

Watch your wallet

I remember a student telling me of how suddenly lost he felt when – traveling across country - his wallet was gone. He had no way of identifying himself, purchasing things, gaining access to shelter. The situation didn't last long but while it did he felt a subtle terror. I mean that wallet contained not only money and credit cards but all the basic data that proved his citizenship, residence, occupation – his location in society. Without it he'd have to prove to increasingly suspicious strangers just who he was.

I later had a similar experience myself. I was commuting home from work on a bus in Washington D.C. – standing room only. I was trying to keep my balance near the center exit when the bus took a sharp turn and we all swayed on our feet and two fellows in shabby clothes leaned especially hard against me. They apologized and got off the bus at the next stop – and my wallet was gone! I panicked. All those credit cards! Those fellows could gain access to my bank accounts; misuse my driver's license, my gas cards. I could feel my whole infrastructure eroding beneath my feet. Of course I reacted immediately. I called all the credit companies, the DMV. And what happened? The mailman returned my wallet two days later with everything in order except for the cash (seven dollars). And suddenly I felt: these fellows were a decent sort after all. Incidentally, I don't know if you've ever seen the 1959 Robert Bresson film *Pickpocket*, in which close-ups reveal how deft a professional pickpocket can be, the stealth, the agile hands sliding into a stranger's jacket. I remember a bishop on a bus in Rome many years ago who found a huge patch cut out of the back of his long coat – cash gone. It's an art!

Have you ever been pick pocketed? Have you ever thought of Christ as a pickpocket – or at least a thief? If not, then you did not pay attention to the Gospel story in which Christ describes his arrival in this world and into your life as a *thief in the night*. In St. Mark's Gospel he reveals his *modus operandi* in terms like: *No one can enter a strong man's house unless he first bind the strong man; then he may indeed plunder his house*. Satan is the strong man, the tough guy who holds this world in thrall, who possesses us as if we were his property to squeeze, con, beguile, waste. And Jesus identifies his mission as one of burglary. By way of his exorcisms, miracles, parables he binds the hands of Satan so that he may run off with us; rescue us as his precious booty – to lodge us in a new household where faith, hope and love may thrive. Beware of Jesus. He's a thief, a pickpocket. He's got his eyes on your wallet with all the false identification whereby we make our way through life. He's going to lift that identity but only to reveal to you your true identity as a child of God – the only credentials that count.

Robert Southwell, the Jesuit martyr of the 1500's appreciated Jesus as a thief. In his lovely Christmas poem he wrote: *This little Babe so few days old, / Is come to rifle Satan's fold; / All hell doth at his presence quake, / Though he himself for cold do shake; / For in this weak unarmed wise / The gates of hell he will surprise. / With tears he fights and wins the field, / His naked breast stands for a shield; / His battering shot are babish cries, / His arrows looks of weeping eyes . . . / His camp is pitched in a stall, / His bulwark but a broken wall; / The crib his trench, haystacks his stakes; / Of shepherds he his muster makes . . . / My soul, with Christ join thou in fight; / Stick to the tents that he hath plight. / Within his crib is surest ward; / This little Babe will be thy guard. / If thou wilt foil thy foes with joy, / Then flit not from this heavenly Boy.*