



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 is brought 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, out of the darkness of the tomb. Some men are helping Lazarus out of the tomb – holding their cloaks around their noses, indicating the smell that would have come from the dead body – and are unwrapping the bindings, redolent of sin and death. 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. What looks like two children are moving the stone door of the tomb away, one black and one white. In the period in which Giotto painted this, it was a legal convention that it took two witnesses to verify an event, and often children were called to be eye - witnesses of important events, so that they could give a valid testimony to the next generation.

The whole scene speaks of love, of intimacy, of redemption, of new life. Jesus calls each one of us out of the dark tomb of our sin, which leads to death, into the light of His love, and friendship with Him and with the Father who sent Him. Just as Jesus called out Lazarus by name, so He who knows us intimately calls us by name, too. Sometimes when an anaesthetist is trying to bring round someone who has had an operation, he or she will loudly call that person's name, to bring them back to consciousness. In a similar way, Jesus calls us to be fully alive in Him, to allow ourselves to be drawn forward by Him, throwing off the bindings of sin and death – perhaps with the help of others - and to engage with the world around us in a new way.