

Sermon preached at OCC, 11 October, 2026

While we were still sinners, you loved us, O God. While we were turning away, you called us back. Open our hearts today to receive your grace, and teach us to extend that same grace to others. Amen

Exodus 32:1-14; Matthew 22:1-14

When We Fail to Recognise Grace

In the 1986 historical drama film *The Mission*, it shows the profound moment of what Grace is about through the conversion of the mercenary and slave trader *Captain Rodrigo Mendoza* (played by Robert De Niro). Driven by overwhelming guilt, Mendoza agreed to accompany the Jesuits back up the mountain into Guaraní territory.

He bound his heavy mercenary armour and weapons into a large net and dragged them up the steep, muddy cliffs and waterfalls of the Iguazu Falls as his penance. When Mendoza finally reached the top of the cliffs and encountered the Guaraní people whom he used to hunt and enslave, a Guaraní warrior approached him with a knife, cut the heavy bundle of armour from his back, and hurled it into the river. In that moment, Grace was revealed to him in the form which he never dreamed of. Grace takes many forms. In the two readings, we find how people fail to recognise grace and why so.

1. Grace on our own terms

In Exodus 32:1-14, the Israelites arrived at Mount Sinai, and they were in the initial phase of their journey—the famous 40 years of wandering. Exodus 19:1 informs us that they arrived at the foot of the mountain exactly three months after leaving Egypt. In terms of their faith journey, they were still in a very early stage. Now Moses was gone for many days. People grew impatient and unsettled. They pressed the co-leader Aron as they needed something tangible and familiar to them to be a guide for the journey ahead. Even though YHWH had led them this far, they were still uncertain without something visible. They remembered what they used to do in Egypt for such a long time.¹ Despite the covenant between YHWH and them, bulls and calves were familiar to them—the common religious symbols in the ancient Near East and Egypt. They would provide them with strength and fertility, and keep them as the storm god. The wonderful memories of God's work since they started this journey

¹ 430 years – Exodus 12:40

seemed to be fading. Grace on our own terms—this is what the story tells us, as if grace is what we want God to be present in ways we can see, control and understand.

2. Cheap Grace?

Now Matthew shows us another kind of grace. As we read, in the parable of the Wedding Banquet, we see a king prepare the wedding banquet lavishly. Sadly, the guests who were invited by the king wouldn't come because they were busy with their own stuff. The king got enraged and sent his troops to destroy them all. Grace was slighted by people's indifference or ignorance.

After this, the king sent out his servants to bring 'everyone'—good and bad to bring to the banquet. When the king came in to see the guests, he saw one guest who didn't wear the wedding robe. The king got angry and punished him harshly. In both cases, they had the invitation from the king. In the former, the guests didn't come to the wedding banquet as they had more important personal business than the king's invitation. In the latter, the king invited everyone—there was no qualification involved. Yet the one didn't wear the wedding robe was harshly punished. What does this mean?

The crucial thing here is not really what wedding guests normally wear. The difficult question is: *Why is this one person thrown out when the king invited everyone—"both good and bad"?*

When Bonhoeffer wrote about *Cheap Grace*, it wasn't simply 'getting something for free.' In fact, grace must be free; otherwise, it ceases to be grace. For him, the problem is grace without discipleship, grace without repentance, and grace without transformation. The invitation was free. The man did not earn his place at the banquet. But the invitation changes the meaning of his being when he enters the room where the king's wedding banquet is being held. Whether he is good or bad, he becomes the noble guest of the King's banquet. He is supposed to behave accordingly. In short, grace comes first. The question is what we do with it.

3. What will we do with Grace?

When God's wrath was about to consume Israel, Moses stood before God and interceded: "Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people." Moses did not deny Israel's wrongdoing or argue that they deserved another chance. Instead, he appealed to God's own character and promises to Abraham, Isaac and Israel. He asked

God to remember the covenant. Some remarkable things are here. While Israel was trying to make God fit their expectations, Moses was asking Israel's God to remain faithful to God's own promises. Israel wanted a god they could control; Moses trusted the God whose faithfulness was greater than Israel's unfaithfulness. He identified himself with the very people who had failed. He did not distance himself from their failure, but carried their future into his prayer before God.

What, then, does it mean for us to recognise grace? As Moses stood between the gap, we can go alongside those who fail, refusing to let their failure define the whole story. We can pray for those who have lost their way, making room for those who have disappointed us, and seeking restoration rather than simply demanding punishment. This does not mean ignoring injustice or pretending that wrongdoing does not matter. Moses takes Israel's sin seriously. Precisely because he does, he pleads for a future beyond it. Likewise, in the wedding banquet, those invited from the street do not earn their place. Yet, the wedding garment reminds us that entering the feast means entering a new relationship that calls for a different way of living. Grace does not ask us to earn our welcome; it asks us to let that welcome change us.

As Moses did, Christ comes among us while we are still sinners, not waiting for us to become worthy of God's love. Through his life, death and resurrection, he opens a future beyond our failure. We do not become mediators in precisely the same way Christ is; rather, having received his grace, we are called to become its witnesses. It is not simply about receiving grace; it is to become people who make grace visible through our patience, our forgiveness and our courage to confront wrongdoing, and our willingness to stand alongside those who have failed.

At the beginning, we heard that grace came to Mendoza from someone he had harmed and could not have demanded forgiveness from. It gives us food for thought if we are willing not only to receive unexpected grace but also to offer it to people we might otherwise judge. Today, we are called to embody that grace for others. May God help us today and always. Amen.