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## Introduction

As we approach the end of this cycle of the lectionary year, we find ourselves back at the point from which we started: in the reading for Advent 1 (which was taken from the previous chapter of Matthew), the emphasis was on readiness for an event the timing of which “no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” In the parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids, Matthew once again exhorts his listeners to be prepared for the coming of the Kingdom and warns of the consequences of not being so.

As we have noted before, parts of Matthew’s text hold a very direct historically and culturally located message connected with the relationship between Judaism and its potential reform as initiated by Jesus. However the stories also have insights which transcend this specificity and today’s passage has important pointers for us when we come to think about conflict and our preparedness or otherwise to deal with it.

### Anchor Question

Have you ever been in a situation when something – a situation, a conversation, a question – caught you completely on the hop? How did you respond? Take a few moments to try and recall the different sensations which were part of that experience. Did you subsequently do anything to make sure you weren’t caught out like that again, and if so what?

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## Text

### Matthew 25:1–13

“Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise.

When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps.

As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. But at

midnight there was a shout, 'Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.'

Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' But the wise replied, 'No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.'

And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' But he replied, 'Truly I tell you, I do not know you.'

Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

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## Comment

As we saw in one of our earlier reflections (Advent 4 – 18/12/16), Jewish marriages at the time of Jesus involved two distinct stages separated by a significant period of time: *kiddushin* or betrothal – the setting apart of a particular woman for a particular man, and *nisu'in* – the formal finalisation of the marriage contract. The story which Jesus uses to convey his message here comes from the point of transition between the two. Although the length of the betrothal was set, and thus the approximate time of its ending known, the exact moment was determined by the father of the groom. He would give final approval for the match thus allowing the groom's procession to set out for the house of the bride preceded by a groomsman shouting 'Behold the Bridegroom comes' and the sounding of the Shofar. Because the precise timing was unknown, it was incumbent upon the bridal party to be in a state of readiness to go with the bridegroom for the finalisation of the wedding contract and the subsequent feasting and celebration.

Traditional readings of the text often focus on the end result of the unpreparedness of the bridesmaids: once the groom and his procession arrived, the doors were shut and no-one else was admitted hence they missed out on the feast and subsequent celebrations. However the story also tells us two critical things about being prepared which have a wider application and which can in turn help us as we think about dealing with conflict. Firstly it shows us there are some things which simply cannot be done or obtained at the last minute – one can't for example condense three months of study into the evening before an exam and expect to get a good grade. Some things require advance planning, preparation or practice if we are to successfully draw on or deploy them when we need them. Secondly it highlights that not everything can simply be borrowed from someone else when we have need of it. Things which can govern and direct our response to others in positive ways – generosity, kindness, grace, etc. – need to be things which we own for ourselves, things which come out of our own embodied experiential existence.

How then does this relate to dealing with conflict? Over the course of this first year of the lectionary cycle, one of the things we have each, in our different ways, been trying to do is to explore and expand on different facets of what might be involved in 'a spirituality of conflict'. In his book 'Spirituality of Liberation: Towards Political Holiness', Jon Sobrino offers the thought that a spirituality of conflict involves '*certain attitudes that, although demanded by faith generally, are more evidently necessary in situations of concrete conflict*'. Bringing this particular lens to bear on the two observations about preparedness arising from the parable of the foolish bridesmaids suggests a number of things we ought to consider about our own ways of responding to conflict – especially given that it is (in some shape or form), a ubiquitous aspect of human experience. Firstly, we need to be pro-actively developing both the understandings about conflict (about specific situations we might become involved with or more generally about the dynamics of human interaction) and the various skill sets (at basic or more advanced levels) for dealing

with it, which we can then draw upon as the need arises Secondly that we need to continuously cultivate attitudes and habits such as hospitality and generosity which will enable and support constructive responses when we find ourselves in situations of conflict. Neither of these will necessarily enable us to successfully defuse or negotiate our way through conflict, but they will help to ensure that we won't be caught completely unprepared to respond constructively if we do suddenly encounter it.

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## Response

Consider whether you (or a group with which you are involved) might benefit from a better understanding of the background to a conflict which touches you, or of the dynamics which underlie human interactions; or whether you might be helped by developing some skills to use in situations of conflict. Investigate local or national resources for acquiring those understandings or skills.

Spend some time reflecting on a recent conflict situation (large or small) in which you have been involved, paying particular attention to your immediate and longer term responses. What attitudes underlay these and what might they say about deeper habits of life or thought? Is there anything which you might want to work on cultivating further, or perhaps changing?

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## Prayer

Jesus,

help us to deepen understandings

develop skills

and cultivate habits of life

which will prepare us to respond

with grace, gentleness, and generosity

in whatever situation we find ourselves.

Amen.