

The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. He then brought them out and asked, 'Sirs, what must I do to be saved?' Acts 16.29-30.

Last time we heard about the strange dream St Paul had in Troas when 'a man of Macedonia' kept begging him, 'Come over to Macedonia'. It doesn't sound much, but it was momentous, for it meant that now the gospel of Jesus Christ was coming to Europe, to us. And who was the very first person in Europe to become a Christian? It was a woman called Lydia. Do not listen to people who say that the Bible is sexist and anti-women. Such people haven't actually read the Bible. Jesus rising from the dead that first Easter Day was the greatest day in the history of the world. Who found out first? It was women. Who was the first person to become a Christian in Europe? A woman. The Church over the centuries has been anti-women, but the Bible isn't. That's what happens when people ignore the Bible.

We all know about how Saul of Tarsus became a Christian. His conversion on the road to Damascus was very dramatic with lights and voices, and that's how it is for many today, but others are troubled and say to me, 'Brian, it never happened like that to me. I never heard voices or saw lights. Am I really converted? Am I a proper Christian?' Some who have had the Damascus Road-type conversion think it is the *only* way to come to Christ. If you haven't had *their* experience, you're not really a proper Christian.

Well, let's see what the Bible says about that. With Acts 16 we're in Europe now, in the city of Philippi, and we have three very different people who come to Christ in three very different ways. First we have Lydia, a seller of purple dye,

who comes gently to Christ. Next we have from v16 a slave girl who is demon-possessed, and finally from v25 there's a rough jailer who only comes to Christ because he's scared.

Let's take a closer look now, because in our own Christian journey we can all identify with one of these characters. Let's look first at Lydia, from v13. There's no synagogue, so the women meet for worship on the river bank, v13... (NB the word 'we'. That means that St Luke, the author of *Acts*, was with them). These women clearly have their own spiritual longings, though no-one has bothered much about them. We're always being told that St Paul was a woman-hater. But he was the only one who bothered about these women. He noticed them, came over to them, and told them about Christ. That's some woman-hater, isn't it? Anyway, among these women was Lydia. She sold purple dye, which came from the juice of the madder root. It was rarer than gold. Designer labels? Forget it! If you could afford a thin strip of purple at the bottom of your toga, you had arrived. So Lydia was a businesswoman, and a very *rich* businesswoman. People looked up to her. She was refined, yet when Paul told these women about Jesus, she responded and gave her heart to him. It wasn't something *she* did; it was the Lord opening her heart, v14... There were no lights, no voices or visions. For years she had been worshipping. Now, with Paul, the penny finally dropped. There was nothing here of the Damascus Road. And she was so modest, that she wasn't even sure she was a Christian! 'If you consider me a believer...', v15. (NB if *all* the members of her house were baptised, that would have included babies).

The next person to come to Christ in Philippi was very different from Lydia the refined businesswoman. She was a low-life, a slave girl, used and abused by unscrupulous men to tell people's fortunes, v16... She recognised something in what St Paul was saying. This was a woman in deep spiritual bondage who desperately needed to be saved from these demonic forces and from these greedy men, v17... She was a desperate woman, and wouldn't leave Paul alone. Finally he turned to her and in the name of Jesus the Deliverer freed her from her bondage, v18...

You've all heard of the Alpha course. I get a paper called *Alpha News*. It tells of some incredible people who come to Christ, not so very differently from this demon-possessed fortune-telling slave-girl. You might think that demon-possession is old-fashioned, but there's nothing old-fashioned about being addicted to pornography, alcohol, drugs. *Alpha News* gives the testimonies of people who were for a long time in a very dark place but who are now in the light since coming to know Jesus. That slave-girl 2,000 years ago saw that Jesus was the way out, the way to be saved, v17...

For many people, their conversion is very black-and-white. There is a clear division between life-before and life-after conversion, drug-soaked/drug-free. If you have always been brought up in the church, that is probably not going to be your experience, and you shouldn't feel guilty that you can't speak of a before-and-after. Perhaps your journey of faith has been more gradual, more like Lydia's.

Well now we come to the last character to come to Christ. Paul and Silas find themselves now in prison for depriving

these men of their income from the slave-girl. (Again, is Paul really this woman-hater when he ended up in prison for freeing this slave-girl from those pimps?), vv19-24...

Paul and Silas are extraordinary! They're in prison and they're singing hymns, v25... The jailer is so coarse, so brutish and desensitised that he sleeps through it all. It was the earthquake which woke *him* up, and even then, all *he* was bothered about was that the prisoners would escape and he would get the chop, vv26-27... But in fact, no-one *had* escaped. Even in prison, Paul was concerned for the jailer, v28...

The jailer was amazed and asked the famous question, 'What must I do to be saved?' What did he mean by 'saved'? Saved by God? Saved from punishment by his superiors? Paul replied that there was, there *is* nothing we can do to be saved; just put your trust in the Lord Jesus and he will save you, vv29-31... The jailer was a changed man, vv33-34...

He had come to know the Lord Jesus Christ as a reality in his life. His conversion was real, and yet his *motives* were not good. He only came to Christ because he was scared. I know soldiers and many others who came to Christ because they were scared. So what? God can use *all* our experiences to draw us.

Read *Acts* 16 again when you go home. It gets to the heart of Christianity. Coming to church is good, but it is meaningless if you don't come to Christ. You need to come to know Jesus in your life personally. *Do* you know him? But as Lydia, the slave-girl, the Philippian jailer, *and* Saul on the Damascus Road remind us, *how* you come to Jesus is not important; only *that* you come. Open your heart to him today.