

Dear Friends,

Our holiday this year took us to Bulgaria and while there we had the opportunity of visiting the island of Nesebar, an ancient city on the Black Sea connected to the land by a narrow man-made isthmus, just south of the popular resort of Sunny Beach. A World Heritage Site since 1983, Nesebar boasts an abundance of historic buildings. It is also reputed to be the city with the highest number of churches per capita. Today, there are 40 churches and, though only a handful are used for public worship, many are strikingly beautiful, not least because of the Orthodox Church's use of icons.

Since the Reformation, Protestant Churches have tended to be very plain. At first, statues and religious art were desecrated by zealous reformers. The famous painting of the Black Madonna at the Roman Catholic shrine in Częstochowa, Poland, was badly damaged by Hussite raiders (early Protestants) in 1430. In England, countless parish churches, including Paignton Parish Church, have statues that were damaged in the Reformation. Is this all a matter of personal taste, or aesthetics, or are there deeper questions to address?

Christians believe in a personal God, a God who can be known. For the Reformers, an important starting point was to ask, 'how can we know God?', and in particular, 'how can we, sinful men and women, be made right with a God who is holy?' For the Reformers, a key conviction was that it was possible to know God through the Word of Truth that he had given – namely, the Bible. Methodism has always been 'a religion of the book' – so reading the Bible personally and studying the Bible together is an important part of knowing God's nature and his will.

In his Preface to his collected sermons, the founder of the modern Methodist movement, John Wesley (1703-91) wrote:

I want to know one thing – the way to heaven; how to land safe on that happy shore. God Himself has condescended to teach the way; for this very end He came from heaven. He hath written it down in a book. O give me that book! At any price, give me the book of God! I have it: here is knowledge enough for me. Let me be *homo unius libri* [a man of one book]. Here then I am, far from the busy ways of men. I sit down alone: only God is here. In His presence I open, I read His book; for this end, to find the way to heaven. Is there a doubt concerning the meaning of what I read? Does anything appear dark or intricate? I lift up my heart to the Father of Lights: "Lord, is it not Thy word, 'If any man lack wisdom, let him ask of God'? Thou 'givest liberally, and upbraidest not.' Thou hast said, 'If any be willing to do Thy will, he shall know.' I am willing to do, let me know, Thy will." I then search after and consider parallel passages of Scripture, "comparing spiritual things with spiritual." I meditate thereon with all the attention and earnestness of which my mind is capable. If any doubt still remains, I consult those who are experienced in the things of God; and then the writings whereby, being dead, they yet speak. And what I thus learn, that I teach.

Traditional Methodists are not against religious statues and paintings as works of art – they are often very beautiful – but there is a concern that the image might misrepresent or limit rather than expand our conception of God or that what started out as an aid to worship becomes an object of worship. Reading and studying the Bible are an essential part of the Methodist tradition of faith.

As we begin our fourth year of *Tuesdays Together* we are making a change. We will be continuing with the Bible study, Prayers and Reflections, and 2B1 but having a new meeting to complement these, '*LifeBuilder Bible Study*'. *LifeBuilder Bible Studies* are small books prepared by Scripture Union.

Members of the group are encouraged to read a Bible passage at home and reflect on it with the help of thought-provoking questions. There are spaces in which to write your answers (I always write mine in pencil in case someone else has a better answer than me). Preparation at home takes 45-60 minutes and in the group members are encouraged to share their insights from the passage.

Our first *LifeBuilder Bible Study* is in ten parts, so will take most if not all of the year of our groups. The theme is *Images of Christ*. 'If Jesus was a carpenter, why is he so often portrayed as a shepherd carrying a lamb on his shoulders? For the very good reason that he called himself the Good Shepherd; Jesus invited us to think of him that way. And he used other word-pictures for himself: the Light of the World, the Bread of Life, the True Vine. From Old Testament prophecy come other images of the Messiah: the Suffering Servant, the Branch. Christ's followers also saw him as the Lamb of God, the divine Bridegroom, the Cornerstone. Ten studies explore these images and focus on our relation to the reality behind them.' The study book is available from me or from the circuit office for £3.99. You won't be made to feel awkward or embarrassed – so do join with us.

The other weeks of *Tuesdays Together* will follow their more familiar pattern. In the Bible study we will be continuing in Matthew. A growing church is made up of growing Christians. The basic aim of *Tuesdays Together* is that we grow as Christians – everyone is welcome. Come as often as you can.

God bless

John

Revd John M. Haley
Minister