

Read Romans 3:21-31

It is said that during the Second World War some soldiers serving in France wanted to bury a friend and fellow soldier who had been killed. They wanted to ensure their fallen comrade had a proper burial. Spotting a well-kept cemetery with a low stonewall around it, a picturesque little Catholic church with a peaceful outlook, they approached the priest. But he answered that unless their friend was a baptized Catholic he could not be buried in the cemetery. He wasn't.

Sensing the soldiers' disappointment the priest showed them a spot outside the walls where they could bury their friend. Reluctantly they did so.

The next day the soldiers returned to pay their final respects to their fallen friend but couldn't find the grave. "Surely we can't be mistaken. It was right here!" they said. Confused, they approached the priest who took them to a spot *inside* the cemetery walls. "Last night I couldn't sleep" said the priest. "I was troubled that your friend had to be buried outside the cemetery, so I got up and moved the fence."

We all have "fences", barriers that we erect that define who's in and who's out, who we accept and who we don't. God has a fence too. The barrier is sin. God cannot tolerate sin. And the bad news is that we all find ourselves outside God's fence: "*all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*" (Romans 3:23).

The good news is that God decided to move the fence. That's what Jesus came to do. He took on our rejection, dying in our place, so that we might be made acceptable to God. As the next verse in the Bible says, we "*are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus*" (Romans 3:24).

In Christ, God went to great lengths to move the fence, so that anyone who chooses to can know God's acceptance rather than his rejection. As in so many things, though, he then challenges us to do the same. Later in his letter to the Romans, Paul goes on to write: "*Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you*" (Romans 15:7).

This applies first and foremost to Christians in the church. But I suspect it also has a wider application. If God can be gracious to us, sending Christ to die for us when we were still his enemies; can we not also be gracious, even to those with whom we have real and deep-seated differences?