

Personal Story of John Browne

In 1985 I was working as the chief engineer at what was then “The Londonderry Hotel” when my boss sent me to New York to carry out a survey on the lifts and the general condition of a hotel our company owned there. I was only there a week but it was obvious that although functional a lot of work would be required at some point in the near future or the wheels would start to come off.

Anyway I was given the job to supervise the place at a distance and keep things running as best we could, but early in 1987 things started to go wrong and I was sent back as an unofficial project manager, the lifts being the main priority.

We decided to give the contract for the lift repairs after some consideration to the existing maintenance company, and because I didn't know the area very well one of their engineers was made my unofficial guide and driver until I found my feet. This is really where my story begins.

At that time no one would have mistaken me for a Christian, I was brought up in a fish and chip shop in Battersea, and although I attended a Church of England primary school and later sang in a church choir I was always motivated by other things, these were hard times and I mixed with hard people and I became difficult to deal with on so many levels, but I somehow managed to get a decent education and although I worked on construction sites doing different things I finally ended up as a lift engineer and built lifts for over 20 years. I hope I wasn't a bad person but I was never easy to get on with, I was certainly a hard worker and expected the same from anyone who worked with me, and my reputation followed me as I took charge of bigger and more important jobs, and I know that some people simply refused to work with me. But it was these rather dubious qualities that got me the job at The Londonderry Hotel and why my boss sent me to New York. It seems I spoke their language, and fitted right in.

My driver in New York was Bill Boch (pronounced Bock). He was a huge soft spoken man, and the first thing I noticed when I got into his car was an old paperback Bible swollen with use, which I had to move to sit down. And later when I went to the office he shared with the other service engineers I noticed that Bill had a Jesus calendar over his desk sharing wall space with all sorts of girly posters and calendars.

Native New Yorkers can be very direct and have a rough and aggressive sense of humour, and so although Bill was a big man (and I don't mean fat) he took a lot of stick because he loved Jesus, but he dealt with all that with a kind word and a smile, and although he didn't drive me around for long I got to know and respect him.

I never realised how much of an influence Bill had on me until I was back home for good, and out of the blue decided to go to church with my wife Marion and two young daughters to her shock and delight. I have to say I wasn't ready for what greeted me when I first walked through the doors of Hartley Brook Church and the odd assortment of people that greeted me as if I was someone special. At the front was the biggest scout I have ever seen, full beard, woggle, shorts and Baden Powel hat, and then to top it all off out of the side door stepped the minister with a toy monkey hanging round his neck. They turned out to be Ian Woodward and the Rev Chris Jones, who along with John Brook introduced me to the Jesus I have come to love and follow.

I'd like to be able to say that the path to my personal salvation was quick and easy, but it was far from that, because I struggled and fought against the changes that come in your life when you decide to follow Jesus. And I think when John and Ian convinced me to take the course in Christian studies and I studied the Bible seriously for the first time, the penny dropped and I began to understand, I also started to pray and talk to God on a regular basis. This was difficult for me, baring my soul to God, but it wasn't a one way conversation, and when I finished the course in Christian studies I applied for Reader training.

I was licensed as a Lay Reader in Chelmsford Cathedral on 8th Jan 1994 and now I Preach and teach the word of God from the front in Hartley Brook Church where I first saw Chris Jones all those years ago. Which proves if you love and follow Jesus anything is possible.