

**Reflection on the Gospel-32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time Year A
(Matthew 25:1-13)**

-Veronica Lawson RSM

How many times were you told as a child to be ready for an outing or for the arrival of visitors or for dinner or for something else when you simply wanted to stay as you were? There are times when it matters little whether we are ready or not. COVID-19 is teaching us that sometimes it really matters and today's gospel parable depicts a situation where it is of crucial importance to be prepared. Wisdom resides in readiness, foolishness in failure to prepare.

The imminent event in today's parable is a wedding celebration. The betrothal period is over and the bridegroom has left to bring the bride from the home of her parents to his family home. Ten young women of his household will watch for the arrival of the couple and will light their way into the wedding feast. These young women can expect to be welcome at the feast. Five are well prepared for the arrival and five are not. The five who bring (olive) oil for their lamps are designated "wise" while the other five who bring no oil are said to be "foolish". Negotiating the terms of the marriage contract takes longer than expected so that the bridegroom is delayed. The young women wait and wait, then fall asleep. At midnight, the bridegroom's arrival is signalled and the young women rise to trim their lamps in readiness for their role of lighting his way.

The bride is invisible in the telling of the story, presumably because the focus must be on the bridegroom alone. Earlier in Matthew's gospel (9:15), Jesus is depicted as "the bridegroom". The attentive reader of the gospel is aware that the parable is about Jesus and that it forms part of Matthew's end-time discourse (24:1-25:46). The delay of the bridegroom evokes the community's expectation that Jesus who has died and been raised will return at an undisclosed time. In the interim, the members are to be actively watchful and ready, living in the spirit of Matthew's first discourse (5:1-7:29) with its emphasis on right relationship. Matthew 7 concludes with reference to wise and foolish decisions: the foolish build on sand while the wise build on rock.

The behaviour of the "wise" in today's parable is as puzzling as that of the "foolish". The "foolish" fail to prepare: they have no oil and cannot expect to light the way without it. The "wise" have prepared and they receive their reward. Is there any wisdom, however, in sending their "foolish" companions to buy olive oil at midnight? There are more unanswered questions than we can address in this little reflection. We can identify with both the wise and the foolish. We can identify with the foolish in our inattention to the plight of our planet. We can identify with the wise insofar as we have the wisdom to ensure that the produce of God's Earth, represented by the olive oil, is received as gift and used in right measure and in right relationship.