



The Calling Forth of Lazarus

Giotto, Lower Basilica of St Francis, Assisi

The Calling Forth, or Raising, of Lazarus is a powerful image. It speaks to the heart of the human existential condition, with its hopes for prolonging earthly life, or new life after death. But it also speaks to the human desire for a better life, one lived in greater light, freed from the bondage of those things that bind us tightly and prevent us from exercising an appropriate human freedom.

This fresco, painted on the wall of the chapel depicting scenes from the life of St Mary Magdalen, encompasses several moments in the sequence leading up to Lazarus emerging alive from the tomb in which he was laid several days earlier, as described in the Gospel of John, chapter 11.

Jesus was clearly very fond of Lazarus; when informing Him of Lazarus' illness, Mary and Martha, his sisters, say: 'Lord, the one you love is very sick.' When Jesus finally comes to Bethany several days later, Martha goes out to meet him and says – rather reproachfully, perhaps - 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' Mary says exactly the same thing when she arrives at the place where Jesus is. Jesus is deeply moved by the grief both around Him and also within Himself. Giotto here depicts the two sisters at Jesus' feet, Lazarus' tomb is opened, and he comes out.

The scene is full of wonderful detail. The surrounding landscape is rocky, with trees growing amongst the rocks, and Lazarus' tomb was clearly cut out of the rock, much as Jesus' own one would be later. To the left of the picture stands Jesus, a little set apart from his disciples ranged behind him, with John 'the disciple whom Jesus loved' – much as He loved Lazarus – immediately behind.

Our eyes are drawn to Jesus as he stands majestically, upright but slightly bent forward, with His right hand extended towards the tomb, two fingers pointed towards Lazarus in sign of blessing. From His mouth come the words, painted in gold: 'Foras veni Lazare' – 'Come forth, Lazarus'. And to the right of the painting is Lazarus, still swaddled in the burial wraps, face still without animation, but with his eyes fixed on Jesus, whose eyes meet his; this produces an electrifying dynamic, as the two gaze at each other across the scene, Jesus' eyes and outstretched hand seeming to draw the previously dead man forward.

Around Lazarus, two people are carrying away the cover of the tomb; one seems to be black – could this be an allusion to Simon of Cyrene, who later helped to carry Jesus' Cross? Others are helping Lazarus out of the tomb – some holding their cloaks around their noses, indicating the smell that would have come from the dead body – and are unwrapping the burial wraps. The figure to the left of that group has his hands raised to depict the astonishment that they all no doubt felt at the sight of one who had been dead coming back to life.

Lazarus is the man who is also part of an ordinary human family who cares deeply for him. They have lived, loved, and struggled together. They are people with similar character traits as us and our own families: sometimes like Martha, perhaps veering towards the obsessive and pushy – yet still caring always for those whom she loves; sometimes like Mary – breaking down, unable to cope amid the confusion and sorrow, yet still lovingly doing her best.

And into this family walks Jesus and he becomes the centre of this family not as a walk-in part in this incident at which Lazarus is raised to life, but over time he becomes part of this family, and we're told He loves Lazarus deeply.

And we can imagine that Jesus is gradually welcomed into their lives: and there is a process of transformation to greater unity, greater faith, and greater love.

So we are invited to see ourselves as we are, with all our sinfulness, all our hardness of heart, the annoying aspects of our personality, and to welcome Christ in to get to know us: to be honest about our everyday struggles, whether in our families, at work, or wherever, and to be prepared to allow Jesus to be right there in the middle of us, and to know He comes to us as the One Who loves us, and who wants to stay with us.

The death of Lazarus is a reminder to us of the price of sin. But the raising of Lazarus, a great miracle, eludes to Our Lord's own Resurrection and the salvation and freedom from sin and death that this brings.

Note, however, that Lazarus comes out in his burial clothes – unlike Our Lord who on Easter morn is re-clothed in a glorious body. Lazarus is unbound and returned to life with his family, which will involve pain, suffering, sin, but he knows deeply how the Lord who loves him deeply is with him constantly. And when we encounter the Lord He constantly wants to unbind us, to call us back into His Family, that is to the Church, and there - in the sacraments which mediate Christ's Presence – and in particular the Sacrament of Confession – of Penance and Reconciliation – the sacrament which unbinds us and again and again, returns us to His Family strengthened for the earthly pilgrimage.

Finally, imagine the scene of this unbinding: it's worth thinking about. Is Lazarus now come to life unbinding himself slowly? No – that's actually impossible – he needs to be unbound. And that's worth pondering. In our own culture we hear much about self-help, detox, rehab, spiritual spring-clean on our own – but for us this is impossible. Our own efforts are a necessary precondition – we need to make an effort - but we are unbound of our sins and restored to friendship with God by Christ through the sacrament and in the Church for the Church.

Questions to reflect on

- What details does the artist include that help us know that Lazarus is being called out?
- Look at each of the characters in the picture and their reactions to this unexpected “calling forth” by Jesus. Describe the varied reactions.
- Have you seen or experienced any of these reactions when someone is “called” by Jesus.
- Lazarus was called out when nobody else expected this to happen. Can you think of examples of God calling (you or others) at totally unexpected times or in seemingly impossible ways?

A PRAYER FROM CHRISTINA ROSETTI

Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth.
Grant us ears to hear,
eyes to see,
wills to obey,
hearts to love;
then declare what thou wilt,
reveal what thou will,
command what thou wilt,
demand what thou wilt.
Amen.

A PRAYER FROM WILLIAM BRIGHT

O God by whom the meek are guided in judgement,
and light riseth up in the darkness for the godly;
grant us, in all our doubts and uncertainties,
the grace to ask what thou wouldst have us do;
that the Spirit of Wisdom may save us from all false choices
and that in thy light we may see light,
and in thy straight path may not stumble;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

A PRAYER FROM J COX

Lord of eternity: Call us
Call us out of captivity.
When we are captivated by values that are from the world and not from you
- Proclaim release.

Call us out of blindness.
When we do not see needs in the world you long for your people to meet
- Restore our sight.

Call us into freedom.
When we do not recognise ways that oppress
- Release our limited vision.

Lord of eternity:
Call us and anoint us for your service.
Amen.