

Thought for the Day 22nd June - John Reed

I came across a story about a fire chief, which was credited to the great Danish philosopher and theologian Søren Kierkegaard. Turning to that source of all wisdom and knowledge, the internet, I discovered (surprise, surprise!) that the story is repeated on many sites, in a variety of similar but ever-so-slightly altered forms, much like an endless game of “Chinese whispers”. Eventually, I found the original story, as published in a volume entitled *Provocations: Spiritual Writings of Kierkegaard*. In chapter 46, “What Says the Fire Chief?” Kierkegaard describes an outbreak of fire:

Hardly is the cry of “Fire!” heard before a crowd of people rush to the spot. One has a pitcher, another a basin, the third a squirter. All of them are nice, cordial, sympathetic, helpful people, so eager to help put out the fire.

But what says the Fire Chief? The Fire Chief, although normally a very pleasant and polite person, says, or rather he shouts, “Oh, to [expletive deleted] with all your pitchers and squirters!” Yes, the Fire Chief is generally a very pleasant and polite person who knows how to show everyone the respect due him, but at a fire he is rather different. He says, “Where the [expletive deleted] is the police force?” And when some policemen arrive he says to them, “Get rid of these [expletive deleted] people with their pitchers and squirters. And if they won’t yield to words, then give them a whack or two, so that we may be free of them and get down to work.”

At a fire the whole way of looking at things is not the same as in everyday life. This is quite natural, for a fire is a serious thing, and whenever things are really serious, honest good intentions never suffice. No, seriousness applies an entirely different law: either/or.

Kierkegaard then goes on to apply this either/or principle to our spiritual lives:

Wherever true seriousness is called for, the law is this: either/or. Nothing is more detestable and disgusting, both betraying and bringing about a deeper demoralization than this: to somehow want a little part in that which must be either/or, all or nothing ...

We read Jesus’ own version of the “either/or” principle in Mark 8:34-35:

Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it.

The challenge to us today is the same as it was to his first hearers back then: which group will we belong to: “the crowd” or “his disciples”. Will we be interested, well-meaning by-standers, or will we be prepared to take up our crosses and follow him?