

12th March 2021

Stealing

“Thou shalt not steal.”

Bible, Exodus 20:15

In *The Dunciad*, a mock-heroic narrative by Alexander Pope from 1743, there is the story of John Dennis, an actor/manager in the early years of the 18th century, who had invented a machine to make stage thunder. He put this to use in his own play, *Appius and Virginia*, which opened in the Drury Lane Theatre in London in 1709 and which called for a thunderstorm in one of its scenes. However, since Mr Dennis was a better impresario than he was a playwright, the play failed at the box-office and was withdrawn after a few performances, to be replaced by a production of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* by another company.

Dennis went to *Macbeth's* opening night and was surprised to hear his thunder machine in action. Enraged, he leapt to his feet and shouted:

That is my thunder, by God; the villains will play my thunder but not my play.

This phrase, corrupted to become “To steal someone's thunder”, is now in common use, because of a *very* angry John Dennis. To adopt someone else's own methods or ideas and pass them off as your own, is to “steal their thunder”. Not a nice thing to do.

Stealing is wrong at any time. It doesn't need the purloining of a thunder machine or, indeed, the Old Testament commandment above to tell us that. But, rather than focussing on such a negative aspect of behaviour, might we concentrate on a positive for once? I've always struggled with the “Thou shalt not” approach of the Ten Commandments, including stealing being a no-no. What if God had taken a positive approach, and made the commandment more like “You *shall* share”?

There's a lot of good sharing around us – insights, knowledge, caring, support. People are already following that “commandment”. Maybe if John Dennis had done so and was happy to share his thunder machine with anyone who needed it, we might be living with the phrase, “To share someone's thunder”, and the better we might all be for that!

A prayer for today

Loving God, help me to ensure that sharing is a guiding principle for my life. Amen

An original reflection by © Tom Gordon

Also available at <https://swallowsnestnet.wordpress.com>