

Life was still pretty chaotic under Roman rule by the time Jesus was born. While there was no doubt who had the power, the Romans showed it regularly with their legions of soldiers and carefully controlled leadership of the region, the Jews were a formidable force.

At the end of the day the Romans could crush any Jewish revolt, and they did several times, but when Jesus was born the region was in a time of fragile peace where the Jewish people were allowed to develop their own sub-society and live by the rules they had developed as a people.

There were rules for eating, washing, working, praying, rules for going to the toilet and for going to the temple, rules for buying and preparing food and rules for bathing pretty much any daily routine had rules by which it was structured. From the time you were a little child you would learn these rules because your daily life was built within these structures, and once you learned them they became second nature to you—just another part of the way you lived your lives.

Rules were part of the Jewish religious tradition, but by the time Jesus was preaching in Galilee, years and years of traditions had been piled up on top, continue of the rules of the Torah so that the structures by which the Galilean Jew lived his life were firm, strong and non-negotiable.

There were good reasons for this, of course. Practical reasons regarding the safe preparation and consumption of food in a day and time when little understanding of disease and sanitary standards existed certain laws kept the people healthy.

Beyond the practical, though, there were psychological reasons for the rules.

Living under oppression and occupation as the Jewish people were, the rules they followed helped define them as different from the people around them. The rules helped them clearly and easily discern who was “in” and who was “out” in a society where they were not in charge. The rules set boundaries and control in a larger world in which they had no boundaries and very little control over their lives at all.

The rules gave order and structure and comfort, because without the boundaries of the rules, things could get out of control. If everyone knew the rules and followed them then everything would be fine.

And the rules gave the leaders, the Pharisees and Sadducees, lots of influence and power; the rules were how they kept the people in line: cross the boundaries, though, break the rules . . . well, then you might end up in very serious trouble.

I guess you had other rules set out by your parents when you were growing up, rules mostly designed for your own protection, we probably didn't break those rules, the politics of fear kept us in line.

By the time Jesus walked through Galilee, the same was true. The Jews were a people who lived under the occupation of the Roman government and needed to have carefully defined rules, guidelines and boundaries to keep the shaky balance they'd manage to create, to keep things moving along at a relatively smooth pace, to keep the status quo in place.

And all was well until this strange rabbi Jesus showed up on the scene and started breaking the rules.

Some were big ones, like pulling up a seat to share a meal with tax collectors, touching women who were unclean, or healing the sick on the Sabbath—a day when you were supposed to be resting.

Some were small, like the one in our gospel reading today, Jesus' disciples were not following the rules about washing their hands. Big or small, though, Jesus soon set a pattern and that pattern was a rule-challenging, not a rule following, pattern.

And so, the chaos surrounding this strange man Jesus grew. And grew. It wasn't so much that Jesus and his gang weren't washing their hands correctly. It was that, with the breaking of the rules they threw the carefully constructed boundaries of Jewish life in Galilee into chaos.

Without the boundaries, without the rules, then, how would the people know who they were? With the loss of that little piece of control, the Jewish leaders got scared. And for the people the uncertainty of life without the structure made them deathly, horribly afraid.

This big wide world they lived in, we live in, is hard for us to manage. And so we build for ourselves mirages of control. When these structures are breached we lose power and we are afraid. Just as they were then.

The Pharisees and Sadducees themselves were afraid. They were afraid of Rome, afraid most of all of losing their power over the Jewish people. The Romans kept them in line by feeding their fears, fears that they would lose power, fears that the Jewish people would be destroyed.

The leaders of the Jews watched the Roman guard keep them in line with fear, why not jump on the bandwagon and do the same thing in their own community?

The leaders knew that if the people were afraid, they would begin to view difference with suspicion. And if they could find a way to mandate compliance, to set an order that couldn't be violated, well, then, they could get the people to do anything!

They knew that if they could get the people to view each other with suspicion, they could effectively eliminate the possibility that they would organise to object to anything the leaders were doing.

And the Pharisees knew, that they could get the people to believe things they would never have believed before, things like entire religions and ethnic groups are evil and dangerous, so policies and laws had better be enacted to limit the influence and presence of these different groups.

You establish and keep power, by finding out what it is that people are afraid of and then you feed those fears.

Protestors continue to do that at the moment spreading fear in our world making extravagant statements about many things talking about worldwide conspiracy theory's A person told me they were speaking to someone at Selby op-shop who said two years ago he saw planes flying over us spraying the corona virus.

The Jewish leaders knew that fear can be very powerful when it is planted and nurtured, cultivated and tended carefully. And so, they did. Quickly they saw that when people are afraid they can be motivated to do things they'd never think of doing before, things like starting wars; killing innocent people; enacting laws that oppress and exclude; taking prisoners of those who are different and horribly abusing those prisoners. Because they are afraid. Afraid.

And so it was that the message of Jesus was seriously cramping their style. While they were busy planting seeds of fear and making sure they took root among the Jewish people, it wasn't helping them at all to have someone telling people they didn't have to be afraid. And so it became critical for them to limit the voices of anyone who would dare to suggest that instead of making and enforcing rules, instead of reinforcing fences and building more walls, that people break them down.

Those people who would preach such a message, who would tell the people that they might embrace people whom they feared unclean, that they could boldly act in faith to include everyone and to open themselves to change by loving people, not by shutting them out, the people who made trouble by telling the people those things, well, because they were afraid they knew: they would have to get rid of them.

What better way could you think of to stir up apprehension and in-still fear than to suggest to the people that Jesus was trying to break the rules? That would really throw them into a panic; that would stir up lots of fear.

But Jesus wasn't so concerned about the rules. His message was so much bigger than specific guidelines about what should be eaten when and how we should spend our time on the Sabbath.

Jesus came instead with a message that we don't need to be afraid anymore and that was a message sure to undermine all the fear planting and tending those Romans and Jewish leaders had been busy doing.

Jesus was preaching this radical message that we don't have to live our lives shackled by the fear of things that are different and the dread that embracing something different will hurt us or, worse, endanger our relationship with God.

In fact, Jesus recognised that love, not rules or power, is what binds us together and that we're stronger and safer together than we are ripped apart by distinctions and differences.

Yes, Jesus came to teach us the law of love, and perfect love casts out fear. Perfect love casts out fear. There's no need to be afraid.

This was not new for the Jewish people, this idea that they didn't have to live in fear.

But under the presence of Roman oppression and the desperate attempts to define their world, they'd forgotten the very basis of the Deuteronomic law. (Deut. 4:7-8). Why are you afraid, people of Israel, when you are in relationship with the very God of the Universe?

But they had forgotten for a moment that they were the people of God, and upon forgetting they began to live lives of fear. We do that too. And what happens when we start living lives of fear instead of faith? The same thing that happened to them: people start to look different to us.

We become afraid, our world is changing.

We start to become concerned for exclusion of those who are different rather than inclusion. We close ourselves down to the possibility of new ideas and new opportunities. The limits of our little world begin to close in and get smaller. Life becomes limited in its possibilities. We forget Jesus Said 'Ask and it will be given'

Jesus said fear is not what a life transformed by God is. When we are in relationship with the God of the Universe. We don't have to be afraid anymore.

Perfect love casts out fear, and the most perfect love of all, the love of Jesus, has claimed our hearts and offered to rule our lives.

Do we not trust that God is in control?

Do we not know that we have a God who is so near to us?

Why are we afraid? We don't have to be afraid anymore. Trust in God through our Lord Jesus Christ

Amen.