

## **Candlemas Sermon 2021**

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I find building sites fascinating, but it's the early stages that are the best in my opinion because once the walls have gone up, the rest of the work goes on mostly hidden from sight.

The first thing to happen, of course, is the foundations. Things like giant corkscrews drill deep holes, then huge steel girders are driven firmly into the underlying layers with a pile driver and concreted in.

All this provides a firm foundation for even the highest building.

When we come to this morning's Gospel reading, we're looking at a building site: Luke is beginning his story, and he's busy laying foundations. Each of the stories in the first three chapters of Luke's Gospel is like a piling driven deep into the solid ground of the Old Testament.

Let's look at some of those stories: first there is Zechariah: a priest, and so descended from a line of priests, as was his wife, Elizabeth. He was patiently and faithfully carrying out the duties of the temple as set out in the Torah, when he has a thoroughly Old Testament experience – an encounter with God's messenger, Gabriel. From Gabriel, Zechariah receives a message that looks both backwards and forwards, because it promises the fulfilment of God's ancient promises. A son will be born to restore Israel to the Lord in the spirit of Elijah.

When the son is indeed born, Zechariah is released to sing God's praise, rejoicing in the fulfilment of promise, and looking forward to the time when this child will go before the Lord to prepare his way, the voice crying in the wilderness which God promised through Isaiah.

In the meantime, Gabriel has visited Mary, who is a descendent of King David, as is her betrothed, Joseph. This message too is about fulfilment of God's promise to restore the throne of David into a never-ending kingdom.

Mary's response is also to sing with praise – the song we call the Magnificat. She too rejoices that God is fulfilling his promise to Abraham, remembering the poor and oppressed, and preparing their relief from the rich, proud and powerful. Her song is firmly rooted in the Old Testament, drawing deeply on Hannah's song when Samuel was born – a song which Mary would, of course, have known very well.

Now we come to this morning's story. Mary and Joseph come to the Temple to do what was required by the law of Moses. Although it's quite rare in today's thinking, the law specified a ceremony of purification after childbirth. The law also laid down how every firstborn had to be dedicated to the Lord, and redeemed, in the case of a firstborn child, by

the offering of a sacrifice.

Luke is making sure we know that Mary and Joseph were following the Old Testament law properly. But then something unexpected happens: Simeon arrives, not led by an angel this time, but by the Holy Spirit. And surprise, surprise he sings a song! Simeon's song is the one we call the Nunc Dimittis, and I'll come back to it in a moment.

Luke gives us a few other stories, too: Jesus' circumcision, Jesus debating in the Temple at age twelve, John the Baptist's message, Jesus' baptism and temptation. All laying the foundation of who Jesus is, connecting him with history, and pointing to what he is going to do.

Finally, at the end of chapter three, after these stories, Luke presents us with Jesus' genealogy tracing Jesus' ancestry back to the very beginning of humanity, and at the same time hinting at his true nature, as the genealogy ends "son of Adam, son of God". You can't drive a foundation much deeper than that!

So Luke is making it crystal clear that Jesus did not come out of nowhere. He was not some random person with delusions, he was not proclaiming some unknown deity or some completely new message. Jesus' life and work is deeply anchored in the history of God's people, and of humanity itself. He is the son of David, son of Abraham, son of Adam, Son of God.

This is Luke's building site: he has laid the foundations, and begins to build on them the story of Jesus, and then in the book of the Acts of the Apostles, the story of the church.

In a physical building, we can often see, by looking at the foundations, something of the shape the building will eventually take, and it's the same here in Luke.

Luke's writing covers the first years of the early church, including its expansion to the gentiles, and there are signs of this in the foundation he is laying.

Zechariah's song and Mary's song are songs of the Old Testament, the first Covenant. They see God fulfilling promises to the people of Israel, the descendants of Abraham, the throne of David. Simeon's song is that, but it's also something new. In Simeon's song, Jesus is a light to lighten the Gentiles as well as being the glory of God's people Israel.

Just as the leading of the Holy Spirit is a new theme in the construction for which Luke is so carefully laying the foundations, so the gentiles are an unexpected inclusion. This is a sign pointing towards those many stories in Acts where gentiles are welcomed into God's people as part of the new covenant which Jesus brings into being.

Of course, Luke was not just writing the story, but living it. He was not just building a narrative, but was himself part of building the church, the new community which embodies the new covenant.

That building work still going on, and we are all living stones for God to use as part of it. We build on the work of previous generations.

It's important to remember that the church we see around us – and by the church I mean the people who are the church family - didn't come from nowhere but rather that Christianity is a historic faith with very deep foundations. This should give us confidence as we live out our beliefs and share our faith with our neighbours.

Let's, then, remember to stay in touch with our foundations: to continue to read the Old Testament scriptures as well as the New; to pay due respect to the traditions we have received from previous generations of Christians.

But let's also remember that although the past is important, it's not all-important. Like Simeon, we must remain open to the leading of the Holy Spirit, and be ready for God the architect to introduce new themes into what he is building. To be part of the growth of this church family in this generation.

And let's remember that just as we look back to previous generations and honour our past, we remember that what we are doing now in our communities will be the basis for future generations of Christians to build on.

Amen