

## Address for 29 August 2021 by Belinda Speed-Andrews

Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, “perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on; you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently He starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make any sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of – throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were being made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself.” — C.S. Lewis

We have, in the last 18 months, been inundated with more rules and regulations. Do you remember at the outset of Covid, the rule to wash our hands for at least 20 seconds and the creative ways in which we were guided to at least reach the 20 second cut off point. Say the Lord’s Prayer while washing your hands was one such suggestion. I used to look at the diagrams that found their ways onto bathroom walls above the sinks and try to avidly follow the diagram instructions. Our lives are all about rules and regulations and some of them make more sense than others. We often lament at H&S these days and say it is just common sense but for some reason we now need to be told what our forefathers did automatically. And, of course, it is to a degree because we have become a litigious society and so to cover our own backsides we produce reams and reams of rules and regulations. To be fair though, most of the rules and regulations are for our own well-being and safety.

The OT may appear to many of us to be full of rules and regulations, no more so than the emphasis on being ‘clean’. So, for example, one may ask was eating shellfish an unclean act or had there been an outbreak of disease as a result of eating contaminated shellfish? I can hear your minds answering this question but we perhaps need to remind ourselves the Israelites were working with what they saw and understood - they perhaps would not have recognised as we do now, that the crustaceans were just a bad bunch which caused sickness. The same can be said of eating pork; in those days they did not know how to clean what is an infested animal, but today we have the knowledge and the tools to enable to us produce meat which is

safe to eat. Remember the words spoken to Peter in a dream in Joppa, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane'.

The Pharisees lived in a particular time and in their zeal they became stricter and added to the number of laws; they used their power and position to impose their rules on others and in so doing they became blinded to the One the laws pointed to.

The word 'ordinances' in vs 1 of our reading from Deuteronomy means having charge over, tending, and keeping watch like a sentinel. But why laws? Laws of the Lord are the source of life but the Pharisees failed to recognise this in Jesus. All they could see were the disciples eating food without washing their hands first. The Pharisees struggle with Jesus but Jesus is trying to show them Godself and they can't understand why he doesn't do what they want. Notice that Jesus did not criticise the Pharisees' attitude towards purity or the sabbath. After all these laws came from God to Moses on Mount Sinai for a wandering people, to give them a framework to keep G-d at the centre of their lives.

The Pharisees though want God in a box, a box of their own creation, a box where they choose when and what is 'right'. What they don't realise is they are resisting God and they don't see the miracles, the teaching and the healing of Jesus, they just see the broken rules, healing on the Sabbath and in this passage today, eating with defiled hands. Yet the charges for purity were for the temple and the priests, not for ordinary people. They have forgotten the words spoken by Moses; 'You must neither add anything to what I command you nor take away anything from it, but keep the commandments of the Lord your God with which I am charging you'.

So, I go back to my quote at the beginning from C S Lewis. Is Jesus coming in and destroying the house that God built among a wandering people or is he as Lewis suggests, making it more beautiful, more spacious and more wonderful because he wants to live there with us?

So, I wonder what rules and regulations, unspoken or codified, exist within our world, or even within our community. Every community, whether a faith community or a club, all human groupings have their rules and regulations with the expectation

that they are observed as a part of ones belonging. We perhaps need to be aware of our own zeal and determination to keep the law that takes us away from the heart of Jesus' message - love your God with all your heart, mind soul and strength and love your neighbour as yourself. Love is the heart of God, it was at the heart of God's commandments to Moses and the Israelites given on Mount Sinai and it is at the heart of Jesus' message to the world too, not whether we have clean hands or not but the Pharisees failed to see this.

I have had much to ponder on in the last few weeks, not just for myself but for others that I know. One of my wonderings is whether the Church as in the institution has become so big that it fails to live God's love in times of real need. Is it failing to really listen to the Spirit as she blows? Is it so fixated on rules and regulations that a person's individual need is trumped by said rules and regulations no matter the desperate situation someone might be in?

This week we met again as part of our exploration about the way forward and all of us who were able to come along were challenged by the particular chapter we were reading.

The chapter was about compassion and our intentions when working with those on the edge of society. Part of the challenge was the suggestion that if we are engaged in a relationship with the homeless say, are any members of that particular group on the decision-making so that their voice can be heard and listened to and considered? The simple answer is no because the rules of the Church state that you have to be on the electoral roll to be a part of the PCC, the decision making body of the local church community. And so we take it upon ourselves to make decisions for these people, which suggests that we know exactly what they need and want us to do for them. So, the challenge is, how do we involve these people to be a part of the conversation?

This is very simple example but simple enough to make me think carefully about any decisions we choose to make here in St David's and the impact it might or might not have on a particular group of people. Perhaps we (we as the wider Church) are too scared to think outside the box now because God forbid it sets a precedent, whether that precedent might be the decision that lives God's love? Perhaps we are too scared to do what is right in a given situation because we now live in a litigious society? I

am not saying this is right or wrong, but in the history of the Church there have been many examples set before us of people who were not scared to do what needed to be done because it bought to life Jesus' command to love your neighbour as yourself. Have we become captive to the rules and regulations of the Church, that we fail to live the message Jesus gives us over and over again?

For now I only have questions, the answers are yet to come and they may never come, but nevertheless they are worth considering and pondering on if only to make us think really closely about what comes out from us, as individuals and as a church.

Most of this passage reflects a conversation that Jesus had with the religious leaders and authorities, but his final and definitive words were for the crowd. It's not enough that he sets the Pharisees straight and corrects their wrong teaching among them; Jesus doesn't finish until he sets the people free from the bonds put in place by those asserting a human authority and will over them. I imagine there were probably Pharisees and scribes who were enlightened and transformed their teaching based on Jesus' illuminating words. But, in breaking into humanity, Jesus bypassed religious authorities. No priest was needed to mediate his message; Jesus brought it directly to the people. Jesus invited them into a direct relationship with the Holy Love and .liberated them from the expectations and limits of human tradition

We walk right when we are more concerned with God's will than with human defined doctrines.