

Every one of our readings emphasises the importance of place and the particular experiences of human lives. The prophet Micah speaks of the little town Bethlehem of Ephrathah, a place only significant because it's where David the son of Jesse came from to become king over Israel. Like Micah, the prophet Isaiah sees in King David a figure from the past that promises better for the future, and that through a particular person born at first as a little child there might come endless peace and justice and righteousness, a fulfilment of what David's kingdom might mean for his people.

Our two readings from the Gospel of Luke emphasise again and again the importance of place and of the particular experiences of human lives. The decree was made by Augustus, not Tiberius; Quirinius was governor of Syria not Saturninus. Joseph went from Nazareth, not Capernaum, to Bethlehem, because that's where his family came from. He took with him Mary, there was no room in the inn, there were shepherds in the fields watching over their flock – and as Jesus pointed out shepherds are very concerned for the wellbeing of every particular one of their sheep.

Human lives *are* very particular, of such-and-such a time and such-and-such a place. They are rooted, which gives us a start in life but which can also limit our options. We are as physical as a piece of clay, but in the words of one of the poems we are hearing this evening, "Deep within the clay.../ do you feel the pulse?"; and in words from the other, there's a heart of heaven beating in the earth: there's a heart of heaven beating in us.

These last two years we have been made much more aware of how limited our freedom can be – how rooted, how locked-down our lives can be. We have been made much more aware of how being in one place means we can't be in another –bringing isolation and separation from loved ones, and for some bringing isolation and separation despite sickness and death.

But at Christmas we remember how every particular place, wherever we are rooted, can be a place of transformation, as the poet Scott Cairns says, “a bright nativity”:

“The wall comes down.

And—do you feel the pulse?—we all become
the kindled kindred of a King...”

Jesus's birth marked the start of a life which for Christians fulfils the particular hopes of the prophets Micah and Isaiah. Jesus's birth marked the start of a life which has shed light on all people, and which has transformed our world. Jesus came to share his life with us, so that we *all* realise how we are children of God, called to transform our place and time with light, to do what we can for peace and justice and righteousness.

As the pandemic enters a more serious phase it is good for us to remember how God came to us in Jesus, a particular man in a particular time and place, to show us how *every* particular place and time, wherever anyone is, can be somewhere graceful and truthful; and is the focus of God's love. Amen.