

**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 Pius XI, until and unless individuals and nations accepted the “rule of our Saviour”.

For many peace-loving people, the rise of the so-called Islamic State marks a new low point 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. Hope for the global reign of the Prince of Peace seems more remote than ever. From a Christian perspective, the world needs the sort of leadership that Jesus of Nazareth advocated in first century Palestine. The election of Pope Francis and his message of simplicity and mercy have restored some measure of hope to a world in deep conflict and economic disarray. Pope Francis has the potential to be a force for good in our world. He will suffer for the cause of justice as he identifies with the suffering of God’s people. He will only succeed in his call for a more mercy-filled and peaceful world if people and nations surrender their “heart of anger”-to borrow the words of NZ poet James K. Baxter.

Today’s gospel is about spiritual leadership. It 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 enter eternal life. Those who fail in these respects are the unrighteous/the goats who fail to recognise the presence of the shepherd/king in suffering humanity. 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 story is replete with mixed metaphors.

The Feast of Christ the King brings the church year to a close. It invites us to consider the way to achieve the things that make for peace. Reflection on the factors that contributed to the rise of IS, including the experience of mass political and economic exclusion, may be a place to begin if we wish God’s reign of peace to be realised on planet Earth.