

Sunday 21st July - Interview with Ruth Edmonds

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Preachers: Matt Wallace, Ruth Edmonds

[0 : 0 0] So, plenty of time to chat and catch up later after our service. And I appreciate the weather's warm. So if you need a drink as we go through, the fridge is always open on a Sunday.

So help yourselves if you need to wet yourself. All right, not wet yourself. That would be different, wouldn't it? We'll leave that there.

We'll leave that there. All right. That is recorded. That will be cut out on YouTube, I tell you. All right. All right.

Just a few words from me before we get Ruth up here for a chat. Because it's been, what, exactly almost three years since Ruth joined us as curate here.

And if you don't know what a curate is, a curate is a trainee vicar. Someone who spends between three and four years with a church community and working alongside someone like me in order to hopefully learn the ropes of the role of a vicar.

[0 : 5 9] And eventually get a job as vicar somewhere else. So this is Ruth's last Sunday with us because she has indeed got a job elsewhere about which we'll discover more in a bit.

But I know I speak for me and for all of us when I say how much we've enjoyed and appreciated all that Ruth has given of herself and shared with us in her time here as curate.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. I did. The Ruth's curacy. If you cast your mind back three years ago, it started at the tail end of COVID. I know COVID is still happening, but all the lockdown stuff.

We weren't even meeting as a church in person three years ago. So Ruth and James moved here having met very few of us and they hadn't even seen what a Sunday service looked like in person. So a bit of a gamble, if you like, on their part to come here. But I'm grateful they did and took the plunge because these past few years with them have been a real joy with lots of laughter and lots of learning, but also lots of love.

[2 : 0 6] I think for Ruth, as we'll know, she's full of energy and creativity. So things like pub club and book club were started by her. She's got heavily involved with Pathway Project off her own back as well.

And then along with James and then Dave and Trish, she's been key in establishing and leading FNF2, one of our youth groups as well. And he did in all of this and many other ways.

I think for me, one of Ruth's best qualities is her passion to ensure that all people, but particularly those who might sometimes be on the fringes of church life or those who are sometimes perhaps labeled by society as different.

She's passionate about making sure that they feel especially welcomed and included and empowered as people who belong and who are loved just as they are.

I think if there's one word I could describe Ruth with, it would be she's a great includer. She's a great includer. Someone which for me is a real Jesus-like quality.

[3 : 1 5] Ruth's proved herself to be very capable in the role, whether leading services or funerals or baptisms or weddings in a very caring manner. Whether preaching, which I've really enjoyed listening to her for these past three years, often in very profound.

And I want to say poetic ways as well, you know, preaching the style, pastorally and prayerfully spending time with people in ways that help them to feel seen and heard.

And all qualities and all experience, which I know will serve her well and be a blessing to her new church is in the future. More importantly than that, though, I think she's consistently demonstrated a depth of character and a level of integrity, which on a personal level, as we know, is endearing.

But on a professional level, is essential. And Ruth's consistency in living in kind and compassionate and loving ways has made her not just a great colleague and great company, but a great curate in

her time here as well.

Alongside Ruth, he's out there. Been special to have James with us. Again, he's a person of real depth and integrity and consistency. But he's also a fantastic musician who I know we've enjoyed. [4 : 33] He's playing on bass and guitar and so on. But I know the musicians feel he's a joy to play with because he just gets what it means to enable people to encounter God in worship.

And that's a rare and a valuable gift indeed. And then just down the foyer, Amara arrived some 18 months ago. And again, she's a bundle of energy and joy.

And it's really nice to be able to see her personality beginning to blossom and bloom as she finds her feet in more ways than one in the world. In a moment, as I say, we're going to have a final chat with Ruth as she and James and Amara get ready to leave for pastures new.

But it has been fantastic to have them here as part of our church family. And it's been fantastic for me and for us having Ruth as part of the leadership of the church here.

Someone who's been a pleasure to work with and who we know is only the beginning of the ways in which God will continue to grow and use her and them all as a family.

[5 : 34] And we're going to be able to share in sharing the good news, I think in Ruth's words, the joyful news of love which comes through Jesus. So I'm going to invite Ruth up here to have a bit of a chat with me and we'll hear more about what's going on.

But as she makes her way up, she'll give her a round of applause. Is that all right? So, Ruth, hello. Hello. I think we did this three years ago, didn't we, when you first arrived? We did, we did. A bit of a chat. And a nice sort of bookend, I suppose, at the beginning and the end of your time here.

So, do you want to just tell us where you're going and what you imagine it's going to be like from your visits there already? So, we're going to the southwest-ish, which is where my family kind of want to be after everything's happened in the last few years.

It was very important to them that everyone settled in the same space. So, we're going towards a place called Cheltenham. Now, I must say when my parents said they wanted to be in this area, I was a bit nervous because I don't drive and it looked pretty rural to me.

[6 : 43] So, I was very pleased that there is a settlement where I can get about. So, that's very good. The churches themselves, they're quite special, actually. So, one of them is, so it used to be a Victorian barn with enough pews for 850 people.

And they've just taken them out and they suddenly have space, space for all kinds of things that they didn't imagine that they would do. So, before they couldn't really even have coffee because there wasn't enough space to get round.

And now they're doing a lot of hospitality and working out what that looks like for them as a church. A church that's very passionate about inclusion, passionate about the environment and working things out.

But, yeah. And the other one is a very traditional Anglo-Catholic church, quite a joyful one. They get a lot of joy from processing lots, drinking lots and, you know, doing the festivals.

They do a lot of celebration. So, they do the church year, you know, as they say, they wear pink in the middle of Lent and Advent because they can't withhold their joy for that long. So, they all must come out and have their Gaudate Sunday because you can't maintain the state of fasting.

[7 : 59] The joy of Christ must burst out. So, they're characters too. They're very lovely as well. And you'll be wearing the flowing robes then when you go there. Oh, yes. Excellent. Excellent.

Yes. There was a terrifying moment where one of them messaged me saying, have you got a mandible? And I was like, ooh, must Google that. A mandible? I thought that's a beetle or something.

Is it not? Is it? I don't know. Can you send us some photos of you dressed up? I will send you some photos. But I can promise you that if you are coming to the service of licensing, Matt will also be A. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, Ruth's getting licensed in September. And as the sort of incumbent of the church where she's been, it's normal that I dress up, isn't it? Oh, yes.

And process in with you. Oh, yes. So, I'll be wearing the Darth Vader outfit as we go. So, yes. Good stuff. Good stuff. You mentioned, I mean, it's community and inclusion and hospitality are some of the key things.

[8 : 57] Was that the main thing that attracted you to the job there? Because it's an open field, isn't it? When you look for a job as a vicar, you apply for jobs anywhere you want in the country. And they pick you and you pick them. So, why this place in particular?

I think it was the creativity with which they were willing to explore all of the spirituality. So, they weren't saying, we only do this kind. They said, we're happy with the band and the choir. We're happy praying out loud and walking around a labyrinth. And it's quite, that's quite nice, that breath. And I think they did advertise twice because they were looking for someone with a particular perspective.

So, they want you. Yeah, they did. Which is nice. Good, good. And then James as well, he's a solicitor and he's been working. What were James doing when you're down there?

Same job. So, he's been working in Bristol. He's been commuting in twice a week. This is going to have the commute for him. So, that's definitely a good thing. Yeah, good stuff, good stuff. All right. So, in terms of becoming a vicar, it's a step up from being a curate in terms of responsibility and so on.

[10:07] What are you most excited about that? And where are the nerves that come with this change? Well, you build up a lot of ideas. You've been training for seven years.

So, you have a lot of things you think, well, what will happen if I try that? And you can try it in your own steam without it being someone else's church that you're, you know, like, experimenting with. So, that's exciting. It's going to be a lot of line management. And I've managed, well, I'm in an after-school club setting, I've managed people. But I've never really managed lots of employees before.

And there are kind of four paid employees and six retired clergy. So, that looks like a bit of a challenge, something to work on. That's a football team, isn't it? That is a football team.

Okay, okay. So, yeah, potential to try your own ideas, put them into practice, but also the pressures of being part of a bigger team. And it's across two churches, isn't it? Which is, again, that's a dynamic of trying to balance that one out.

[11:10] I guess in all that, one of the things that we would appreciate being able to journey with you in that, what's the main prayer requests for the short term and the medium term, I guess, going forward in that?

I guess the first thing is that you arrive and you make a lot of decisions very quickly. And for some reason, the first decisions that you make seem to be the ones that people are still dealing with later. But they're also the decisions you make when you don't really know what you're doing and you're just going through trying to work it out. So, I think, pray for those first decisions that you make, that they shape the church and your journey with them.

Pray that they're not completely rash and that, you know, when you pick people, you pick some of the right people and that you trust people who will journey with you well.

And pray that God is there in all of that. In the medium term, I mean, moving is horrible. Leaving a community you put roots in is horrible.

[12:13] So, pray that it's somewhere we can stay. Yeah, yeah. Yeah, it's quite a lot of change, isn't it? Both studying before this and in a relatively short time here, three years and then onwards. Hopefully, that will be somewhere you put your roots down and settle.

We hope, yeah. Okay, okay. So, yeah, priorities, wisdom, people and settling in. Yeah. That's a good four. Okay. Okay. If we think a little bit about your time here over these past three years, why here in the first place?

What attracted you to here in the first place? Because, again, you can be a curate anywhere in the country. What was it about Burntwood? But also, have these three years turned out as you expected or not?

So, we didn't know what to expect. We hadn't seen the church, like, you know, in action at all. So, we came in COVID. You guys have been a gift. Like, but I'm so pleased that you're a gift.

But I didn't know what to expect because I haven't, I hadn't been, you know, you have been warmer and more gracious and kind and prayerful than I could have imagined.

[13:16] But I actually came for the gaffer because I met him and I thought, I want to learn from you. So, yeah. And he, I could meet in COVID, whereas all of you guys, I didn't.

Yeah. Yeah. We met at the Nags Head, didn't we, as well? We met at the Nags Head. Set the tone, really, for that. So, yeah. And we talked about pubs enough that I wasn't sure how much I should be drinking at that point because I was like, do I need to prove that I'm a pub person or do I, or should I?

Just to reign it in. Should I reign it in? Because you worked at Weatherspoons for a good few years before becoming a, yeah, nice career change. But very similar, I think, in many ways. Pub landlord and being a vicar.

There's a lot of crossover there. So, what are some of the things, perhaps, that you think you might have enjoyed most then about these past three years? Oh, it's been the team. It's an amazing team here, isn't it?

The people, they are the real gift. I mean, I'm not going to name lots of names because that will definitely come and bite me because I will forget someone who has been really precious to me.

[14:16] But the wardens are incredible at this church. I mean, you know, Nigel and Marg. Marg comes to meetings and everyone's going, me, me, me, me, me, me, me, me, me. And she says, God is wonderful.

Life is wonderful. And they all have to turn around and eat their words and remember what they're there for. And that's amazing. And Nigel is just actually an angel. I think the other weekend there was like a CD I need to transport.

And you just know you can trust him to always have your back and to enable you in every way. And he's quite honest as well. So, he says, this went well. That doesn't matter.

That didn't go so well. And you can kind of just take that really well. And obviously, Marie is wonderful as well. Cool. Cool. Yeah. Yeah. Marie's great. I think the wardens often reflect the church as a whole.

You get the wardens you deserve, I think, often as a church. And that's credit to us, to you. But they are fantastic as well. So, yeah. Conquer thoroughly with that. What's been, on the flip side, what's been perhaps the challenges or the surprising things that have taken you a bit unawares?

[15:23] So, this is not the church culture I have necessarily grown up in. And there are lots of things that you do that I had not necessarily seen before I end up doing them. So, I think the immersion baptisms in my first year, Matt got COVID.

I was like, I've never been to one. So, let's hope that it goes well. I was in the deep end, quite literally. Or even the dedication last week. I don't think I've seen one of them either. So, that was, yeah.

You kind of, there's lots of cultural knowledge that I didn't necessarily have. Yeah. Okay. Okay. First time. Good to get them done here rather than when you're a vicar, though, I guess. Yeah. No, I think it would be even worse then.

Good stuff. And then thinking bigger. Let's go to God. What are the things perhaps that you've learned or discovered? How has your own personal faith changed or developed over the course of these three years?

So, I think expressing faith in a way that's normal and everyday is really, really important. Because it makes it real to people who are on the outside.

[16:23] So, Friday night, I was at my best mate, Stag do. And after the third pub, everyone burst into tears. And they were all burst into tears. And they were all burst into tears because they come from a place where they had maybe not the fathers that they wanted to grow up with.

And they didn't have language for the kind of love that they wanted. And I thought what they actually needed was to come to this church and to hear some of your preaching. Because that kind of vulnerability and understanding of how God loves you in ways that you can't always express.

That's something we don't have language for in this culture. It's something that especially apparently blokes really need. But everybody needs. They need that kind of understanding that God loves you, not in an aggressive way, not in a macho way.

But God loves you as the father that we all wish we had. Yeah. Yeah. Lovely. Lovely. Okay. I know as well, over the past three years, and you alluded to this a little bit earlier, there's been certainly some ups and some downs in your personal life, in your family life.

It'd be good just to touch on a couple of those, really, as a way of us journeying with you, with them. But also, again, part of the prayers of going forward for you as you live with the reality of those things.

[17:38] Let's start with Patsy, your sister. She sadly died in your time with us here, which is obviously a profoundly difficult experience for you and your whole family.

I think we talked around the time of her death about how you cope when you're in a church leadership role where death is part of what you do.

There's a kind of professionalization, in a way, with funerals and grief and mourning. You know what it looks like to help others to do that, but when it's you, it's a different ballgame. So, as much or as little as you want to say, how have you handled that personal grief whilst being here? And how has the role helped or hindered you in that?

I think it has been difficult because you also expect yourself to feel one way this day and another way this day. And one of the things about journeying people with grief is that I really do believe that they go on to heaven.

[18 : 43] And there is a part of you that really walks with that and you kind of have that because you normally are the person who says, but it's going to be okay. And so you're also saying that to yourself and maybe too fast sometimes.

And you kind of don't always do the early bit before you do the next bit. I think for me, it was quite difficult because how much do you tell everyone?

And I think, I hope I got that right. I hope I told you I had enough going on, but not threw it all in your faces. But it is very difficult because this is also my church community.

And I'm here and I'm preaching and I'm standing at the front and I'm trying to authentically be myself and tell you what I'm going through. But it's important not always to tell people about things when they're really pulling you apart as well.

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Sincerity in knowing what's appropriate to share, isn't it? Yeah. And in terms of what you've learned about God through the grieving experience, I suppose, how would you put that?

[19 : 52] I think we often, like, judgment is something that we can talk about very casually. And it's really important that we are very careful about what we say about judgment because God's arms are always open.

And if you don't tell people that, then when they're at their lowest, what they take away is the half-hearted comment about hell that you made a long time ago.

And actually, if we take God seriously when he says, at the name of Jesus, every knee will bow, that means every knee, including the ones that you can't see. And that matters because when you preach a vengeful, angry, conquering God, when you preach that God, it gets in the way at all the hard points where people's faith might fall apart.

And it's so important not to. Okay. Thank you. Thank you. Flip side in many ways with Amara's arrival.

And she's great, obviously. She's wonderful. What's been the best thing, then, about being a mum or being parents with James? What's sort of, again, what surprised you?

[21 : 02] What are the joys that have come with that, expected or otherwise? I think, I mean, she's really funny, which is a joy. She's got a little proper character and a sense of humour.

And she kind of, and it's really nice watching her loving coming to church. She calls it the party church, which I think is a name perhaps you should consider rebranding. But, yeah, no, she is, that's lovely.

I think I came into parenthood thinking that probably it was going to be really horrible and tough until they were about four. And then they became easier and talk-to-able.

And I thought, you know, I like teenagers. Children are okay. Babies are terrifying. Actually, it's been a joy. And that's been such a gift. Yeah. Great, great.

And then, again, the same thing. Your perception of God, how has that changed through being a parent? I think it means, it's really underlined, like how loving God is.

[22 : 04] I mean, we were reading the prodigal son in clergy chapter, which is where all the local clergy come around and read it. And they were all... That's not a party, is it? That's not a party. That is not a party. But we were reading it and they were all like, isn't it surprising that God was there with his arms open wide?

And my experience of parenting is that it's not actually surprising that God was there with God's arms open wide. In fact, it's kind of probably a bit awkward for God that the prodigal son got to the point where he was like eating pig's food before he went home.

Like you want to think that your arms are open wide enough that someone knows they've messed up, they can come home. Like that, and if I can love Amara like that, how much more does God love us?

Yeah. Yeah. Brilliant. Brilliant. All right. Final question then for now. This is the end of season for you with us here. And obviously we'll see you again and we'll be with you in September for your licensing.

What encouragement, I guess, would you give us as you leave this place and leave this community? What would you say actually, in my opinion, that would be what would be a great focus for you going forward or to do more of or to continue doing?

[23 : 09] What's your encouragement, I guess, for us? I guess since coming back from COVID, this community has really had its arms open. You see that at Little Friends especially, but in so many ways.

And welcome people who are like you and different to you and learning to grow from that inclusion. And that has been amazing because you see God in that in such a big way.

And this community, as it grows more inclusive, that is a testament and an exciting thing. And it means that we run FNF2 on a Wednesday. And you can say, well, of course, at church, we talk about that.

And they're blown away by that. And that makes it such a great church for the local community, such a really good community church. So I'd say leaning into inclusion, finding people who you find difficult and learning what you can learn about God from them.

That is where I'd say. Yeah. All right. We'll take that to heart. Thank you. Let's give it up for Ruth. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.