

Farewell Sermon Exeter 18.1.25 Exeter Cathedral 3pm HC
Ps 121, Phil4: 4-9, John 10:7-11

‘The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore.’

When I was going through the ordination selection process, I am not sure that anyone told me how much going out and coming in there would be. How many times we would say hello, and goodbye, how many times we would give our hearts and leave at least a bit of them behind.

When we moved here in 2018, I remember thinking, at the time of the ‘hellos,’ that my heart was going to take a little while to catch up with the rest of me, and was probably trundling along the M5 somewhere. I said this recently to Antonia Tregenza, Licensed Lay Minister at Crediton, and that the reverse was about to happen, that we will be traveling back up the M5 to Stratford on Avon, and my heart will once again be trailing along behind. Yes, she said, I understand, and it will stop for a coffee at Gloucester services! I thought this woman knows me well – my heart would definitely stop there and quite likely to do some shopping at the same time!

Amongst the many charges given to a bishop at their consecration, one is to know their people and to be known by them. In those early months here I visited incumbents in my patch in their vicarages and rectories, getting to know them ... and their dogs (I came to believe very quickly that it was an unwritten rule that a vicar must have a dog in Devon). I also got to know a little of their context – whether city, coast, market town, rural, or as we like to

say, ‘deep rural’. I also got to know the roads and lanes, and how many tractors, horses, cyclists, motorway jams, or potholes, I was likely to encounter on the way.

Being a Bishop is to have a ‘going out and a coming in’ kind of ministry. But then we are a ‘going out and a coming in’ kind of church. Whether in our schools, chaplaincies, parishes or fresh expressions of church, we make an invitation – to come ... to come to the one who is the Good Shepherd, to the one who gives life in all its fulness. We invite people to come to our churches, chapels, cathedral or collective worship; we invite people to come and to meet Jesus, to worship him, to be baptised and confirmed. We are a ‘coming in kind of church’ – offering warm spaces, hospitality, help, support, an inter-generational community built on love and care, on relationship and kindness.

Time and again in my ministry here, as I have travelled from church to church, to schools and chaplaincies, it has been deeply encouraging to see the signs of welcome, the open doors and hearts, invitations made, and the gift of faith in Christ being offered. Your websites, facebook pages and social media interactions make the invitation too – to come and see, to find friends and the hope and peace that only God can give.

Just a few months ago I was taking a service of baptism and confirmation. The vicar had taken seriously the confirmation challenge that +James and I had given: to book us in, in faith, without knowing if there would be any candidates. Not long after making the booking he had a young man call in at the church, no background of faith, who had had a dream about the purpose of his

life, and he came asking what he had to do to be baptised. Another young man came, and then a couple seeking to get married. They formed a small group led by the vicar, looking at the Bible together at what it means to follow Christ. They were baptised and confirmed together. We do our bit in faith – we open the door, we invite, we welcome – and God does God’s bit – the work of transforming hearts and lives.

So, we invite people to ‘come;’ and just as importantly we go, we are a ‘going out’ kind of church ... in our daily lives going to work, to study, to volunteer, out and about in ordinary everyday life, bearing within us the light of Christ. We are intentional in our mission as a church in this diocese, to go where people are, to be with them, to serve the people of Devon with joy. For some, I know, this is at times deeply costly – to be with those on the edge and the margins, to sit with the broken, the sick, the addicted, the dying. To offer prayer, support, help, and hope. We go out to be with the disempowered ... and to be with the powerful alike, to be salt and light, for the good of *all* in our communities.

All this is by way of encouraging you, as I leave, to keep doing what you are doing; to love wherever it is God has called you to be, and to be the ‘coming in and going out’ people of God, living and sharing the life that Jesus gives.

I want to say something about bridges. It is impossible in Tiverton, where I live, to come in or go out without crossing bridges. They cross the rivers, the canal. The railway line. The motorway and other roads. We are so used to them we barely notice them (except

for Bickleigh!) Bridges are essential for connection, communication, and any travel at all. Without them, we would be stuck.

To be a going out and a coming in kind of church we need bridges. Not just with our communities, but with one another. They are bridges of relationship, bridges of love. You may know the phrase ‘Build bridges not walls’ – but for relationships to fail, for church to divide, you don’t need the walls. All you need is that the bridges crumble. Neglect the bridges, and there is no coming and going, we are cut off from one another.

Both Jesus and St Paul have even stronger images – they talk of a vine with many branches, or a body with many parts. We need one another. Our differences are a strength, and it is possible to disagree, to hold different views, and to still hold relationship. Give attention, in these challenging times for the C of E, to the relational bridges. Do not let them crumble, do not give in to division, do not give up on meeting together, on praying for one another; on asking the simple question ‘How are you?’ and listening to the response.

‘Going out and coming in’ is a recurring biblical theme. Solomon in his great prayer as he became king said, ‘I do not know how to go out or come in’ and he asks the Lord for the gift of wisdom. There have been many times in ministry when I have echoed that prayer ‘I don’t know how to go out and come in with all that is going on today!’ And perhaps you sometimes feel the same ... we ask for God’s wisdom, and we do what is ours to do, in his grace.

And so, I finish with this ancient Hebrew Blessing: ‘May the Lord bless *your* going out and your coming in, from this time forth and forevermore. Amen