

9th July 2021

Certainty

**“I maintain that two and two would continue to make four,
in spite of the whine of the amateur for three,
or the cry of the critic for five.”**

James McNeill Whistler, Whistler v Ruskin, Art and Art Critics

What are you certain of? In the “Complete Works of Benjamin Franklin”, published in between 1887 and 1888, the editor, John Bigelow, records Franklin’s oft-quoted affirmation in his letter to a friend, M Leroy, in 1789:

In this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes.

Now that’s out of the way, what certainties are you left with? Of course, James McNeill Whistler is right. No matter what, two and two will continue to make four. No whine or cry from amateur or critic will make the answer different. But I’ll leave that kind of certainty to the accountants. Because I’m thinking more of certainty in terms of belief.

So, I want to make two suggestions: the first is that if we ever get to certainty in our faith, our belief-system will become stagnant and may even die. A bold statement? Maybe. But faith should never be about a conclusion, a destination, but always about a journey of learning and growth. When faith becomes pure, defined, absolute, then it becomes no more or less than a codified system we subscribe to. It has lost its heart.

Secondly, when I look at the words of “The Committal” in the service for “The Burial for the Dead” in the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer*, I find these familiar and well-used phrases:

Forasmuch as it hath pleased Almighty God ... to take unto himself the soul of our dear [brother] here departed, we therefore commit [his] body to the ground, earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust, in sure and certain hope of the Resurrection to eternal life, through our Lord Jesus Christ ...

There are parts of that which I may return to at another time. But today, I hold onto “sure and certain hope”.

John Stuart Mill, the 19th century philosopher, wrote in *On Liberty* in 1859: “There is no such thing as absolute certainty, but there is assurance sufficient for the purposes of human life.” “Sure and certain hope” is that assurance for me, my certainty that two and two continue to make four!

A prayer for today

Certain? No. Certain? Yes. Sufficient? Always. Amen.