

## TALKING THE WALK

# Walking through a time of crisis

Episode 32 | Dr Ruth Valerio

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In this episode of [The All Terrain Podcast](#), host Jo Taylor meets Dr Ruth Valerio, Director of the Global Advocacy and Influencing group at Tearfund. Previously, Ruth was a director at [A Rocha UK](#), a Christian charity that works for the protection and restoration of the natural world, and she has written various books – such as [Planet Protectors](#), co-written with Paul Kerensa, about how children can look after the Earth.

## Challenging the status quo

The first thing you might pick up about Ruth is that she is happy to deviate from the established script.

She not only picks four living companions for the All Terrain podcast's hypothetical hike instead of the usual 'one living, one dead and one fictional', she also opts to walk 'through a time of crisis' instead of choosing an actual, physical location.

'I thought about lots of different places where we might be walking today. But what came to mind is that all of us are walking through a time of crisis, or crises: We're facing the war in Ukraine, we have a cost-of-living crisis, we have an energy crisis, we have a climate crisis and a biodiversity crisis. And all that can be pretty worrying.'

As a long-term advocate for climate justice and a director for a charity that works alongside those living in poverty – people who are disproportionately impacted by climate injustice – Ruth's vocation is all about challenging the status quo. So, while her choice to walk 'through a time of crisis' may seem rather abstract compared with previous guests' more concrete locations, paradoxically it might actually represent a much more tangible reality we can all relate to.

## We can cope with the pain

One of the biblical passages Ruth refers to in the podcast is Isaiah 58. It creates a fascinating backdrop to much of what she says in the podcast episode.

'We've all been through so much change over the last few years. And what we've learned is that while that change can be really hard and painful, we are also creative and adaptive, and we can cope with it.'

***‘Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins and will raise up the age-old foundations; you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets with Dwellings.’ (Isaiah 58:12)***

This positive view of humanity’s capacity for resilience is inspiring, but is it all about ignoring or just powering through the pain that accompanies complex change?

‘As we think about some of the crises we’re facing now – particularly the climate one – I think one of the first things for us to do is to acknowledge how we’re feeling. We can just rush through life, from meetings to families to friends to church, and not really allow ourselves to stop and look face-on at the horror of what is happening in our world, at the millions of people being pushed further back into poverty and the terrible degradation that is happening in our world.

‘And there’s something really helpful as a first step to stop and to acknowledge how those things make me feel? Yeah, I feel sad, angry, overwhelmed, hopeless... Sometimes when we acknowledge our emotions, it can take a little bit of the sting out of the emotion, and it enables us to not necessarily move *out* of it, but move *within* it.

## **Community that supports *and* inspires**

Like other guests, Ruth reflects on the power of community to support us through suffering. She shares how she and a friend have used WhatsApp and phone calls to talk through various grief-filled, traumatic experiences in their lives, and sharing their feelings in this way has made them feel so much better.

But Ruth suggests community is more than just a support structure: it gives us opportunities to learn, too.

‘Through community we can build powerful movements for action and for change. Through my work with Tearfund, we have seen the government commit to ending finance for overseas fossil fuel projects, and we’ve seen change around plastic pollution.

‘So community is there to inspire us to take action. And taking action is itself important. When we think about the climate crisis, psychologists agree that one of the best things we can do to prevent ourselves from being overwhelmed is to do something to take action.

Ruth was recently reading stories from applicants to a new initiative she’s involved with, and thought, “Wow, there are amazing people doing amazing things all around the world!” And I found that so inspiring and hopeful. So, look for those hope-filled stories, and stop to notice the beauty that surrounds you.’

## **Blessing the bees and the birds**

Talking about beauty, Ruth says that the beauty of her garden helps her to receive joy:

‘I was sitting out there not so long ago with a cup of tea, and found myself praying a prayer of blessing over the different creatures that share the garden with me.

'I was watching some bees and I think I must have been reading something about bee and insect decline, and about how important our gardens are to help prevent that decline. So I found myself praying a blessing: blessing the bees, the frogs, the slow worms, the hedgehogs that I feed each evening and that come out and share that space, the dragonflies and the birds that come and feed. They are so precious, and I don't want to see them disappear.'

***'You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail.'* (Isaiah 58:11)**

Intermingled with Ruth's joy for the gift of God's creation that is unmistakable in her blessing, one can also sense her tinge of sorrow at the prospect of us losing that gift.

## **An integrated life**

A consistency is evident across Ruth's work, writing, speaking and home life. How has that integration come?

'When I look at the Bible, I see a God who has created a world that God says is very good. That means it's not something that is going to be discarded at a later point. This world came from God's very word, his breath, his being, and so this world is deeply connected with God and is incredibly precious. And as someone who loves God, and wants to worship God, I want to value and take care of that which is so precious to God.

'As part of that, running all the way through the Scriptures you see such a clear theme around issues of justice and poverty. In Isaiah 58 we're told to spend ourselves on behalf of the hungry, and satisfy the needs of the oppressed. Colossians 1 tells us that Jesus died not only for human beings, but to reconcile *all things* to heaven and on earth.

'So for me, I guess I've tried to make my life integrated because I understand the good news of Jesus to be about not only our relationship with God, but also our relationships with others, the wider natural world, and ourselves.

What are some of the ways we, as disciples, can care for the world God created?

'It's important to be aware at a personal level of the amount of resources that we use: to think about the food that we eat, the way we travel, the energy we use, and the things that we throw away – particularly single-use plastic. One of the biggest things that we can do is shift our diets so that we're eating a predominantly vegetable- and grain-based diet.

'And then alongside those individual lifestyle considerations, the really big change comes about when we hold our governments and businesses to account, when we call on them to take responsibility. It's important that we don't take all the responsibility on ourselves, because it's governments and businesses

that need to be making the really big large-scale changes. So holding those two things together, are important.'

*'Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter – when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?' (Isaiah 58:6-7)*

## Questions for reflection

- ☰ *Are you someone who finds it easy or difficult to deviate from the established script, to challenge the status quo? What issues of injustice might prompt you to challenge the 'rules' of the world?*
- ☰ *Which changes over the last two years have you found hardest and most painful to deal with? Which changes have you been most creative with and able to adapt to?*
- ☰ *Which communities you belong to (work, education, church, family, neighbourhood, clubs) have inspired you to take action?*
- ☰ *Does the 'media diet' you consume weekly drive you to hope or cynicism? Where do you look for hope-filled stories?*
- ☰ *Have you ever prayed a blessing over creation? If you sat in a garden right now, what creatures would you pray a blessing over?*
- ☰ *How much does nature and the created world feature in your worship? In what ways could it feature more?*
- ☰ *Do your lifestyle choices reflect a belief that God's world as precious?*
- ☰ *How one thing could you do to hold your government or businesses you use to account on their climate-impacted actions?*

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**TALKING THE WALK** is a series reflecting on episodes of [The All Terrain Podcast](#), written by Matt Little.

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