

March 26, 2023

John 11:17-27

“Realities”

Pilgrim Lutheran Church
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Decatur, Illinois 62526

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Harry Blamires was an English Anglican Theologian, literary critic, and novelist. He was once head of the English Department at King Alfred's College in Winchester, England. He died in 2017 at the age of 101. Writing after World War II, and please keep in mind this was some 77 year ago, he stated:

A curse of contemporary Christendom has been the replacement of traditional theology by a new system which we may call "Twentieth-century Sentimental Theology." Sentimental theology has invented a God: it insists that he is a God of love, and implies that it is therefore his eternal concern that a thumping good time should be had by all. Are we in the dumps? Pray to this god, and, at a word, he restores us to SELF-CONFIDENT buoyancy... (Modern Reformation).

Keep in mind that Blamires was writing during the happy days of victory and the pursuit of the "good life" after the Great Depression and World War II. That time was the beginning of creating a type of heaven on earth. And this was the era when church/Bible talk of sin and grace became frowned upon as negative and unnecessary. That era led to the upheavals of the 60s and the 70s and everything else that has followed and reached our time, where the church has become more and more faithless, powerless, and useless. What have we gained from the so-called "quest for the good life?" Lots of anxiety, fear, violence, immorality, loss of freedoms, hopelessness, and a horrible uncertainty about the future. This Sunday of Lent were here to stay in touch with **Realities**.

In an article which appeared in Modern Reformation some years ago, Michael Horton wrote: "Grace is amazing because it saves wretches, not because it puts a final polish on nice people." How true! You can't be saved if you're not lost. You can't be freed unless you are enslaved. You see, that's exactly what Jesus is addressing in our text: this thing called "death." Paul writes that "the wages of sin is death," and that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Sin is lawlessness against God - it's rebellion that brings guilt and devastating consequences.

The church cannot avoid the truth of sin. It cannot avoid the truth that even we as Christians struggle with our wretched desires every single day of our lives. Lawlessness and rebellion are always trying to take over our lives. If we try to downplay that truth, then we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. Paul reminds us in Romans seven: "For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh, for I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out." He then goes on to say: "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" And then he ends the chapter by exclaiming: "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!"

What this unbelieving world needs, and what we Christians constantly need, is a heavy dose of the **Realities**. Christ came into this world to expose our sin and to give us knowledge of salvation in the forgiveness of sins. Otherwise, the words of Jesus in Revelation (22:15) will be applied to all of us: "Outside are the dogs [wild dogs] and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood (lies)." This is the entire direction of Scripture: a persistent,

relentless look at this fallen, unbelieving world, the Christian fight with sinful desires and, with that, the love of God in Christ to forgive those who are sorry for their sins and look to Jesus and his cross for forgiveness. **Realities.** The fact is that the Christian church is not on earth to offer people “a thumping good time.” It’s to present the love of God in Jesus’ cross and empty tomb. The church has the gospel and sacraments whereby we meet Jesus who forgives our sins and saves us from death and hell.

And with that, we are brought to the account of Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha. Messengers had been sent to inform Jesus that Lazarus was dying. Nevertheless, he did not race to see Lazarus but remained in the place where he was for two more days before he began his travel to Bethany. By the time that Jesus arrives, Lazarus had been in the tomb for four days. Martha expresses her dismay that it took so long for Jesus to arrive. If he had been there, he could have kept Lazarus from dying. Nevertheless, she adds the following: “But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you.” Our gospel lesson records:

Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” Martha said to him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?” She said to him, “Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world.”

When Jesus says, “Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die,” he is setting forth beautiful and mysterious **Realities.** Jesus is the great “I am” who is able to have mercy and compassion - even raise the dead. A believer dies and yet he does not. Even the physical death of the Christian cannot take away the forever life that Jesus gives. The raising of Lazarus proves this to be true. When a Christian dies, he does not even taste the forever death in which all deserve, because Jesus has tasted that death on the cross, as it says in Hebrews 2:9. He tasted death for everyone. And his physical and spiritual sufferings have saved both our bodies and souls. Nothing will be lost but sin, death, and hell. We will be restored and made new. As Francis Pieper wrote:

The believers will have to endure death before they enter the *ecclesia triumphans* (church triumphant). But death has lost its terrors. The Savior assures them that when they die, they will not perish. He who believes on Him does not lose his life in death, but through it enters into life. “He that believeth in Me, though he were dead, yet shall he live (John 11:25).”

Scripture tells us very little about the state of our souls in the interval between death and our resurrection from the dead. The best that we can say is what Jesus said to the thief on the cross when he was going to die. He said to him, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise (Luke 23:43).” Or, as Paul remarks about death in Phil. 1:23 - we will be with Christ, which is “far better” than remaining here in this life.

It is simply staggering when you read the words of John 11:38-44. It is amazing to consider that John is the writer of the gospel by the power of the Holy Spirit, and he saw this with his own eyes:

Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days." Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out." The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

These are the **Realities** that push back all "Sentimental Theology," and the idea that the church's main job is to provide for everyone with a "thumping good time." The issue is sin and death. The solution is in Jesus Christ. He is the gift of God. His words are not fiction. They are the **Realities**. He says, "I am the resurrection and the life!" Do you believe this? I hope you do! It's the difference between eternal life and forever death!

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott