Let me share with you a story. It begins with a young man on the brink of a new chapter of his life. He comes from a galaxy far, far away and he and his family are about to embark on a long space voyage to a distant planet, where his father will take over as the new ruler. The young man is called Paul, and he is serious and thoughtful. He knows that in the future he will take his father’s place as head of the family and that he too will be a ruler. Just a few days before the departure to the new planet he has an unexpected visitor. A very old woman, dressed in religious robes, arrives at his father’s castle. Her purpose is to test the young Paul, to see if he has the qualities of a true leader. She brings with her a sinister green metal box and a deadly poison-tipped needle. Paul is brought to meet her and she instructs him to place his hand in the metal box. Although he is afraid, he obeys her and immediately she places the deadly needle at his neck. He must now keep his hand in the box or die.

He waits, and slowly his hand begins to prickle with a burning sensation, yet he cannot withdraw it. The feeling gets stronger, until he thinks his whole hand will be destroyed and the pain is overwhelming. And then suddenly it stops, he withdraws his hand and to his astonishment he sees that it is whole and perfect. He has passed the old woman’s test. Throughout his ordeal he has been reciting in his head the words his mother taught him for those times when he faced great fear.

*I must not fear. Fear is the mind killer. Fear is the little death that brings total obliteration. I will face my fear. I will permit it to pass over me and through me.*
These words—from Frank Herbert’s science fiction novel *Dune*—came to mind when reading today’s Gospel story because fear is the overriding emotion that swirls around this story of Jesus’s encounter with the scribes. Over last few weeks we have seen Jesus come into increasing conflict with both the scribes and the Pharisees. The tension is mounting, the words exchanged become more heated, become *freighted* with increasing risk, violence lurking beneath. The atmosphere is now pervaded with that particular type of fear that ends in the kangaroo court, the lynch mob, or vigilante action. This is the fear that feeds on both itself and the mounting fear of others—quick to ignite if the tinder is dry enough and the words carry enough spark.

*Fear is the mind killer. Fear is the little death that brings total obliteration.*

**The scribes are afraid** - afraid of the growing influence and power of the itinerant preacher who has come from nowhere in a meteoric rise. He seems to have answers too—provocative answers—answers that trip you up. And in their fear those who consider themselves learned make simple mistakes—fear is after all, *the mind-killer*. Of course a kingdom divided against itself cannot stand. Jesus sweeps aside their accusation and turns it on them. You can almost hear the collective intake of breath.

**The crowd can feel the fear**—some will undoubtedly be afraid for Jesus. Afraid that he will be taken away and stoned, afraid that this extraordinary, liberating, healing voice will be silenced. And some will be afraid for themselves, wondering whether their association with him might become a taint, something to be hotly denied in the future. Like Peter caught in the firelight, recognised as a Galilean—*I tell you I do not know the man.*

**His family are afraid for Jesus**—his mother and brothers and sisters—they too feel the fear. Jesus can’t even pause to have a meal, the crowd press in, demand his attention, his words, his healing hands. His family are reduced to standing outside passing a message in by word of mouth—person to person—across the crowd. And surely
they too must fear for themselves—besides the exposure they are experiencing as the family of a notorious preacher, a charge of blasphemy would affect them all.

**Only Jesus stands unafraid**—hungry and tired, perhaps—but not afraid. Jesus has allowed the fear, if you will, to pass over him—or better, if we are to put it in the language of scripture rather than science fiction—to allow perfect love to drive out fear. The love that he knows in the Father through the Spirit is that perfect love. People say that the opposite of hate is love, but I wonder. It seems to be that the Bible knows that the opposite of hate is actually fear. Fear drives even the kind hearted to acts of selfishness. Fear provokes and promotes a particular type of individualism—one that makes us self-centred and self-obsessed. It is an individualism that is inimical to compassion, empathy or love.

Jesus looks at those around him—he stands unafraid in the midst of all this tension and fear. He looks, he regards, *he beholds*. And what does the Son of God and Son of Man see? When he looks at the crowd he sees his brothers, he sees his sisters, he even sees his mother in the faces of those around him. He sees unity—not division. He sees family, he sees relationship—the glue that binds us together as people who care for each other. He sees the spark of community—*he wills it into* every single person there, just as he will breathe his Spirit into his frightened disciples at Pentecost. Because he is the God who exists in perfect unity, in perfect relationship—ever-giving, self-emptying, constantly oriented one-to-the other in the relationship of love that we call the Trinity.

The God who exists in relationship calls us to share in that relationship. In this exists no fear, only love. In this relationship we are all brothers and sisters in Christ. ‘Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother’. Welcome to the family.

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