

**Reflection on the Gospel-Feast of Christ the King Year A
(Matthew 25:31-46)**

-Veronica Lawson RSM

“It has long been a common custom to give to Christ the metaphorical title of King.” These are the words of Pope Pius XI who established this feast between two world wars in the hope of counteracting the growing secularism “in public affairs and politics” and finding a way towards global peace. Peace would never be achieved, wrote Pope Pius XI, until and unless individuals and nations accept the “rule of our Saviour”.

In some ways, hope for the global reign of the Prince of Peace seems more remote than ever. For many peace-loving people, the rise of the so-called Islamic State and of Boko Haram marked new low points in more than a century of violent and ongoing conflict which has claimed the lives of some 160 to 180 million people across the globe. From a Christian perspective, the world needs the sort of leadership that Jesus of Nazareth advocated in first century Palestine, the kind of leadership that Pope Francis is offering our world.

The gospel for today provides a blueprint for Christian living in general and for leadership in particular. Matthew presents Jesus as both shepherd and sheep: as judge and king on the one hand and as suffering humanity (“the least”) on the other. Works of mercy are the measure of justice or righteousness. Those who feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, and set the prisoners free are “the righteous/the sheep” who will inherit God’s empire or kingdom and have life. Those who fail in these respects are the unrighteous/the goats who fail to recognise the presence of the shepherd/king in the suffering of “the least”. Why sheep and goats? While goats grazed with the sheep, they were never imaged as God’s people, somewhat unfairly, I suggest. “Sheep”, on the other hand, is a frequent biblical designation for the people of God’s fold.

This gospel story is replete with mixed metaphors. It is the gospel source of the seven spiritual and corporal works of mercy that have informed the Christian way of life for centuries. It focusses on suffering humanity. In proclaiming an eighth work of mercy, care for our common home, Pope Francis has asked us to expand our horizons and to extend our concern to the suffering of the whole Earth community, human and other-than-human.

The Feast of Christ the King brings the church year to a close. It invites us to consider ways to achieve the things that make for peace. If we wish God’s reign of peace to be realised on planet Earth, then we might heed the invitation of Pope Francis to care for our common home: to engage in “grateful contemplation of God’s world” on the one hand and in daily gestures that “break with the logic of violence, exploitation and selfishness” on the other.