

Last week we raised the following question: in a world of doomsday prophets, conspiracy theorists, and media outlets like Fox News that cater to consumer demand rather than a desire for truth, how do we know who to trust?

Should we turn to people like Harold Camping, the former president of Family Radio who received roughly 80 million dollars in donations for (wrongly) predicting the end of the world back in 2011? My answer, of course, was no. We should turn instead to Jesus. How can he help us determine who we can trust?

First, he would presumably caution us against placing our trust in anyone who claims they know when the world will end. For “about that day and hour no one knows,” he says in Matt. 24:36, “neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.”

Secondly, he would likely advise us to be wary of anyone who appeals to a direct experience of God as the basis of their authority and power. Christ came to serve, not to be served. No experience of the divine supersedes the revelation of God we have in Jesus.

Thirdly, he would condemn violence. Pay attention, he might say, to what internet, radio, and television personalities endorse. Do they encourage or justify violence, sedition, or the sword? If so, then what they teach does not conform to the example of Jesus who famously says that “all who live by the sword will die by the sword” (Matt. 26:52b).

In short, measure what you hear from influencers and authority figures by whether it conforms to the teachings and example of Christ. He is the one we can trust, the Way, the Truth, and the Life (Jn. 14:6), the Good Shepherd (Jn. 10:11) whose pathway leads not to death and destruction but to restoration and renewal (see Jn. 10:10).

Christ the King

Today, we turn from Christ the teacher to Christ the King. The church has observed Christ the King Sunday for less than a century. Pope Pius XI established it in 1925 to counter the destructive forces of fascism as evident in the ideology of the emerging Nazi regime. In contrast to tyrants and dictators, he suggested, we follow Christ the Cruciform King, the peace-maker, and the giver of life who leads us not by asserting himself *over* others but by inviting us to follow him in service *to* others.

His death, in turn, was a consequence of the life he lived. Instead of cowering in fear, he stood up in the name of love to the principalities and powers of his day.

Unfortunately, his courage ends in what appears to all of us a humiliating defeat.

Yet through the gate of death he opens the door to paradise. What a king we have in Jesus, a king who resists every temptation to claim power by force, a king whose followers “conquer” the world through love they show for one another and the good

they do for all people, a king whose kingdom clearly is “not of this world” (John 18:36).

Jesus’ servant-style leadership subverts the expectation people of his time had regarding a messiah who would use violence and military force to overthrow the Roman government. “If my kingdom were from this world,” he explains to Pontius Pilate in the second half of Jn. 18:36, “my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Judeans. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.”

Now the would-be Christian has a choice: she can follow Christ, the Good Shepherd, whose path of non-violence leads to “abundant life,” or she can follow someone like Barabbas, the violent revolutionary whose path led him and his followers to their own demise.

The “Thieves” on the Cross

Turn with me now to the altar and look to the right (or left) of the cross. Which two people were crucified alongside of Jesus? Who were they? Why does one of them confess that they, unlike Jesus, deserve their punishment (Lk. 23:41)?

Let’s take a poll.

How many of you would identify these men as **thieves**? Raise your hands.

That’s good. You have Scripture to support your answer. Matthew and Mark refer to the two men in question as *laystai* in Greek, which *can* mean “thieves.” In contrast to Luke, neither Mark nor Matthew specify what the thieves have to say.

They simply tell us that *both men* joined the crowd which was taunting Jesus. Why can’t you save yourself, the hecklers jeered? If you are truly the messiah, “come down from the cross” (Mt. 27:40, 44).

Now here’s my question.

Why would Rome crucify *thieves* alongside a man they believed to be an insurrectionist, that is, a threat to public order? Does the punishment (death by crucifixion) truly fit the crime (stealing)? We know that runaway slaves were crucified. We know that people suspected of sedition or accused of fomenting rebellion were crucified. But what about thieves?

Perhaps an alternative term would make more sense.

Let’s take another poll.

Christ among Criminals

How many of you think of these men as criminals rather than thieves? Raise your hand. Congratulations! Your view also has a basis in Scripture. The Gospel of Luke identifies the two men next to Christ three times as “criminals.”

Now the word “criminal” clearly possesses a wider range of meaning than “thief.” A criminal can be punished for a variety of infractions, including those far worse than stealing.

These criminals, moreover, have distinct personalities. Unlike Matthew, Mark, and John, Luke tells of the exchange they have with Christ.

One reflects the sentiment of the crowd, only now in what appears to me as a demand. “Are you not the Messiah?” he asks desperately. “[Then for God’s sake,] save yourself and us!” (Lk. 23:39).

The other criminal has a vastly different outlook. He affirms Jesus innocence, which Luke emphasizes in contrast to the other Gospels, and repents for the unspecified crime he committed. Jesus replies with a promise, one of the most famous in all of Scripture:

“Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

It’s tempting here to think of “paradise” as the final destination for believers. Perhaps we equate paradise with heaven and then assume Jesus is saying that he and the repentant criminal will meet again and reside there eternally. In context, however, the term means something different. “Paradise,” a modern commentary explains, “was a contemporary Jewish term for the lodging place of the righteous dead prior to the resurrection.”

Do you hear that?

Paradise is *not* our final destination after death, at least according to the belief that prevailed during the time of Christ. It’s more like what I call a *layover* where those who repent rest quietly in the presence of God until the last day when God awakens them and reunites their soul or life-force with an imperishable body as part of God’s new creation.

“Well,” you might say, “thank you Pastor Dan for ruining my belief in heaven. That stuff about inhabiting an ‘imperishable body’ sounds like a pill too big for me swallow. How about we return to the identity of those two criminals on the cross.”

“Fair enough,” I might reply. “Maybe life after death would be a topic worth discussing as part of an upcoming forum. But for now, sure, let’s return to Luke.”

The third Gospel offers a unique account of the crucifixion, one we do not find in Matthew, and Mark.

Here the men who die alongside Jesus aren’t merely thieves. They are criminals. Whatever crime they committed must have been more severe than merely stealing to warrant execution.

So, what did they do?

Luke offers us a clue, but one we might not expect.

Earlier in the same chapter he mentions Barabbas, a man Matthew calls “notorious.” Luke describes Barabbas as a murderer and insurrectionist, a violent revolutionary who wanted to overthrow the Roman government (23:25).

We will return to Barabbas and his relationship to our two criminals in a moment, but first, let’s take another poll.

How many of you think of the two men we have been discussing as “bandits” instead of thieves or criminals?

Any takers? Raise your hand. Nice work! The word “bandit” leads us to the Gospel of John, the last stop in our effort to solve the mystery of the two criminals who die at Jesus’ side.

More than a Thief

John’s Gospel offers just one clue for our purposes but it’s a big one. “There, at Golgotha, the Place of the Skull,” its author says, “they crucified [Jesus], and with him two others, one on either side, with Jesus between them” (Jn. 19:18).

Do you hear what’s missing? John says nothing about their identity, their high crimes, or even their minor misdemeanors. He also leaves out any distinction between the two thieves as well as the dialogue they have with Jesus shortly before they die.

John’s Gospel nevertheless reveals an important truth about Barabbas that neither Matthew, Mark, nor Luke explicitly provide.

It calls him a bandit.

Now a bandit is not necessarily a thief, which explains why in Greek (like English) we have a different word for each one. We distinguish them.

The Greek word John uses for “thief” is *kleptos*, which is where we get the English word, *kleptomaniac*. Jesus uses the Greek word for thief when he refers to those who figuratively *steal* his sheep, that is, people who lure away his followers according to John 10:1-10.

The word “bandit,” on the other hand, has a double-meaning. In some contexts, it appears to be synonymous with “thief” or “robber.” However, in the New Testament the term more often means “violent revolutionary” or “insurrectionist.” By calling Barabbas a bandit, therefore, John confirms the descriptions we have of him in Matthew and Luke as notorious, a murderer and a violent revolutionary.

And here’s where it all (hopefully) comes together:

Matthew and Mark use the same word for the criminals being crucified next to Jesus that John uses to describe Barabbas! They call them *laystai* or “bandits,” which in this context suggests that they were violent revolutionaries or insurrectionists, and which also explains why the Roman government was crucifying them. They were seditionists

who threatened the *Pax Romana*, that is, the peace that exist between nationalities within the Roman Empire.

It also explains why the thief in Luke's Gospel defends Jesus' innocence. Jesus may have run livestock out of the Jewish Temple, but he never committed an act of sedition. He never provoked his followers to violence, which explains why, when the chief priests and elders send a crowd to arrest Jesus, confronting him with sticks and swords, he asks, "Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest me as though I were a *bandit*" (Mt. 26:55; emphasis mine). "Have you brought weapons," in other words, "to arrest me as a revolutionary?"

Now, let's take a final poll.

How many of you now think that the two men who die at Jesus' side were not merely thieves or criminals but violent revolutionaries who were executed for attempting to overthrow the Roman government?

Remember as you reflect on the evidence to consider the words of the one who repents. "And indeed," he says, "we have been condemned justly, for we are *getting what we deserve for our deeds*, but this man [Jesus] has done nothing wrong" (Luke 23:41; emphasis mine).

Why This Matters

Now that we have the results, I have one more question for you: who cares? Why does it matter as to whether these men were common thieves, criminals, bandits, or violent revolutionaries?

Here's why.

All of us remember the horrific events of January 6, 2021 when thousands of people descended upon the capitol building in Washington DC to overthrow the American government. Five people were killed.

Police officers were brutally injured as men and women from all across our nation chanted for the death of the vice president, scaled the walls of the capitol building, and forced their way inside.

And then think of symbolism they used.

Not only were these so-called "patriots" waving Confederate Flags in the American capitol. They also held up signs saying, "Jesus saves" and "In God We Trust."

Barabbas would certainly have been proud.

These people were not acting as Christians. They were not following Christ. They were insurrectionists just like our "thieves" on the cross, many of which marched to their own (legal) destruction and committed blasphemy by aligning Jesus with their cause.

For those who repented of what they did, ours is a God who forgives. As for the others, I assume God abandons them to their own destruction. Violence has no place in

Kingdom. As Jesus confirms in John 10:1-10, leaders of the people who resort to violence lead themselves and those who follow them astray because their rebellions inevitably end in slaughter.

Jesus, the Good Shepherd, the Cruciform King, the Prince of Peace, promises by contrast not to lead people to destruction and death. He promises to lead them – and to lead us – to abundant life (see Jn. 10:10).

Sometimes, we need to look to the right (or left) of the cross to determine the contrasting identity of the man in the middle.

Sometimes, we need to look to the right (or left) of the cross to determine the kind of savior, the kind of king, Jesus truly is.

Amen