

The call of the prophets has been unmistakable these past few weeks—with Jeremiah, Baruch and Zephaniah on Sundays, Isaiah throughout many of the weekdays. On this final Sunday of Advent, we encounter the prophet Micah, who draws our attention towards a *place*, an insignificant village called Bethlehem, home to probably about 300 people at the time of Jesus. Sadly, Bethlehem is becoming very little again today. Christians make up barely 2% of the total population of the Holy Land, compared to about 18% just sixty years ago. This should concern us all because of the spiritual significance of Bethlehem.

While Joseph and Mary journeyed to Bethlehem, it was in order to be enrolled for the census; quite frankly, for the purposes of taxation. Was this merely a coincidence? Might we see in God's mysterious providence a simple, even *worldly* way to bring Mary and Joseph to the place mentioned in Micah's prophecy? First mentioned in the Scriptures in connection with the death of Rachel, Bethlehem existed since the time of Jacob, and was the home of Ruth (after whom the Biblical book is named), Jesse (David's father) and King David himself (1 Samuel 16:1; 17:12). It was the place where he was anointed king (1 Samuel 16:4-13). Though it remained a small town, its significance as the place of Jesus' birth is foremost in our hearts today.

Micah wrote his prophecy in the first half of the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC and was a contemporary of Isaiah, though not as well known. He was a rural man, disdaining many things of the city, whether Jerusalem or Samaria. He is the prophet of the simple and poor people who were often exploited by the rich and powerful. I suspect that his prediction of "big things" from the little town of Bethlehem was seen by many as just another feeble attempt to denigrate the larger cities. The rivalry between urban and rural culture is hardly a 21<sup>st</sup> century phenomenon!

But here they were wrong. In this prophecy, Christians see the very birthplace of our Savior being foreshadowed. For those of faith, this is a bold prediction come true, one that absolutely matters. Micah never lived to see the truth of the words spoken by God through him. That would be left for centuries later. But Bethlehem would indeed be great.

Greatness cannot merely be a by-product of geography—the promised greatness of Bethlehem will continue only if we live its message today. It must be a city of peace, not a forgotten pin on a map. Many of the greatest Christian writers the Church has known were born in villages that have little Christian significance whatsoever today, in particular in the north African Christian communities, now predominantly Muslim.

If I were to be moved to visit the birthplace of my favorite theologian, St. Augustine, I would be sorely disappointed. Located in modern-day Algeria, the site of the small Roman provincial village of Tagaste has yet even to be excavated; it is a victim of urbanization, a mere afterthought, a city park engulfed by a city of 150,000. But he is not forgotten.

Think about when you are driving on an interstate or a state highway, and you see the large brown signs indicating an historic marker ahead—Do you ever stop? Perhaps, but many times we just keep going. Whatever it is, it does not pique our curiosity enough to stop passing through. Absent a lived faith, Bethlehem could become a mere brown sign on the side of the road, a mere footnote that goes ignored.

This little town was mentioned 45 times in the Old Testament, and numerous times in the New Testament as well. Places do matter; they are not insignificant details. If Micah's words are to ring true today, it will be because Christians of every time and place have taken their calling seriously to be witnesses to what the prophet recorded for our benefit. "O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie." We may add, "how much we honor thy memory and pass on thy saving message of peace and joy."