

## The Burglar God

Burglars are among the least-loved visitors to have entered my life, though I am glad to say I've never had the worst sort in my house. I've already been robbed in Lincoln (I must confess I thought I would be!) The loss - of my car-keys - is pointless and fruitless and very expensive, and I don't even have the consolation of believing the thief needed what he took more than I did; he can't use what he took, and it is pure gratuitous damage. But that's the shape of sin: so often the damage it causes on a wide front does no-one any good, and leaves every one of us as a victim. Fortunately, this criminal world is being stalked by a different kind of burglar.

### Is The Alarm On?

There's no defence from this burglar, because it's a divine intruder we're up against. We're constantly open to his attentions, because we build our house out of false materials - sometimes knowingly, sometimes under the impression they're real. I'm afraid we're all suckers for short-cuts and hopeful bodes; ready to believe life is easier and less demanding than we thought. A helping of infidelity here and there, a measure of faking, and a lot of good luck: but alas! the wind comes down, the storm blows, the floods rise - and down comes the house with a mighty roar. It was Isaiah who, in the ruins of the exiled nation, whispered the truth that *it was the Lord* - God himself who had banished them, demolished his own Temple, scattered his own people, deposed his own King - and that the Jews were victims, not of a human plot, but of a divine plan of humiliation (which means "bringing you down to earth"). It was hard for people to hear, agonising to think of. But I hear the same contrary language in the Gospel today. *Don't look for God to come on the clouds, with trumpets and archangels*, says Jesus: *expect him like people watching for a burglar!*

### A Whole Way Of Life

You can let human burglars get to you, and start living a new kind of life. You can start governing your actions by burglars' rules, until you find yourself imprisoned in your own defences, brassbound in a narrow place., accidentally setting your alarm off when you go downstairs for a drink of water. We say it's not healthy, that you've got to get over the fear of persecution, and look for the good

times. True to form, the Gospel says the very reverse. If you want to be secure, you've got to start thinking like the divine burglar, so that when he "breaks through the wall of your house", you're awake and waiting for him. So what else does the Gospel tell us of this God who comes "like a thief in the night"? The answer to that is very surprising.

### Waiting At Table

When the master returns, in the watches of the night, and finds his servants awake and waiting for him, what will he do? *He will sit them down at the table, put on an apron, and wait on them.* Curiouser and curiouser! I can't help going immediately, in my mind, to the Last Supper, where Jesus washes his disciples' feet, and tells them: *I, the Lord and Master, I am among you as one who serves.* This burglar breaks our house, not to rob us, but so that he can get inside and serve us. One of our worst qualities is that of being incapable of being served. Self-sufficiency is a great destroyer of families, friendships and communities. Many a poor marriage has foundered on self-sufficiency; for nothing demeans people more than being told that their help is not wanted. People sometimes think God is a hard and demanding Master, that he is a fountain of terrifying and unkeepable commandments, that he is a moral tyrant. Nothing could be further from the truth. God is a giver of unimaginable gifts. He is a tremendous lover, he is a divine servant. It is in order to get past our disbelief that he has to burgle his way in, under our defences, past our prejudices. When we are totally undefended, we shall be, as we say, *at his mercy.* It is then that he will show us exactly what his mercy is like.

### What About Us?

Our job, in all our relationships, but above all in the Church, is to be that sort of burglar: to get past people's sad defence systems, and then to show that we were worthy to be greeted at the front door. What we actually do in cold-hearted Britain is to stay outside each other's lives, and to let each other alone. People who are left alone die, slowly, of loneliness. We should adopt that divine plan, to unwire the alarm, to prise open the windows, and to get in where people are. Maybe what they call their safe refuge is really their prison.

*Fr Philip*