaker. Maximus was desperate to save his life. In my opinion, this is where he made a simple error of judgement.

He travelled to where the company of Jesus were meeting and sought the aid of that alleged healer. In his defence it must be noted that he travelled out of uniform and without any trappings of his rank. Neither did he encourage or permit Jesus to enter any barracks or other building in use by the Roman Army. Maximus reports that, as he always has to follow orders without question even when issued from as far away as Rome itself, all that he asked this Jesus to do

was to issue the order for the man to be well. Maximus would carry that order back to his slave and that would be the end of the matter.

I believe it would have been the end of the matter had not the slave got better. Even as I write this he is still alive and showing no sign of his recent approach to death's door. Of course, we are confident that it was as a result of the earlier work of our physicians - as are they. But there is much talk amongst the other slaves and even some of the lower ranks that it was this Jesus simply speaking the word that brought about the cure. Maximus assures me that he has no opinion on this. All that he knows is that his servant was once dying and now he lives.

It is my judgement, with which I humbly hope you will concur, that Centurion Maximus is guilty only of an error of judgement brought about by the emotional attachment to the slave in question. He did not act in order to offer any aid or comfort to any of the local population, only in the interests of someone who he loved. He freely acknowledges that he has risked everything by acting in this way and is willing to take the consequences.

He is clearly now not suitable for front line work amongst the natives. Everyone will know of his approach to this healer and this will undermine his authority on the streets. I recommend that he be restricted to barrack duties. Perhaps if he was given tasks that would make him hated by the population - the execution of any rebels against our Roman law for example - this would have the necessary counterbalancing effect to his current popularity.

I believe that we must also watch closely the activities of this self-styled healer Jesus. If things go on as they are, he may become a leader amongst the rabble. I have already taken the necessary action amongst our contacts within their religious orders to try to discredit him. However, before things come to a head, it may be necessary to enlist the aid of our puppet King once more. I look to your worship's assistance in this aspect of this affair. After all, we made sure John was imprisoned and that worked to our advantage. Surely we can manoeuvre a similar fate for this Jesus?

Assuring your worship of my continued loyal and faithful service,

Asking the gods to continue to smile and shed their benevolence upon you and all of your household,

Steadfast in the service of the Senate and People of Rome,

I remain, Flavius, Tribune of the Legion currently in Judea.

Alice: But he threw away the rule book. That's why they came after him.

Brian: That's not the point.

Alice: What is the point then?

Brian: He reached out to everyone and anyone.

Charles: And it was their faith that healed them.

Brian: Their faith in all the good he was doing?

Charles: Their faith in him.

Alice: That's why he had to die. Because he was turning their way of looking at the world upside down and inside out.

Brian: But he kept on trying. Kept on changing things for the better. Kept on showing his love for us.

Charles: Even at the very end he was still healing broken people. In the garden as they were arresting him taking hold of him to drag him off to his painful and horrific death even then he found time to heal.

Alice: In the midst of all the chaos he reached out and touched someone who was hurting. (As High Priest's Slave): It hurt. It really hurt. And there was nothing I could do about it.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Let me start at the beginning. It all started in the dark of that night.

The temple guards were summoned from their beds. That meant we slaves who were with them had to get up as well. I was told to get torches and distribute them. The guards meanwhile were putting on their armour and gathering their weapons. It felt like we were making ready for a war or a big battle at least. Once everything was ready we were off through the dark streets of Jerusalem. Nothing was moving only us.

You see, it was the early hours of the morning following the night of Passover. Most people would have eaten well and drunk even better. They would be tucked up safe in their beds by now. But not us. We were off on some fool's errand in the dark. Of course, being only a slave, no-one told me what was going on. But the guards were none the wiser either. They just followed their orders and marched after the stranger who was leading the officers out of the town.

In the end we came to this hillside. Like most of the ones closest to the city it was covered with gardens and olive groves. Even with the light from the torches I'd given out to the other slaves it was still a dark night. Everywhere looked the same. I had no idea where we going as we worked our way up that hillside. But the stranger knew. He had a clear idea where we were going to end up.

Suddenly, without any warning, we reached the destination. There, in amongst the olive trees, were a group of men. They were all clustered about one man in particular. The guards hung back at a sign from the officer and the stranger went forward. And then the strangest thing happened. He kissed the man at the centre of the group.

Then all hell broke loose. The guards rushed forward and I found myself carried along by their tide. Suddenly there were swords everywhere and I was in the front line. Everyone was shouting. There was pushing and shoving and suddenly I felt a blow to the side of my head. Everything froze then.

Thinking back I can work out what happened now. I was standing in front of this big fisherman bloke who had been waving his sword about. He had struck me by mistake I think from the expression on his face. But that blow had cut off my ear. Blood was pouring from the side of my head and my ear was lying at my feet.

When things started to move again it was the man that had been kissed who came to me. He bent down and picked up my ear. Then he placed it against the side of my head as he looked deep into my eyes. The blood stopped flowing, the wound was gone and the ear had re-attached itself. That's when I recognised him. He was that prophet bloke who only a few days before had marched with his followers through the streets being proclaimed as a king. I'd heard that he was seen as some sort of healer and he had just worked a miracle on me.

Once the moment was past things started moving in quick time again. Despite all the preparations it wasn't a big battle. The guards simply seized the prophet bloke, chased his friends away into the dark and we were off again down the hill back into town. We ended up at the High Priest's place and everyone knows the events of the rest of that night and the next day.

I followed most of them slaves are not noticed amongst the crowd. I went with the rest to Pilate, then to Herod and back to Pilate again. I watched as the man who had healed me was whipped, mocked and finally made to carry his own cross to the place of execution. I stood helpless as he died before my eyes. And I wept - because that really hurt.

I had to stand and watch this man who had done me a great favour hung and suffered in the noon day sun until his strength gave out and his life slipped away. He'd done nobody any harm. People told me that all he ever did was good to others. The same people tell me that the healing of my wound was the last good deed he was able to do on this earth.

And I didn't even get the chance to thank him. That's what really hurts.

Charles: Yes, that was his last miracle: the healing of the High Priest's slave's ear.

*Pause*

Alice: That wasn't his last miracle.

Brian: What do you mean?

Alice: That wasn't his last miracle. His last miracle came 3 days later when he rose from the dead.

Brian: Yes, that was a real miracle.

Alice: Imagine being around for that one?

Brian: You have to wonder, don't you? Wonder how Peter felt about that one. I mean, he had been closest to him, hadn't he?

Alice: Imagine how he must have felt when he met his risen Lord.

Charles: His world must have gone through a roller coaster of change. (As Peter): ##

Brian: Yes, Peter's world had changed forever.

Alice: And ours.

Charles: All because of that Jesus's last miracle.

*There is a pause why they all consider this and are transformed by it.*

Brian: (Confidently): So, what are we waiting for?

*All 3 stand. They embrace one another in fellowship and leave the stage transformed by their personal encounter with the Risen Lord. Significantly Charles leaves his walking stick behind.*