

An Interview With Ruth - 12th September 2021

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Preachers: Matt Wallace, Ruth Edmonds

[0 : 00] What we're going to do this morning, we're trying to keep things a bit varied, I suppose, week by week. So we thought we'd introduce Ruth officially today with an interview. I'll explain who Ruth is if you're not sure.

So Ruth is our new Ruth. It's an ongoing Cockney problem I have. Ruth, T-H, not R-O-O-F.

Ruth is a curate. If you're not familiar with churchy kind of language, a curate is really a training post like an apprentice vicar in the church where after a good few years normally of some church experience, a bit of study at college, Ruth was selected and then ordained.

Big stuff in the cathedral where the bishop lays hands on you and so on. Ordained to learn the ropes of what it means to be a minister in the church. Now minister is another churchy word. It means effectively someone who serves.

So people like me and Ruth, we've been selected, I suppose, to serve God. Serve you, serve our community through a role of church leadership. Now everyone's a minister though, so there's no sort of difference between us all in that sense.

[1 : 05] Everyone serves in one way or another, hence those ways to serve forms that we're doing. It's simply that having an ordained role means that you've got a bit more responsibility in terms of leadership.

So the buck stops with us in some ways now for St. John's. How's that feel? I think it still stops with you. Still stops with me, says Ruth. Okay. Technically that's true, but yes.

Now Ruth's coming here. She's been here since the middle of June or so. That's a mutual decision. How it works is there's a kind of informal interview that we have. But it's got to be right for Ruth.

It's got to be right for us. So on behalf of the church, I was dead keen for her to come having met her on Zoom. And then you came up for the day with husband James as well. Where's James? Excuse me. There you are, mate. There's James as well.

Married to James, which is good. Now Ruth's been with us a little bit of time already. A number of you will have met her and gone out for coffee or whatever kind of things Costa provide. So I know she's met a various number of people, but this is going to be a chance just to interview her and find out a bit more of her and James's story.

[2 : 04] We'll get to know more over the coming, what, two and a half, three, three and a half years. It's all a bit fluid. We'll see. We'll see. We'll see. But that's the length of time they're with us for, which is going to be good.

So can we give her an official welcome, a round of applause? Is that all right? Now we'll see how we go in microphones.

But Ruth Edmonds, this is your life in some ways. COVID has meant that it's been a different kind of way to start a new job in a new area, new church and so on.

How have you and James found just your first opening few months with us so far? So you've all made us really welcome. It's a really exciting community, a community going through a lot of change.

But it is weird starting a church job when there is no church. And I think that has had its moments because it means that when you meet me, you can't just meet me for coffee and then disappear after five minutes.

[3 : 05] You're stuck with me for like hours. So thank you very much for putting up with that and for making us welcome. We're really excited to be here. Probably three, four years is realistic.

Yeah. I mean, you're coming with fresh eyes. There's always something beneficial about people moving into the area with first impressions and so on. It's a little bit about the welcome of the community. What else has struck you about Chase Terrace, Bonier, Chase Town where you've been down to, Burntwood as a whole, this area?

Do you know it from previous times or is this all new to you? It's completely new to us. I grew up in Derbyshire, which isn't so different, more rural probably. But we have a similar emphasis on, I guess, good food and good company.

But I think around here, one of the things that really struck me is that you're often making quite a lot of excuses for things, whereas actually you've got a lot to be proud of. And I think you could be more forward about the things that you have to be proud of.

Like this is an amazing church. And a lot of you have asked me why I came here. That's the wrong question. The question is, why did you accept me? And I think you've got a lot of love and you are showing it to other people.

[4 : 11] That's an exciting opportunity. I understand COVID, you've been doing a lot of community work, especially you have been doing a lot of community work. That's incredible. And that's what the church needs to do. So I think that's an exciting opportunity going forward.

Great. Now, you mentioned a bit of Derbyshire background. Tell us a bit more about your background. I mean, growing up, earlier life, life with James, how you met, what the first date was like, all that kind of stuff.

Poor James. He doesn't even get to say anything. No, he can't heckle, can he? So I grew up in Manchester for the first half of my life. And then my parents moved out to the country because they'd had enough of Manchester forever. My family is quite an interesting family.

So my older sister's adopted. She comes from Grenada. That means that she's black. And the rest of us are white. My younger sister is like a typical engineer. So between us, we're completely different.

I don't think you'd have met three more different people. My older sister is like languages, sports. Don't ask me to ever catch anything. That would be a nightmare. But yeah, and Orlando is a proper engineer.

[5 : 15] And so between us, we cover a lot of bases. I think growing up, I think even though we grew up in a multiracial family, I don't think I really realised how much racism affected my sister until I was about 18.

And then she was unfortunately assaulted by the police. And she's had PTSD ever since. And I think that suddenly made me realise that all those times when I thought she wasn't confident enough to go out, actually she was right.

And I think that sort of made me really passionate about inclusion, about making places a safe place. I was quite sad she couldn't come to my ordination because she wasn't sure how she'd be treated in church.

And that's a tragedy. And I think that's something that my upbringing has really led me to be passionate about. Now my mum is a typical Mrs Weasley person.

So our house was always full. I think she used to work with Albanian refugees. So a lot of them lived in our house until I was a teenager or kind of bounded about.

[6 : 16] They'd come in and out. And that certainly meant for some exciting times. There was one point when they were late taking me to school. And I think they did swap drivers while driving.

That was one of the most terrifying moments of my life. But it's kind of always given us a sense that what we have is precious, that you can't work out what's going to happen.

Because they never thought they'd end up leaving their home. But then there was a war and they did. So that kind of gives you a different perspective on things. And I guess from a faith perspective, that means that I've always had a lot of different influences around God.

So I guess I've grown up with a really Christian family. But also with the Albanian Christians coming in. And then Albanian Muslims. There's been a lot of prayer.

I've always had a huge sense that God's been there. But initially I didn't think I had to do anything about that. And I think gradually, as I became more passionately into inclusion, I realised that the church is the place to start.

[7 : 17] Because this is a place where we know that we're loved. And that we have to love other people. And if we can't do it here, where can we do it? Alright. Yeah. Rich and varied upbringing then. Tell us about how you unwind, what you're into hobbies-wise and interests.

And what's a day off look like for you? So I guess I'm quite a political person. Which sounds like a really terrible hobby. But I think it is something that I'm really passionate about. So I used to be a passionate Lib Dem.

Which is where I met James. He used to work for the Lib Dems. And I guess... So I do do some campaigning in my day off. Not for the Lib Dems anymore. As Kathy will be very pleased. I've got some pet quails.

I'm quite keen on them. My parents have always had birds. Quails, yeah. Like mini chickens. We wanted chickens, but they're too noisy. I think our neighbours would hate us forever. You've got quails. Quails, yes.

Excellent. Alright. They are very funny. And very silly. Do they lay eggs? Quails? They haven't laid any yet. So I'm hopeful.

[8 : 18] But they haven't actually... Can you eat quail? I don't know if you're vegan. But yeah? I've never heard of quails. Okay. We're in the Bible, aren't they? You can't eat my pets. That's not... I can't eat your pets.

Okay. You're pescatarian, aren't you? I'm pescatarian. So I was a vegetarian most of my life. You're a meat eater, aren't you? So is there a little wrestle goes on with your quails or not?

No. No. I think when we were babysitting my mum's ducks and James' dad texted, suggest grill.

But that didn't go down well. Okay. Moving on for your quails and ducks then. What else? So you're politically engaged and then passionate about...

What do you do to... Like, what's your normal just to do something that doesn't necessarily connect your brain but is fun? What do you do for that? Yeah, I've got to be active. So I'll be going for a walk or something or, you know, sorting out the garden, that kind of thing.

[9 : 13] I'm no good at just sitting down and relaxing like that. So that's... Activist. Yeah. Okay. Now, you said about... Don't ask you to catch anything. You're dyspraxic. Yeah. I gather as well.

So what does that mean? What does that look like for you? So I guess some people are kind of dyslexic, so words are a bit harder for them or dysnumerate. I'm dyspraxic, which means that basically I'm really clumsy because I don't see space in the same way as everyone.

And that does have some implications. I think the worst breakup of my life was my first driving teacher who actually did say, it's not me, it's you. Wow.

That was very sad. But you passed your test, didn't you? Yeah. Just, I think, yeah, that was a long call. Okay. So Ruth can drive.

She's not a fan of driving. No. Presumably because of the dyspraxia. Anything we need to be aware of as a community, as mates and stuff, to be aware of that? How do we help you live with that condition is the word, I guess?

[10:14] I guess, I mean, I think just be aware that I'll be clumsy. I mean, that's a great, get out of jail free card if I break any of your things. But, yeah, I am clumsy, very clumsy.

And sometimes that will be a bit of a pain. I'm really lucky to be here. When they wanted to send me to a church, they wanted to send me to a really high church that had like seven little bows you were supposed to do before you started.

And I just thought, I'm never going to be able to do that. It's going to make them really upset every week. Okay. Okay. Yeah. There's not a lot of ritual coordination here.

No, no ritual coordination. And that's probably for the best, isn't it? All right. Now, you said about you grew up in a Christian home. And prayer for you was instrumental, perhaps, in your understanding of how your faith developed.

But each of us have got our own story, our own journey of how God becomes more real, more relevant for us, I guess, as we grow old. What's your kind of your journey through teenage and 20s years?

[11:16] What are you, 28, 29? 28. 28. So. Thank you, Sue. The tutting at your age, this is. No, I think the tutting at you asking.

Oh, come on. I'm 46. That's all right. It's fine. We're amongst friends. I don't agree with this sexist, don't ask a woman their age business. All right. So, anyway, in your teens and 20s, how did faith sort of develop for you in your understanding and how you put it into practice?

So, I guess I went to quite a traditional church when I was a teenager because my parents were quite committed to going to a local church. And that meant that there was a Eucharist and there was a robed choir, which I sang in for a bit and then eventually got out of.

But it wasn't really a place where my faith grew very much. So, it was a place where I felt there was God, but I didn't learn very much about God.

It's probably how I describe it. And then going to university and suddenly having these amazing Bible studies and sermons, which actually said something as opposed to being about village gossip, made a huge difference.

[12:25] So, that became something I could take seriously. And I guess gradually something that took up more of my time, especially after the Lib Dems broke my heart and joined the coalition government.

And then I was looking for a place where to build a better world. And I just really felt this sense that God wanted me to be in church. So, I spent a lot of time in a lot of different churches.

At university, I was a chapel warden. So, that meant I did morning and evening prayer every day and a midday Eucharist. And that sort of shaped my life. It wasn't the best place to learn about faith, but it was a place to be with God.

And I think going to college has really helped me learn more intellectually about faith. So, it's moving from a more experiential faith, which I've had since I've been a child, really. I can't remember not having that sense that God is there.

But I can remember deciding to take it more seriously. And for you now, at this stage of life, how do you feel you best relate to God? Where's that come?

[13 : 26] How does that, what does that look like for you? I think the place I meet God most is in other people. So, I think when I'm talking to someone, when I'm serving someone, that's where I'll have the biggest sense of God.

I guess walking around can also help. But I remember when I was deciding whether to explore ordination between university and the next thing I was doing. I just went for a huge walk.

In the end, I ended up walking from Melrose across to Linda's Farm. And I was coming down to Canterbury. I just had my bivy bag and I was sleeping rough. James had a couple of nightmares, actually, along the way.

But, yeah. And then I just was there, like, not really thinking about anything, but feeling where God was sending me. And that's what faith looks like for me as well.

It's interesting. Similar to you in terms of walking for me is where I best connect with God. I don't know if you found during lockdown, especially these daily walks we were allowed to do initially or getting out about if we're in a chair or whatever.

[14 : 27] But that sense of being out in the open, especially when perhaps we've had a tradition of being in a building to meet with God. That was an eye-opener, I know, for many of us, myself included, just getting a new rhythm of engaging with God going on.

And I don't know if you've kept up that habit of being more outside than perhaps we used to be in terms of how we do stuff. Sue's nodding, for example. I wonder if St Anne's down the road, Chase Down, they do a worship and walk once a month, which is a nice idea.

More of a sort of get-together and talk and walk and, yeah, converse about the stuff of God together. I wonder if that's something we might nick as well as an idea, perhaps. Towards the spring, we'll get that going, perhaps.

So more of an outdoorsy kind of church. Not importing what we've got in here, into the park or anything like that, but just being out in nature and letting God speak to us in that way. That would be a good thing.

So you did Melrose to Lindisfarne down at Canterbury. Well, I actually got mugged in Kingsland, so I didn't get much further. Mugged in Kingsland. Sounds like an Alan Partridge episode, doesn't it? Very mean to take my backpack.

[15 : 28] Did you make it down at Canterbury then? I didn't. I haven't finished it yet. I will get there one day. There you go. Next summer. Next summer. Nice one. All right. So you did philosophy and politics and economics at uni. How do you see faith and church relating to politics?

Because I get quite political, perhaps, at times, some might say. I know we've got some other people who are involved in local politics, in particular, in the church. For you, though, how does it all mix together?

So when I look at the Gospels particularly, a lot of what Jesus is doing is feeding people and making sure they've got enough to eat. And I think some of these policies, like 20 quid extra in universal credit, can seem like they're really up in the air and they don't connect to something.

But they really make the big difference between whether someone can feed their family for a week or not. And I think Jesus would really care about that. So I think that the link is there. I also think, you know, the personal is political.

Like, you know, how people can buy a house, whether they can buy a house, like how all those things do. They make a huge difference to individual lives. And political is personal.

[16 : 35] You know, the fact that we might not be welcoming migrants to the UK and those people might be dying in the sea. That's personal, too. I'm aware it's a contentious issue for some of us.

We don't necessarily want to come to church and talk politics or be told necessarily how. I wouldn't dream of telling you how to vote. But that kind of equation going on with how we talk. I think we generally try and avoid party politics.

But in avoiding party politics, it doesn't mean that we want to avoid politics in total. Do you know what I mean? And then it's up for us as individuals in our own discussions and prayer lives to work out how we vote in relation to what we've been thinking and praying through.

I'm glad that Ruth's here. I did politics at uni as well. And it's always been a part of my faith. And I guess that will be a continuing thread, which we'll both be bringing out. I know Ian, when he was preaching, there was always a bit of a political edge there as well.

So no apologies for that. Politics is just about decision making. And that decision making is part of how we live out our faith. So that's one of our values, I suppose, certainly for me and you going forward, but as a church, hopefully, is about putting our faith into practice in the way we make decisions corporately.

[17 : 48] That's what politics, it seems, is all about, as well as the personal you've been saying. So there's a political animal inside you as well. Other stuff that you've been involved with was you were a network relationship manager for Single Friendly Church.

Do you want to tell us what Single Friendly Church is and how that might relate to us here? So Single Friendly Church is essentially a campaigning group to make the church more welcoming and inclusive of single people.

It's something that kind of came to me. I was working in a church in London and a lady offered me a house and it turned out that she runs the charity Christian Connections. So we talked about it in quite a lot of depth.

But it's quite shocking to me that actually there are 40% of the UK is single and that's not at all represented in our churches. Often people who come to church who are single feel excluded.

There isn't a way in. I was talking to someone here the other day, actually, and they were saying when they were widowed, they felt forced to leave their former church. I think that kind of thing happens all the time because people don't know how to deal with people on their own always.

[18 : 54] I think that's really wrong. I mean, Jesus was single. St. Paul was single. Like, you know, as a church, we should be able to meet people and see those people as people who have things to offer and things to gain from church.

Often what they're suggesting is quite simple and a lot of it you do do here already. It's things like making sure that you've got an easy access social which people can come to without having to invite someone around to their house.

It's that kind of thing. Or if you go away to a church conference, make sure that single people don't have to pay twice for a room what a married couple would do. So a lot of it's very pragmatic. But I think it's a really important hearts and minds change because we don't really think about singleness as an issue very much as a country.

And it has a huge effect. Thanks, Ruth. I mean, I'm aware we're on a learning curve with this. And I've spoken to a number of people who are single. And it's not always the easiest church, either for us or church in general, for those who do live alone or with friends who are single, not in a relationship, to feel included perhaps on every level here.

And it's something that we've not always got right and we don't always get right. But I'm glad you're here for this aspect as well. You're going to give us some experience and help with that progressing forward. But if this directly affects you, there's things which bug you or things, ideas which you've got, which we might be able to improve how we cater for and involve and include people who are single, then do talk to us, please.

[20 : 19] Because we want to learn together about how to make this word inclusion an everyday part of what we do. Okay. Now, you mentioned about immigration. And when you were in London, you helped coordinate partial support and fundraising for asylum seekers and refugees in the immigration system.

Gavi-led overnight shelters as well. You mentioned about your sister as well. How does all that tie in for what this phase of your life will be here? Because immigration is a live issue for people's opinions.

But we haven't got, in our town, a huge influx in some of the migratory stuff that goes on often. So it can feel a bit detached from our everyday experience unless we're commuting or working in bigger cities and so on.

So how can we connect the passion for immigration, and I think you're right about inclusion and that being part of our faith, with Chase Terrace? Well, I mean, you've been extremely welcoming to us.

So it must be the case that there's a lot of welcome out there. I think one of the things about migration is, for me, when you meet someone who hasn't got their house, they haven't got their life in order, they've had to trust on a wish and a prayer and on God completely.

[21 : 35] Those are often people you can really powerfully meet God in. So that would be one of the things I'd say, is the people who've had to give everything up and trust in God are often amazing places to encounter God yourself.

And as a church, that would be an opportunity. I think there are going to be a lot of refugees coming over from Afghanistan. There probably will be some locally. And Chase Terrace isn't completely wide, I'd throw in there too.

I think it is quite a mixed community in many ways, or at least the people I've met have been quite mixed. And I think it's about embracing that as part of your identity and finding a really positive way to say, you know, we have more than someone who has nothing.

How can we give? How can we meet God in those people? And how can we offer spaces? I think. So there are lots of holes in government policy. There's this horrible thing called no recourse to public funds, which means that you can come to the UK.

You're not eligible for benefits. If you have domestic violence, you can't go to one of the shelters because there's no money for it. So those people end up in abusive relationships and they can't get out of them. One of the amazing things that the Church of England has done is it has set up refuges which are funded differently.

[22 : 52] I think we certainly in London offered a drop-in space for people who had no eligible for benefits where they could have breakfast. I think sometimes practical open spaces where you say there is food, anyone can have some.

Sometimes that's all you can do. All right. Just to fill you in on a couple of developments, I've signed us up to be part of a welcome network, which is a directory of churches who want to welcome refugees into our community.

And we will provide as best we can for their needs while we're here. So if people are placed locally, they know this will be a welcoming place for them. So we're on that directory and we'll see who comes this way.

The other development that's happening is part of Burnt Be a Friend, this organisation we helped set up during lockdown to meet people's practical needs. That's developed now, and I think there's new funding which has just come through for that, to get a food pantry going.

So alongside Food Bank, which is for people in crisis, immediate food need, we're now setting up a food pantry which has been running at St Anne's for a little while, but I think it's going to move up to Sankey's Corner very soon, where people pay a nominal amount of money to get more food than that money would buy in the shops.

[24 : 00] So it's a kind of way to encourage independence and honour people's integrity with that. It's not a freebie, so it gives them that sense of, OK, I'm not a charity case, as they might feel, but it's a way to encourage that ownership of their own life in a way which helps them financially to afford food.

And with, as you say, with universal credit, yeah, this national insurance rise coming in and so on. We're going to see food needs increasingly this season, I would have thought, so we're glad to be part of that initiative. And whether that's for people who have been here for donkey's years or have just arrived here, it's an open welcome to those.

All right. One other thing as well, you also spent years working in Wetherspoons. And I've got a quote here, and this was what sold me on Roof when she put this in her CV.

She said, I've learned more about leadership and management behind a bar than anywhere else. And this is the bit that got me. If churches could be a bit more like pubs, the world would be a better place.

You're talking my language there, Roof. You're talking my language. So, on the spot, what have pubs taught you about life, faith, and how church could be?

[25 : 14] So, I think pubs are really exciting places. Anyone can just walk into a pub. Mostly, you can then have a conversation with someone. And after a pint, people talk about things that they don't talk about anywhere else.

So, they sit down and they say, this is what my life looks like going forward. These are the things I'm scared of. And sometimes in after-church coffee, that's the one time you can't talk about those things. I haven't been to after-church coffee at the 10 a.m. here before.

So, obviously, no judgment here. But, I mean, you know, certainly a lot of the churches I've been to, after-church coffee is when you talk about the flower arranging rather than the meaning of life. And I think if pubs could be spaces where you have conversations, where anyone's welcome.

And the other thing about being a landlord is you've got a lot of responsibility. Like, if someone's ill, then they're your problem. If someone's in an abusive, come with an abusive date, that's your problem. And it is your responsibility to sort it out.

And people know that those are the legal responsibilities of landlords. Or at least, if you don't, you know now. And so, you know you can turn to someone and say, I can't get home. How do I do this?

[26 : 18] And it's a place where you can really rely on that. I think pubs are a place of deep encounter. Come on. So, one last question then.

How can we best support you and James going forward? I've been a curate and I've been a curate here. And I enjoyed it, but it was pretty hairy at times. How can we best support you going forward and pray for you in particular for the next X number of years?

I think in terms of prayer, at the moment everything feels good. So, we'll come to you with prayer when we need it. I think let us in. Give us time.

And I'm definitely still learning. So, I need honest feedback. Because if you don't give me feedback, some poor church is going to be left with me as their vicar. And if you haven't sought out the issues, then who will?

But I also think we're here to make friends. We're here for quite a long time. The longest time we've ever lived anywhere in particular. So, please do be there for us like that.

[27 : 23] Great stuff. Let's give a round of applause. Nice one, Ruth. All right. Let's pray for Ruth and for James.

Lord, thanks very much for the chance to hear some of Ruth's and a bit of James' story this morning for them as a couple. And Ruth's introduction here as a curate. And we're so grateful that you've led her here and James too.

And we pray, Lord, that it will be a mutual learning experience. That Ruth would learn the ropes of what she needs to do in this role and in this ordained life that's coming up for her in the years to come.

But we also know that there's a real gift of her and James being here for this season with us. So, help us to learn from them as well. May you sharpen us and encourage us and challenge us in new ways, having new voices, new insights, new experiences in our midst.

Will you bless them and their home life, bless friendships which will build and emerge here. Will you help us to know how to constructively help Ruth in particular as she learns the trade.

[28 : 32] And above all, Lord, would you bless them so that they may be a blessing to us and to our community in this season and beyond, we pray. Amen.

Amen.