**The sermon for Rev. Richard Sandland’s first officiating at Holy Communion at St Godwald’s in 03/07/22 given by Revd Canon Alex Vaccaro, Associate Priest in the Kidderminster West Team, and Diocese Dean of Self-Supporting Ministers.**

It’s a great honour and great pleasure to be asked to preach here this morning as Richard celebrates the Eucharist for the first time. Richard and I have known each other for quite a while now and it’s been my privilege to journey with him from tentative explorations of church to communion, confirmation, discernment, training and ordination.

Sometimes in life, you come across people who are inherently holy and religious. People whose faith is so sure, whose belief is so strong that it can never be shaken. People who never doubt what God has in store for them and who know with complete certainty that God has called them to a specific way of life.

And then, sometimes, you meet people like Richard. People who live in the real world, engage with real life and are equally realistic about their faith and their calling. People with doubts and questions but with a deep desire to understand and to meet God.

Yesterday, in the Cathedral, those being ordained priest were charged to go out and share God’s story with the world. Today, in our gospel, Jesus chooses 70 new disciples to do just that. Some of them may have been holy and religious – but I’m willing to bet that most of them would have been pretty ordinary people, just like the five people ordained priest yesterday. People who had lived ordinary, uncomplicated lives until Jesus came along, people who probably never expected to be chosen for a mission of faith, and who were quite likely more than a little nervous about carrying out Jesus’ instructions.

But these 70 go out and do as Jesus has told them. And they return, we’re told, full of joy, elated at the fact that the authority that they had received from Jesus had enabled them to do such wonderful things. They must have felt that their belief in Jesus had given them the power to do just about anything.

But today, 3rd July, is the day on which we remember another, rather different disciple, because 3rd July is St Thomas’s day. Had we used the readings for St Thomas, we would have heard the familiar story of Jesus appearing to the disciples after his resurrection; of Thomas being absent and then reusing to believe unless he saw for himself; and of Jesus appearing again and offering Thomas the chance to touch the wounds of the crucifixion to prove the reality.

It’s a story that contrasts strongly with the obedient faith of the 70 disciples in today’s reading. They went out, did as Jesus said and returned delighted with the outcome. We are impressed with their faith and their deeds. Thomas, on the other hand, is portrayed as a doubter, a sceptic who refused to believe unless he saw for himself, and often as a rather second-rate kind of disciple. But perhaps Thomas gives us just as good a model for discipleship and ministry as the 70 who were sent out.

Very often our Christian faith can be rooted in other people’s experiences and not our own. We listen and we accept unquestioningly what we’re told, as we think we should. But if that’s all we do, then we never own that faith and the reality of it for ourselves. For Thomas, hearing the testimony of others is not enough – he wants to see and experience the truth for himself.

It’s impossible to condemn the 70 disciples that Jesus sent out for their complete trust in him, for their total assurance in their faith. They were rewarded with success and with joy as they returned. But neither can we condemn Thomas for having a faith that made him think and question, that needed to test what he believed against the reality he experienced. Jesus himself didn’t condemn Thomas or his doubt; instead he came to show Thomas his wounded hands and side, and Thomas experienced the same amazement and joy as had the other disciples in the same room and the same joy as those 70 who were sent out to preach and heal.

The journey to ordination has to involve questioning, testing, and experiencing the presence of God. For *all* those of us who follow Jesus, making faith our own, discovering truth for ourselves, will be a personal and unique journey. But a journey without questions and doubts, exploration and learning and growing, wouldn’t seem a very worthwhile journey at all. Acknowledging our doubts and asking difficult questions can allow God to amaze and astound us with the answers.

Jesus knew that some people would not listen to those he sent out, that there would be people whose minds were closed and whose beliefs could never be changed; these were the people who would not ask questions, who would not seek proof for themselves, who would not ask Jesus to come to them and reveal himself as Lord and Saviour. These were the ones who were condemned, not just by Jesus but by their own actions.

Not so long ago, I watched a TV programme about a convent which had welcomed a sceptical reporter to stay with them and experience their life. When the reporter admitted doubts about their belief in God, one of the sisters had the perfect response – “God wants us to question whether he exists,” she said, “so that he can show us.” Thomas questioned the reality of the risen Christ and Jesus showed him the truth of the resurrection.

And faith that is truly worth having will be strong enough to cope with the questions that we ask, and will grow stronger through the asking and the learning. Only a faith that knows doubts and uncertainties, which are part of the reality of ordinary human life, and that can face them without fear, can truly bring the light of the presence of Christ to those who need it most. That’s the sort of faith that Richard knows and that will be invaluable in the reality of ministry.

It seems to me that Thomas was perfectly justified in his scepticism and in needing to experience the truth for himself before he could believe it. But for him, and for the 70, even when they knew the reality of the good news of Christ, of resurrection and salvation – even then, the journey of faith that lay ahead of them would be full of unexpected challenges as well as untold joys.

Rich, that journey is the one that lies ahead of you. You’ve travelled the first part of it and today we rejoice with you at what God has done. But the journey continues. May you remain amazed and joyful at where God takes you; remain open, doubting and questioning ; and be the one God uses to reveal himself to others who need to know him for themselves.

Amen