

There is a story that comes out of Poland from many years back - it was during the Second World War in fact, at a time when the nation was, by and large, a Roman Catholic nation.

It happened that in a particular village there was a man who was well known for his care and compassion for others and who was deeply loved because of it. He was not a particularly wealthy man, nor was he a native of the village, nor did he attend the village church. In fact he was not even baptised and showed little interest in rectifying that situation.

But both before and during the War he was known for his good works within the village that he had adopted as his home. If a stranger came to the village and needed a place to stay, this man would offer a cot in his little home. If a village family ran out of food, he was among the first to offer a loaf of bread or some flour from his meagre supplies. If someone was in trouble with the authorities, who by and large oppressed the citizens of that nation, or if the Germans or, later the Russians, were performing a sweep of the village to collect up the young men for either imprisonment, or to force them into the army, or worse, he would help hide the would be victims in the woods outside town or in some other way. He was loved very much by the villagers on account of all these things and many more.

Finally the man died.

The villagers prepared his body for burial and proceeded to the village church where they asked the Priest to perform the burial service and to bury the man in the church cemetery. The priest, who knew and loved the man as much as did the rest of the villagers agreed that he would conduct the funeral service – but he insisted, despite many pleas from the villagers, that he could not bury the man inside the church cemetery because he was not baptised. "I cannot bury him in our cemetery", the priest said, "It is hallowed

ground. He must go where those who are not baptised are buried. Those are the rules of the church and I cannot change them."

The villagers appealed even more earnestly to the priest, saying that the man was a good man and surely loved by God as much as any of the baptised, perhaps even more on account of all the good that he had done. The priest agreed with them regarding the virtues of the man, but insisted that the rules of the faith were clear and could be not be broken. Finally he came up with a compromise that he hoped would satisfy everyone. "In recognition of your love for him - and his love for you and all of God's people in this village", he said, "I will bury him on church land, near to those who have gone before him - those whom he has loved, but it will have to be beyond the fence that surrounds the consecrated ground of our cemetery."

And so it was. On the appointed day a grave was prepared just outside the fence that surrounded the church cemetery, and the body of the man was processed by all the villagers to the site where the priest conducted the ceremony - and then the grave was filled in and a stone placed before the night fell. During the night something very beautiful happened - something that became apparent when the priest went to the church next morning to conduct morning mass. The fence that surrounded the cemetery had been moved by some of the villagers - so that it now took in the grave in which the man had been buried.¹

Now that is, I think, a lovely story. We might even say that it's a very "Uniting Church" kind of story. It tells us how a certain group of people overcame what seemed to be an unfair prejudice in their community or in their religion, or wherever we happen to locate it. And yet, as moving a story as it is,

¹ Story from Richard Fairchild, <http://www.rockies.net/~spirit/sermons/b-or16su.html>

we need to be careful about the way we approach it and what we think it teaches us. Who is it who causes the problem in the story? Perhaps the priest seems to be the problem, or perhaps the church which he represents. Certainly I suspect that most people would consider the villagers to be the right track. They recognised in someone who was different from them a humanity which they wanted to embrace, and to identify with.

Whatever the case, there was, in a sense, a wall – the cemetery fence – which was drawn between the “ins” and the “outs”, and some of the people took steps to expand the boundaries of who was in. Our reading from Ephesians this morning spoke of a wall which divides people: listen again for the word of God in this section from what we’ve already heard:

Remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth ... were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.

He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father.

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and

prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.

“For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us” (v.14): there is a “dividing wall”.

It *sounds* very similar to our story. And yet there is an important difference between what we heard in the story of the cemetery fence and what Paul says about what Christ has done in his crucifixion. In our story, the townsfolk want to say that they have seen in the man who died a goodness which was independent of his being baptised or a committed member of the congregation: “So what if he wasn’t baptised, or a Christian, he was still a good man.” But in what *Paul* says, the dividing wall between us is not overcome by some of us deciding that others are like us, and so we’ll treat them nice, but by Christ who brings together peoples who don’t care for each other at all.

We know that the church could often benefit from being reminded that there are “good people” outside the boundaries of the church. But more to the point of the gospel, we need to be reminded that what the church calls good is not actually this or that moral act, but God’s work in Christ reconciling us to himself. The first word Paul speaks here is not “be reconciled to one another” but “you *are* reconciled to one another”. It’s an important distinction, and if we don’t get it, we’ll slip into a legalistic moralism that might produce so-called “good” people, but won’t produce *free* ones.

Perhaps the townsfolk actually got it wrong. How did they know that there were not some serious problems in the mans’ life that no-one knew about? Or what if the fellow who had died had not had so good a reputation in the town? Who would have pleaded for him then? How good is good enough to deserve to be buried in heaven’s cemetery? Those who can move a fence out to include can also move it in to exclude.

But when Paul says that *Christ* is our peace – that Christ will be the source of true peace among us – he is saying that true peace comes not from us trying to get over each

other's little foibles or working out who is good and who is not, but that peace comes from our recognising that we had a part in building the walls between us in the first place. In reconciling us to himself, in breaking down the walls between us and God, God also reconciles us to each other – bringing us together whether we like it or not.

This is not to say that somehow we leave it all to God, as if we have no part in the work of reconciliation! We must move (out!) all the cemetery fences we can, so to speak! But watch out when you find that there are people you'd be happy to leave outside the fence, or some inside who you wish were buried a little closer to the fence so that you could move it in a bit so now they were outside! In the first case there is seen a sign that there is something between you and another which is beyond your ability to overcome, and yet it must be overcome if there is to be true peace and right relationships between us. In the second case, you presume rather a lot to imagine that you have somehow earned the honoured plot! "For *he* is our peace, in him the dividing wall between the 'ins' and the 'outs' – the hostility between us – has been broken down." This healing is incomplete, but now at least becomes possible because it is offered to us from without, and is not first required of us out of ourselves.

The knowledge and love of God begins not with our knowing and our loving, but with the knowledge and love which is God's for us. It is only so that it might indeed be God we know and love, and then each other, and not merely ourselves.

For what God has done, that we might know him and meet each other, all thanks and praise be given. Amen.