

We have been using the terms *conversion-transformation* as short hand for the the business of Lent. The RCIA uses *purification and enlightenment* to express the same process. We come to know this season as a definite **journey** - a movement towards the immersion in Christ we are called to in the three day feast of the paschal mystery (The Easter Triduum) and especially to the baptismal waters of Easter night, for it is there that those to be baptised will publicly profess their faith along with those who are already members of the Church, declaring their faith in what the church teaches and then proceeding to the waters of baptism. Those who are already baptised, in churches which accept our credal faith, renew their baptismal promises with the community and then are Confirmed in the Catholic faith. They then prepare to come to the Lord's Table.

The format of the **Baptismal Promises** is a *solemn dialogue* of questions and answers. This baptismal faith is affirmed at every Sunday Eucharist either in the form of the questions and answers or in the form of the Nicene Creed (so called because it was formulated in the year 381 at the Council of Nicea).

The Nicene Creed is the most widely accepted and used brief statement of the Christian Faith. In liturgical churches, it is said every Sunday as part of the Liturgy. The even more brief *Apostles' Creed* is also permitted in our Catholic liturgy. It contains the phrase *He descended into hell*. The Lazarus story this Sunday can be actually seen as a foretelling of the Holy Saturday story of Easter, when Jesus himself *goes into the tomb*, and to Hell itself to *unbind* everyone and *let them go*. The unbinding of people is at the heart of message of the Gospel, and proves Jesus to be more than a mere rabbi or a great teacher. He is "Saviour of the world", Messiah, Divine One, Deathless One. He is the great "I am"; he does the work of Yahweh.

The Office Hymn for Holy Saturday sings:

*His cross stands empty
in a world grown silent,
through hours of anguish
and of painful dread;
In stillness, earth awaits the resurrection,
while Christ goes down
to summon out the dead.*

*He summons Adam and his generation,
brings light where darkness
only ever seemed;
He frees and claims his own
so long held captive,
who with the living faithful are redeemed.*

(Tune: Abide with me)



Connecting with the Old Testament reading this Sunday

The short passage from Ezekiel comes from the same book which contains an astounding vision of the Most High God in glory in the temple – similar to those of Isaiah and Daniel. The vision is of the one who cannot die, who is Deathless, and who is coming to meet his people. "I will put my spirit in you". This prophecy speaks of what is happening in this Sunday's gospel. Yahweh ("I am") is drawing close, the word of God, made flesh. His name is Jesus ("God saves"), the name which is above every name. The Deathless One draws close and reveals his identity by means of signs which give life, which "well up to eternal life". The effect of the signs is to provide real knowledge, true sight, wholeness, completion of creation. Think of the dynamic of last Sunday's Gospel: the blind man was given sight in the midst of the confusion and criticism of those who *thought they knew*. True knowledge and sight become apparent. This Sunday, Jesus, the antithesis of death, the "Deathless One", reveals life in the midst of human grief.

Jesus is faced with the human and painful reality of death. Lazarus, a dear friend is dead. Jesus weeps because of the great loss and emptiness he experiences in the death of his friend, but with a loud voice, to overpower the clamour of grief he raises Lazarus to life. This is his "work". Jesus is always about the **works** of God. All the signs and wonders that Jesus worked focus on the great abundance and generous compassion of God the Father. Jesus restores to life that which appeared dead; he gave hope where hope seemed hopeless; a vision for tomorrow where grief seemed to be the only answer.

Lazarus returned from the dead. The breath of life flowed through his whole human being. Yet, this is a different coming back from the dead from that of Jesus after the resurrection. The corpse of Lazarus was resuscitated. But Lazarus would die again. Lazarus walked again with his family and friends: we can presume that his life was changed by the whole experience, yet he would die again. He was the same man revived from death as he was before he was revived. In his resurrection, Jesus is totally transformed and he becomes the Lord of Life, never to die again. His was no longer a body of the earth. The resurrection is God's way of saying "yes" to Jesus, God's way of confirming and everything of Jesus' life and ministry.

In the days of Lent, in preparation for the Passover the church is called to discover where she is "bound up", (like Lazarus), where grief overtakes her, where she has lost hope, where she is "dead"and then to allow the grace of resurrection which breathes through her to renew her, so that the Passover feast can be fully entered into. This session hopefully explores the Lazarus story in order to draw conclusions to help prepare us for a "better than ever" celebration of the Passover feast.

Lazarus, in being raised from the dead is a **sign** of God's presence. We have an even greater **sign** in the resurrection of Jesus. In his resurrection, the possibility of new and transformed life is available to us all. Like Lazarus, all of us will have to face death: but even now, death still faces us, for death is the result of sin which binds us, blocks us, or hinders us. In John's scheme of things, after Jesus gives the seventh sign, he becomes the sign himself!

Connecting to our personal situation

Often the death that stalks us each day is simply pride, or our desire to hold a grudge, or to refuse to modify our point of view, or to let go of the zeal for the faith which we once had; perhaps we have been drained by sorrow or failure and just wonder *where* God is; perhaps our dreams of what we can be have dwindled. Whatever our situation, as with Lazarus, Jesus is saying to us in Lent, "Come out, be unbound, live the new life!"

Looking towards Easter, the feast of our New Life

From the first centuries, the Sunday nearest the feast of Passover became the time for Baptism. The stories told of Israel "passing over" from slavery to freedom and of Jesus "passing over" from death to life. His baptism of passion and death and resurrection surrounded the action of the church in baptising new members with water and the Holy Spirit. New Christians were "passing over" from old way to new ways, sometimes from ways of slavery and death to ways of life and freedom. Because this action and this decision were not taken lightly, there was an immediate time of preparation. This is the origin of our Easter Triduum.

For personal reflection:

Think about Lazarus in the tomb, wrapped in cloth. Since last Lent/ Easter, have you felt in any way entombed, or bound up and not able to rise up and live life in a new way? What keeps you from coming *out of the tomb* when Jesus calls your name? Are you aware of his call, knowing that he speaks not always with a loud booming voice but in the quiet of our hearts? What is he calling you to as this Lent progresses and as Holy Week draws nearer?



In-

spiration from this Sunday's Liturgy

*As true man, he wept for Lazarus his friend;
as eternal God, he raised him from the tomb,
just as, taking pity on the human race,
he leads us, by sacred mysteries, to new life.*

Connecting to our Lenten journey of conversion-transformation

This Sunday we proclaim in the Gospel the final act of Jesus in the "trilogy" of the RCIA-focussed Lenten Sundays—after the the encounter with the woman of Samaria and the healing of the man born blind. The narrative this Sunday is also the last (and most powerful) of the **seven** signs given by Jesus in the Gospel of John - the raising of Lazarus from death. This action of Jesus is the *final straw* for the Jewish authorities, who now decide Jesus definitely must be done away with. (They will seek the death of Lazarus too.)

The people, through his signs, have been on a journey of faith to recognise him as the Divine One, the true *Logos*, Word of the Father, the light of the world. Groups and individuals have acknowledged him. Yet the Jewish authorities, despite his signs, see him as a troublemaker, and blasphemer, as one who identifies himself as Son of God, Yahweh—I am. He and his message, they believe, must be destroyed. We will enter the into scene of the raising of Lazarus and try to discern where God is leading us as the feast of Christ's (and our) Passover approaches.

