Today is the last time I will preach at Christ Church, at least as Archdeacon of Oxford and Canon of this great Cathedral. Over the last six and a half years I’ve preached here over 150 times. So the first thing I need to say is Thank you! Thank you for listening and paying attention! Thank you for your comments and questions and encouragements over the years. Thank you too for your singing, your music, and for our shared life of worship and prayer and Christian commitment.

The Cathedral is open for worship 365 days of the year, beginning each morning at 7.15 with Morning Prayer and Communion, followed by prayers every hour led by our Day Chaplains, and then 6pm Evensong when usually one of our splendid choirs lift their voices, and our hearts and minds, to God at the close of the day. As the hymn says, ‘the voice of prayer is never silent’, and in this place that is true. Next Sunday, December 15th, I’m down to preside at 11 and then there will be Farewell Drinks after Evensong at 6. I’d love to see you there if you can make it. It will be a wrench for me to leave.

So why go? Why am I going to be a Bishop? Why leave this beautiful lively city to live in a challenging and deprived part of the West Midlands as Bishop of Dudley?

Well I’m going because the church has asked me to. The church has called me to this particular post. I would be much easier to say no, but I have no good reason to, and I do see how I might be needed there. But more deeply I’m going to be a bishop because I feel that God has called me. How do you listen for God? I try and listen, and just sometimes I feel God does get through to me quite directly.

Ten years ago I’d been invited to a Bishop’s post, for all kinds of reasons it wasn’t right at the time and I said no.

Soon after I was on holiday with my family, we were visiting Ely Cathedral and my heart was troubled. I was asking God to show me, what I should do if the call came again. Just then I walked into the chapel of St Etheldreda, patron saint of Ely, whose saint’s day falls
on my birthday. Inside was a statue of her, and she was holding a shepherd’s crook. And in my head I heard the words, ‘Be a Bishop in my church.’ So this time round I had to obey!

Today’s first bible reading was from the book of Amos. Amos had heard a call from God to be a prophet, to speak for God in the world. He’d been called from his peaceful life as a farmer, to prophesy doom and destruction to the King and his rich followers. Not an easy call.

Amos was no religious professional. When challenged by Amaziah the high priest he says, ‘I am no prophet, nor a prophet’s son; I am a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore trees.’ But Amos knew that he was doing what God wanted him to do.

You see in those days the king and his nobles would pray for peace and prosperity to continue, all the while ignoring the hidden cost of their comfort. The terrible disparity between rich and poor that had grown ever larger. The lack of mercy and justice between people living alongside each other, but living totally separate lives. Most were poor, some lived in a bubble of luxury. This bubble Amos had to pop. This lifestyle Amos had to challenge.

‘Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory, and lounge on the couches; Do they not grieve over the state of the nation?!’ ‘They trample the heads of the poor into the dust of the earth.’

I recently spent a day in the place I will soon be living and working in the post-industrial sprawl called the Black Country to the west of Birmingham. Once the heart of the industrial revolution, now a symbol of manufacturing decline in this country.

Dudley is only 80 miles away, but I was struck by the huge disparity between rich and poor in this country. Not just lacking wealth, but opportunity, beauty and culture, with street after street of boarded up shops.

Where factories once stood and people found work and identity, there are now just open spaces, with cars bypassing communities whose people have nowhere left to go. People born in Dudley on average live 10 or even 20 years less than people born in Oxfordshire, with poorer food, and longer waits for hospitals and doctors. But they are people too, with hopes and dreams and human longings just like you and me.

Amos reminds us that every human being is a child of God. All are created in his image. God is not just for the chosen few, but for everyone. Beautiful worship means nothing if
it is not backed up by just and generous living. Amos was convinced that economic justice wasn’t just a good thing, economic justice was necessary to preserve the nation. When God called him from tending sheep, he had to speak out!

Amos has inspired generations of prophets and believers. John the Baptist followed in his footsteps, called to Prepare the Way of the Lord Jesus.

It’s a calling we all share, each in different ways. What is God calling you to be and to do for him? Will you listen for that this Advent?

As I finish, let’s be quiet for a moment.

Perhaps close your eyes.

In a moment of stillness… let God come close to you,
God who is real. God who knows everything about you.
God who loves you more than you will ever know.

What does God say to you?

What do you… say to him…?