

9th April 2025

Theft

**"The Friar preached against stealing,
and had a goose in his sleeve."**

George Herbert, *Jacula Prudentum* (1651)

Following a recent news report of the theft of an 18-carat gold toilet worth £4.75m from Blenheim Palace, I found other stories of bizarre heists. A vanload of pies worth £25,000 was stolen in broad daylight. £35,000 worth of portable toilets were stolen from a firm in Hertfordshire. After thefts of cheese from his restaurant, the owner secreted a tracker in a wheel of brie, and the stolen cheese was recovered several hundred miles away. A giant wooden statue of Julia Donaldson's *Gruffalo* was removed from a Theme Park – along with eight other exhibits, including half a *Paddington Bear*.

But none of these compares to a theft in my first parish. The housing scheme was notorious for thieving. If an item wasn't screwed down it was likely to be purloined! A colleague had his car stolen. He informed the police and his Insurance Company. The car was found two streets away, completely burnt out. The Insurance Company was contacted, and an Underwriter came to check the veracity of the claim. My colleague took the investigator to the location of the burnt-out car, only to discover that the ruined car wasn't there. The wreck had been stolen. Imagine his surprise, therefore, when he saw the shell of the burnt-out car in the forecourt of a garage across town. The Insurance Company were quickly informed – before the garage's prize exhibit was nicked for a third time.

The eighth commandment is "Thou shalt not steal". Thefts, bizarre or otherwise, are clearly not a good idea. But beware! Remember the preaching of the Friar in George Herbert's 17th century treatise, condemning stealing, while his own ill-gotten gains are secreted in his cassock (notwithstanding that the bulk of a goose up a cassock sleeve might have been a giveaway)? Have I been guilty of the occasional theft – an idea, a bit of time, the odd photocopy, the available paperclip or biro pen? Yes, I have. No comparison with a gold toilet or a burnt-out car, I know. But shouldn't I be careful not to apply the commandments only to others, when they're really meant for me?

A prayer for today

"Thou shalt not ..." Oops! Sorry!

"Thou shalt love ..." Oops! Must try harder!