A classic phrase of feminist theology was penned by the iconoclastic theologian Mary Daly. She wrote: “If God is male; then male is God” (Beyond God the Father, 1973.) Since we know that God cannot be contained in or limited to any human characterizations, we know that both premises of this statement are false. Still, this has not prevented many people from clinging to the gender bias that has been fundamental to many social, political and religious points of view and practices. We cannot deny that much of the Bible reflects such a bias. However, we have come to realize that, while we maintain that Scripture is revelatory for us, we acknowledge that its message has been expressed in human language, literary forms, and colloquial imagery. That language, those forms, and that imagery come from patriarchal (father-headed), androcentric (male-centered) societies. Consequently, we must learn to read past such bias in order to uncover the revelatory force of the biblical message.

Two of today’s readings show that not all of the biblical texts contain a gender bias. It is not unusual to find personification in Hebrew writing, especially poetry. Several explanations for such characterization have been advanced. Some believe that this is a remnant of ancient worship of a goddess of wisdom. Others see is as merely a development from the feminine form of hokmah, the Hebrew word for wisdom. The most widely accepted explanation can be found in the nature of the society itself. Wisdom was regarded as the most desirable possession. In this patriarchal male-preferred society, it is understandable that it was personified as a woman. In this feminine personification, Woman Wisdom is not exactly a divine characteristic, but she is very close to it (see Wis 7:25-26). She is “[r]esplendent and unfading...” Clearly, this figure is not subject to human control. So necessary for human success, “...she makes her own rounds, seeking those worthy of her.” She is available to all, but whoever seeks to love Wisdom must be worthy of her.

The story in the gospel reading is a story of the endtime and the coming of the messiah. The joy of being united with the messiah was often compared to the joy of a wedding celebration. When the bridegroom came to get his bride and take her to his home, the final celebration. Since we do not know the exact time of the messiah’s coming, we must always be ready. There is no gender bias here. The metaphor of the wedding procession requires that these attendants be women. What should be noted is that here these virgins stand for both women and men, unlike other instances where men stand for men and women. The point is that all are invited to the final wedding celebration; all must be prepared at all times.